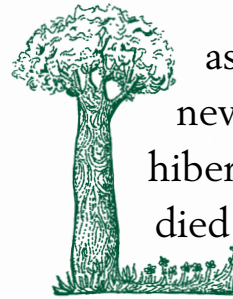
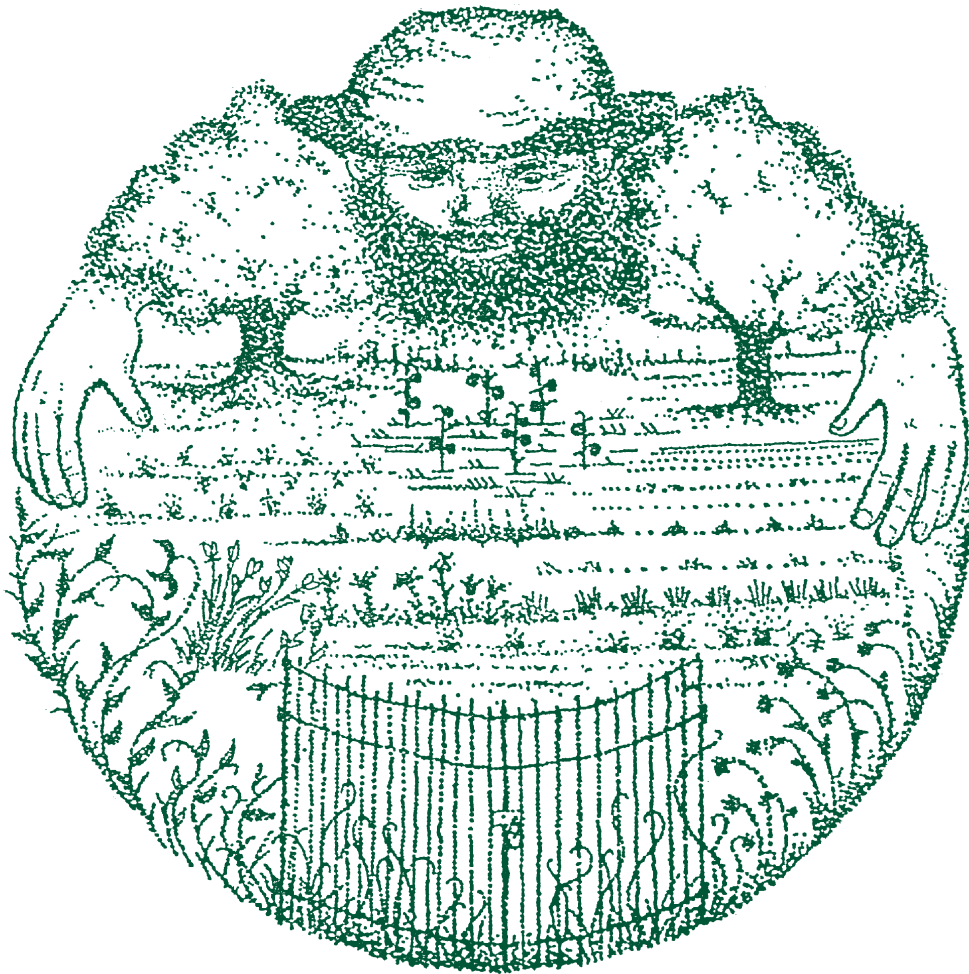


MANHATTAN IS A GARDEN



MAKING NEW GROUND



ast March I thought winter would never end. All I wanted to do was hibernate in my room. My father had died the summer before and it just wasn't fun to be me anymore.

I was 9 1/2 then, but I felt so old. Soft sounding voices had no answers to questions slinking like shadows. I cried a whole lot...that helped

March winds blew, blew, blewww well into April. Dad and I were awfully good kiteflyers, but without Dad's help, my kite would never go up. Inside, I felt safe, but one day the huffity-puffity winds and the warm sun forced me up and out.

