

THE COMMUNITY FOOD GARDEN OF CISSIE GOOL HOUSE



Karen Hendricks is a leader of the housing movement *Reclaim the City*, Woodstock Chapter. She is also a resident and coordinator of Cissie Gool House (CGH). Her vision is for a truly inclusive city for the poor and working-class women of colour to participate in decision-making for their communities, city and country.



Melissa Jansen Arendse is an activist in the *Reclaim the City* movement. She resides at Cissie Gool House and was elected as a Garden Monitor. Melissa loves being in the garden and gardening has become her passion.



Bevil Lucas lives in the CGH occupation, named after civil rights leader and anti-apartheid activist Zainunnisa 'Cissie' Gool from District Six in Cape Town. He has been involved in the trade union movement for many years and in various social organisations, including the anti-apartheid movement. In CGH he is involved in the co-design project for the future of the occupation site.

SOWING THE SEEDS OF COMMUNITY

weeds that snake in-between the brinjals, then
twist between my fingertips
dirt staining my hands, grubby muddy lovely fingernails
Melissa's voice sings – she's queen of the garden, plant fairy
granting wishes in the form of seeds
buried dirt-deep the depth of my thumb
permaculture tumbling from her tongue to my hands
turning bottles upside down
water-weighted, wavy, what a scary reflection if i was a cat
but they don't mind
they're busy on the walls
dodging barbed wire with nimble flexy spines
spying from above
Table Mountain with blue all behind
a whisper of wind
around the leaves of the lemon tree.
winter's coming soon.
it rained all morning yesterday
but now the soil is dry
and making its way around my pants
at the knees, coming up to my wrists
teasing the end of my shovel as
i put all my weight into it
my hair looks terrible
it's a garden of women with ideas
blooming next to the tomatoes
enshrined within and between fences, the gate,
windows cracked or glassless
big bags of topsoil ready to be scooped
laundry hung out to dry
Melissa shows me how to put the roots in the soil,
gentle and firm, so they'll last.

Anonymous garden comrade



Background to Cissie Gool House

According to the 2022 census, there are over 55,000 homeless people in South Africa, about 10,000 of these in the Western Cape. However, with the passage of time and due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is thought that the real numbers may be higher. In response to the government's insufficient response to the growing homelessness crisis, a group of housing activists, students and homeless people decided that it was time to take action. The Old Woodstock Hospital in Cape Town became one of two sites chosen by the *Reclaim The City (RTC)* campaign to occupy in response to the growing trend of *gentrification* and lack of affordable housing. A committee was formed to interview prospective occupants. These should be people who were facing the threat of eviction from their current residence, could not afford their current rent or had been rendered homeless. They also had to understand what was expected of them. The building already had running water and electricity, but it was necessary to set up various processes so that the community could become self-reliant. For example, cleaning crews were needed to make the building habitable, and a community kitchen had to be set up to help ensure that people had enough to eat. The main intention was to raise awareness about the housing and homelessness problem in the city, and to educate people about their rights in relation to housing. Many people used to make the long trek from the Cape Flats to work in the city centre every day. Now, some of them could live in the city. The activists renamed the building *Cissie Gool House (CGH)* after Zainunnisa 'Cissie' Gool, the anti-apartheid political and civil rights leader, and a new experiment in self-sustainable living was born. This article focuses on one important component of CGH – the community garden.

CGH was originally intended for 1,000 inhabitants, but currently houses closer to 1,500. One of the main challenges faced is how all the people can feed themselves in an environment that is still recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, and an economy that is under strain from the ongoing

problems of electricity outages, high unemployment, homelessness and crime. One important project initiated to help tackle this problem was the community garden. Within an atmosphere of learning from social action, the residents look at CGH as a place of homecoming, self-learning, collective care, self-sufficiency, and solidarity. The knowledge that guides and drives the community is rooted within the community; it is shared and local. This article tells the story of how the garden was set up and how it is run, providing employment for residents within the informal economy. It tells the story of how it was founded based on the principle that whoever works the land should benefit from the labour.

The community garden

It was not long before the challenge of providing regular food to the community became apparent. In response to this challenge, the idea for a community food garden emerged, and it was decided to start it within the existing neglected and overgrown garden of CGH. It was named the Noor Tofie Food Garden after one of the first people who set up the garden and has, sadly, since passed away.