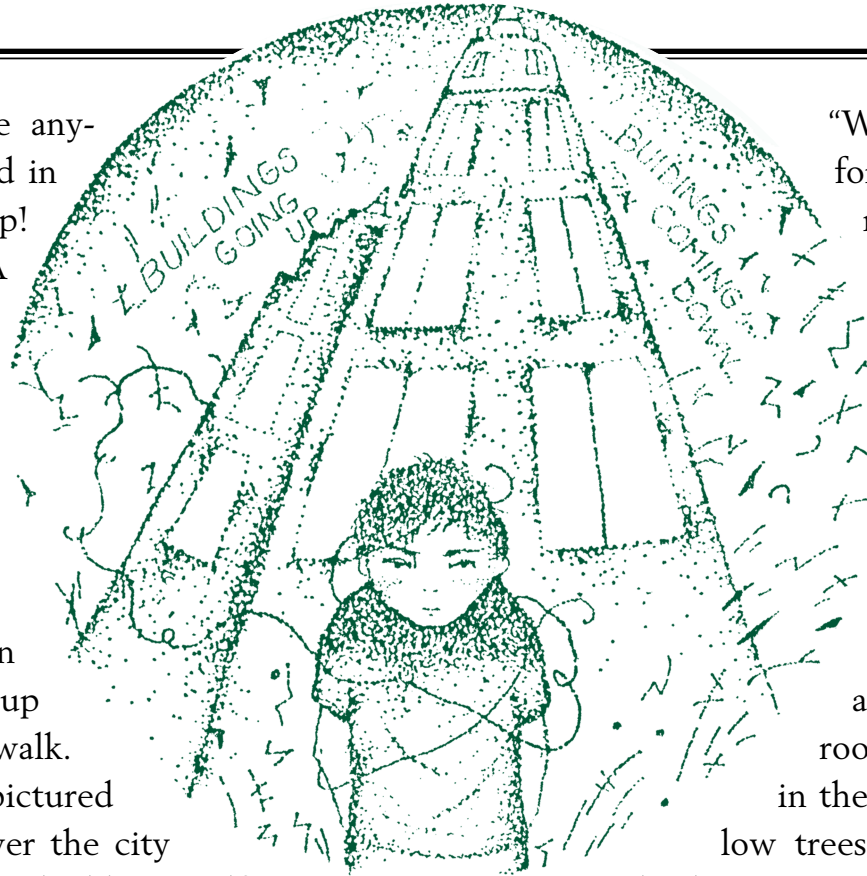


“What's so good out here anyway?” an angry voice shouted in my head, Buildings going up! Buildings coming down! A great big whirly-burly ball of noise.”

Soon the angry voice quieted and I remember walking along City sidewalks whistling through the space in my teeth, “Hey! Could it be?” I paused over a dandelion which had pushed its head up through a crack in the sidewalk. “How did it get there?” I pictured brave little dandelions all over the city nodding at unsuspecting passersby like myself.

“Wait a m-i-n-u-t-e” I thought, directing my fullest attention to something else I had never noticed...here and made my way over to the chain-link fence to snap off some fluff balls. “They really look like grey and white kitten-mittens. Fuzzy-wuzzy feels so-o-o good,” I smiled as I rubbed the fluff on the tip of my nose.

“Hold it, Kid!” I jumped, startled to hear a deep voice, my heart dropped into a pit in my stomach, and I was afraid. But this voice was not tough.



“Wait, let me cut some branches for you,” said a bearded old man with kind blue eyes.

With clippers drawn from his pocket holster, he snipped off some of the plumpest pussy willows and handed them to me in a bunch with the following instructions: “Just put ‘em in water and they’ll last forever. Why these old sticks are so full of life, they’ll grow roots overnight. If you stick ‘em in the ground they’ll be pussy willow trees tomorrow. That’s how this bush got started. And, well see for yourself.”

The old man chuckled, brought out a ring of jangling keys and unlocked the gate to this magic world. I followed him in with both eyes wide-open. “Wow!” Here beneath tippy-tall skyscrapers was a GARDEN! The old man gently placed his hand on my head and told me this story. “Once our community garden extended all the way back to that parking lot. The bulldozer destroyed that-there area last week, and put up a parking lot.” And then without a smile, he laughed a grown-up laugh and



kicked a stone hard in the direction of the parking lot.

Abruptly, as if making an effort to move forward, the old man turned, walked down the brick path to a place where tulips and daffodils bloomed and began to work. He never said so, but I knew he was happy to have me follow and watch. He had so much to show me: In one spot he had baby plants nestled under cutoff soda bottles.

“This corner’s my nursery,’ he said with lion-king pride.

“Did’y ever read the story of Job, Kid?” Before I could answer, the old man explained that small seedlings I’d observed, were called Job’s Tears. Fumbling in his pocket, the old man found what looked to me like beads. “Job’s Tears—seeds—I planted some in my nursery. Just moved these seedlings outside, so I gotta be careful and keep my baby seedlings warm at night.

After checking out rows and rows of baby plants, the old man moved to an umbrella-topped worktable.

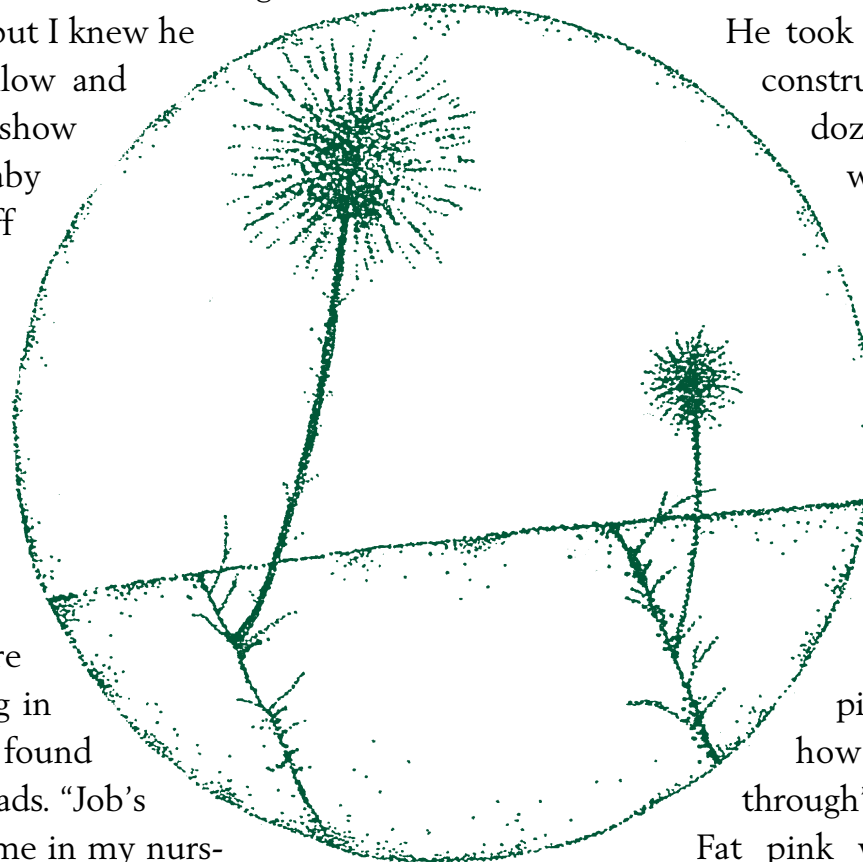
“Come here,” he motioned and showed me how to put little twigs, “cuttings” he called them, into pots of wet sand. “These here cuttings will grow roots and by the end of summer become raspberry bushes.”

He took my arm and whispered so the construction crew manning the bulldozer on the other side of the fence would not hear a word: “Everything in this work space I found, trash on the street.”

I didn’t feel comfortable asking, but blurted out. “And when will the bulldozer destroy the rest of the garden?” He shrugged his shoulders and said to the sky.

“Maybe today...maybe tomorrow...maybe never.” and he picked up a shovel to show me how he’d turned over the soil through’n through last fall.

Fat pink worms wiggled through each shovelful in this dark, chocolate brown dirt. I picked up a worm in my bare hands and watched it wiggle and swiggle to free itself. “Worms are the lungs of the soil,” the old man told me. “See how they tunnel in and out,