Melissa Arendse came to live in CGH in August 2019 and gave birth to a daughter, Cassidy, there during the COVID-19 pandemic in December the same year. She is a monitor in the garden and recounts that:

When lockdown for COVID-19 started, I was introduced to working in the garden as part of the feeding scheme in the CGH community. At the time people could earn points for their work that could be translated into a small income. This was initiated by organisations who gave training regarding permaculture. I felt that the garden was my calling not only because I could be kept busy with a toddler at my heels, but also my realisations as an adult learner about the relationship of the earth and society, [as well as] the relationship between nature and humanity and my role as a steward.

Among the various work teams set up to manage tasks in CGH, a Veggie Gardening Team was set up comprising of 12 people. It consisted of a mix of people from within and without CGH who were interested to be part of the team, which was often women-led. Noor Tofie started the initiative independently, but when people showed interest in what he was doing, a task team was assigned of which Melissa Arendse was part. Noor had cleared the first space for the garden, and this later was expanded on by the task team.

While outside organisations such as Development Action Group and Upliftment Project supported the project through food donations, there was always a strong belief that the garden needed to be self-reliant. Some of the food produced in the garden was donated to the community kitchen as a contribution to feed those in need. Outside organisations also supported through the provision of training in areas such as permaculture, garden design, compost making and seasonal planting. They also donated seeds and equipment. Before long, the garden was producing a wide range of produce, including spinach, spring onions, herbs and medicinal plants, among others.

Germinating the idea of the garden

The community food garden was started as a way to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 in our community. In a sense, it was *guerrilla gardening* as part of our protest regarding the right of land and ownership, and the right to plant on land that had remained inactive for two decades. In the beginning, it was dependent on the goodwill of individuals swapping seeds who were attending workshops in places like the *Oude Molen* Eco Village in Pinelands, Cape Town. This workshop focused on areas such as education and empowerment for self-sustainability, as well as urban farming methods, such as permaculture.

Immediately following this workshop people became active – putting the ideas into practice, and they started looking at the viability of planting a garden at CGH. Not everyone was prepared to get dirty in the soil to help clear out spaces

for the garden to be planted, but enough residents participated to see the idea become a reality.

Bevil Lucas is one of the organisers in CGH. He reflects on the experience of setting up the garden:

I am often reminded of how the garden at CGH started. Boeta¹ Noor Tofie (better known by most of us as Oupa²) was the founder member of the garden back in early 2019. He was my opposite neighbour, my comrade and dearest friend. He lived in Room 12 on the ground floor, and I lived in Room 15 with my son, elderly father, and my Uncle John. Oupa was a short, elderly, active and very assertive man who was very passionate about the garden. He used to wake up and start his day at 5a.m. in the garden, and work until midday. After a few days he had cleared all the tall weeds and shrubbery. I questioned the 'oldie' about his interest in the garden. At first, he shared with me that the garden had become his place of comfort, of healing and a kind of quiet retreat. It made him feel like he had a sense of belonging, and a sense of ownership. Not long thereafter, the garden became a safe and comforting space for a few more elderly occupiers – Mamma Rose who lived on the ground floor, Gogo Virginia who lived on the first floor, as well as Boeta Ebrahim Januarie and Uncle John from the ground floor. We renamed the garden Noor Tofie Food Garden after Oupa passed away.

Karen Hendricks, one of the founding members of CGH, also recalls the setting up of the garden:

Days and weeks passed amid concerns and discussions about the wellness of the elderly [in CGH] and [talks of setting up] the garden space. Bernice, a comrade, supporter, and friend of the garden came and shared her extensive knowledge, love, skills, and experience with everyone. Within a few days the first compost beds were made. The first official launch of the garden was on Easter Monday in April 2019. What a memorable day. It started with storytelling and ended with a



Re-naming of the garden event

walking tour of the garden. It was then too that the shared vision of the garden space was birthed. By November 2019, the first garden fundraiser was held.

What we learned in the process

In the beginning, we were fortunate enough to be able to draw on the assistance and knowledge from residents like Boeta Noor and Bernice Roeland, who shared their knowledge about medicinal and indigenous herbs and plants. They knew which plants would grow best in the clay soil of Mountain Road, and which plants would do well in the local weather conditions. We also learned that everything is connected – landscape and people. It is all in harmony. They taught us how to

recycle the waste from the kitchen to make fertiliser. We also had to contend with cats who were causing damage in the garden – we learned that water bottles could be used that reflect light and scare the cats away. Netting was erected in strategic spots to protect the garden from wind. Some spots had the ideal sunlight for growing our seedlings, while others were suitable for planting.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, many residents of CGH were affected. It created a lot of additional challenges. The communal kitchen received pots of food from the local community, which they distributed to people in CGH. All of this had to be done while observing the strict lockdown rules and ensuring social distancing. It put a lot of strain on the community. But the COVID-19 times forced us to learn to plan better, and to involve more volunteers in the occupation in the garden. Fortunately,

residents were not too severely affected by COVID-19, and we came through stronger and wiser.