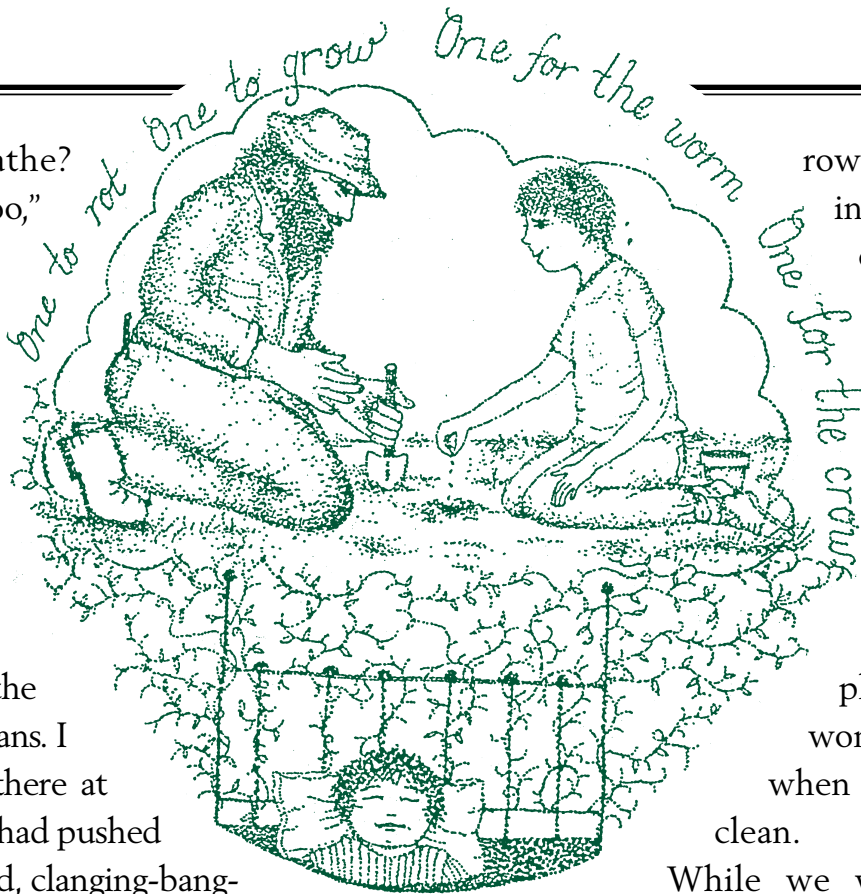


helping the earth to breathe? Hmmm! The earth breathes too," I thought.

We worked side by side and, before I knew it, the sun had nearly gone down. "If you come back tomorrow you can help me plant these seeds," the old man called out as I headed toward home clutching my new pussy willow friends.

The next day I woke up with the sun, my head humming with plans. I hoped the old man would be there at the gate. The construction crew had pushed closer to the garden and the loud, clanging-banging noise of their machines kept the old man from hearing me call out to let him in. Finally he looked my way and slowly came to where I was standing and with those jangling keys unlocked the gate.

"Upsy-daisy," he winked, as I tripped over some junk on the way in. He nodded, glad to see I'd returned and boomed, "TODAY IS PLANTING DAY." In the bed we prepared yesterday, we had used up most of the dark brown dirt. "Have to show the Kid how to compost" I heard the old man say under his breath. First we made



rows in the soil and then, handing me the seed packets, the old man chanted:

"One to rot,
One to grow
One for the worm,
And one for the crow"

I tossed my shovel aside, got down on my knees and planted with my bare hands. I wondered why soil meant dirty when it felt and smelled so-o-o clean.

While we worked people passed by, poked through the fence, and shouted words of encouragement to "Joseph." So that's the old man's name. I'd been afraid to ask.

We worked hard that day and as I left, I looked back on all the markers poking up from the garden. Joseph promised I'd soon see peas climbing up the bamboo stakes.

That night I went to sleep and had a funny dream. Joseph and I were planting seeds in the cracks of the sidewalks all around the City. After we'd finished it