We learned that we could make tea from *African Wormwood* and prepare *Spekboom*³ and garlic chutneys to help stay healthy. People often added these plants and herbs to their *Reclaim Your Festive Box*, a gift box that was sold to generate income. The income generated could be used to buy compost, seeds and seedlings. We re-learned that *Malva*⁴ could be crushed and used for earache, and that the indigenous *wild garlic* was good for coughs, colds, flu, fevers, tuberculosis, asthma, and as a remedy for intestinal worms. It also produces an odour that helps keep snakes away. The food garden helped to focus our attention away from the pandemic and the frustrating confinement that came with it. It created a sense of peacefulness and escape. It enabled us to regain our centre as a collective.

Everything worthwhile comes with challenges

One of the early challenges faced in setting up the garden was getting people to learn to cooperate with each other. The task team even fell apart at one stage. However, a new task team was soon formed with new members. Through increased efforts in areas like cooperation and conflict resolution, this group learned to work together. Gradually, they were able to work more effectively.

Only a small number of individuals contribute to the garden in order to help ensure the food security of all. There are ongoing efforts to encourage different groups to join in, with mixed results. There is a need for ongoing sensitisation of community members about the importance of the garden to the overall project. All of the other task teams are important too (e.g. the security and safety team), but the garden is pivotal to ensuring the sustainability of the project.

It is also time-consuming to maintain the garden, and it is a challenge for people to devote time when they have other duties to take care of (e.g. family, income generating work).

Where are we now?

We have learned that our plans were a bit over-ambitious. People are busy. They have many other responsibilities. So, we need to work out a system that is feasible with people's available time. Melissa and her family have taken over as *champions* of the garden. They have been able to draw in a few others, but it is still not enough. We need more volunteers. If we had more people, we could plant more. At the moment, we have to adapt the size of the garden to the available workforce. But this means that there is less food for the community kitchen. The kitchen used to cook food twice a week, but now they can only do it once. After the end of the COVID-19 lockdown, there are fewer unemployed people available to work in the garden. Even though many people do short-term and precarious jobs, they are still less available to help out. CGH has become much quieter during the day, after people go out to work in the morning. You notice that it becomes vibrant again in the afternoon as people return from work.

Looking to the future

The work in the garden started out focusing on small sections that we could plant in. But there is still a huge area that is filled with rubble, and which was used as a dumping ground before CGH was occupied. We would like the City of Cape Town to assist us with clearing it. We also need community volunteers to help us to sort the plastic and recyclables from the wood and other trash. Recycling can be an additional source of income-generation.

We are also applying to use a fallow plot of land near CGH that receives ample sunlight and can be used for planting leafy vegetables and salad crops. Ideally, we would like to be able to produce enough food both for the community kitchen and for income-generation. However, as already mentioned, it is a challenge to find enough volunteers. If we could produce more, we could sell at a monthly farmers' market to generate income to buy more garden supplies and seedlings.

Water is also a challenge. We would like to install large tanks to conserve water, which is especially needed during the hot summer months. Finally, we would like to collaborate with other community gardens, university students and others to exchange and learn from each other. The garden is part of the local community of Woodstock. We would like the whole community to get involved – garden enthusiasts, volunteers, schools, retirement homes, etc. Through the garden, we want to help create awareness about the importance of locally produced goods and supporting the local informal economy. The CGH Noor Tofie Food Garden was created harnessing the knowledge and experience from within the community. It is inspired by the principles of social action, solidarity, self-governance and cooperation. It is a response to the growing need for local communities to work towards food security and sovereignty, and to break the reliance on outside food chains. We hope that the garden has a positive impact on our ecosystem and is a place of knowledge and learning. It is part of our broader campaign to reclaim unused spaces around Cape Town and use them in a way that responds to community needs for housing and food. With cooperation and vision, we can become more self-reliant and create a society where food security and sovereignty are in the hands of local communities.



Endnotes

- 1 Boeta is an honorific in Afrikaans that is used for an elderly male person.
- 2 Oupa is an Afrikaans word that means grandfather.
- 3 The Afrikaans word translates to 'bacon tree' in English. This South African plant is also referred to as 'elephant bush' as it forms part of their diet. It is used as food and medicine, especially for skin conditions.
- 4 Mallow, a plant common in Southern Africa, that is used as food and medicine to treat disorders of the skin, gastrointestinal tract and respiratory tract.