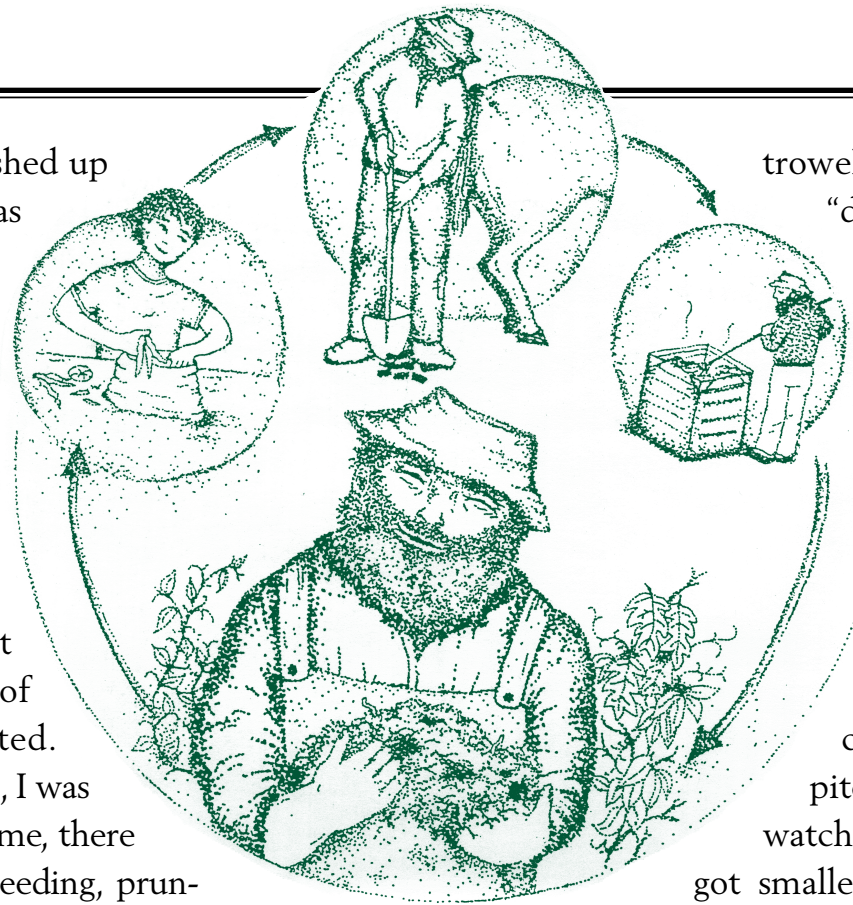
rained. Next green shoots pushed up through the cracks and grew as tall as buildings.

So you see, even rainy days weren't that bad anymore. I thought of our plants gulping raindrops and the barrels Joseph had found filling up with rainwater. We'd need every drop of that water to make it through the dry "dog days" of summer, Joseph often repeated.

Whenever I wasn't at school, I was in the garden. Every time I came, there was something new to do...weeding, pruning fruit trees. Nothing was ever wasted, I soon found out. Joseph even asked me to save our family garbage.

With my mom's help we saved plastic bags full of banana peels, corn husks, grapefruit rinds; even leftovers like that. When I lugged these garbage bags to the garden, Joseph was prepared.

With me as chef's assistant, we dumped the garbage on top of the pile Joseph had already layered with leaves, grass clippings, straw and seeds. We used our



trowels to scoop in some horse "doo-doo" Joseph said he'd collected from Central Park. We topped the layers with soil and while watering down the pile, Joseph mumbled, "Magic, you'll see...in a few months that pile will look like crumbly fudge cake."

What Joseph had taught me was composting and composting is magic. I used the pitch fork to turn the pile and watched as slowly, slowly the pile got smaller and darker. Meanwhile my garbage was becoming soil, food for plants, and the plants we grew from seeds in this soil—we'd eat one day. "It's a cycle," Joseph said using the shovel to draw a large circle to show me: "Turning, turning...Do you see it, Kid? Nothing ever really dies." He repeated it once more, because at that moment the bulldozer roared.

At the end of June I left for two months way up in the mountains. Joseph wasn't a letter-writer and I doubt if he even had a phone. I had no way of knowing, but I did imagine what could be taking place in the garden...could



smell it too! When I got back to the City, I checked in at home and then rushed as fast as I could to the garden.

"It's gone," I shrieked in disbelief. The bulldozer was destroying our garden.

Blinded by tears I thought I saw

Joseph in the distant corner. I

raced over where, under a lone-standing mimosa tree,

Joseph had set up his umbrella-topped table.

He put down his clip-

pers, caught me up in

his arms, and when I

stopped crying, softly

repeated, "Hey Kid...it's

okay...I've gotta secret

to show you."

"Wait a sec," he bent

down and from under the

table, reached for a beat-up

old briefcase, snapped it open,

looking up, ordered me to close my

eyes. "Okay now...open!" There on the

table lay many neatly-labeled baggies. "What's

this?" I questioned.

"Well, Kid, believe it or not, this here's a garden." I

responded with a blank look. Those plastic bags didn't look much like a garden to me. Tickling my curiosity,

Joseph teased: "Remember the marigolds; those yellow 'n orange smellers that

keep the bad-guy insects away?"

"SEEDS, KID...these are the

SEEDS I've gathered from

all our plants. And, this

big bag's our precious

BROWN GOLD. Got

'em before the bulldozer

buried our

treasure."

"Look," he said as he

opened the bag filled with

skinny black specks and poured them

into my palm. "These are

your next year's marigolds.

Don't you see it now, Kid?" I

had never seen Joseph so happy.

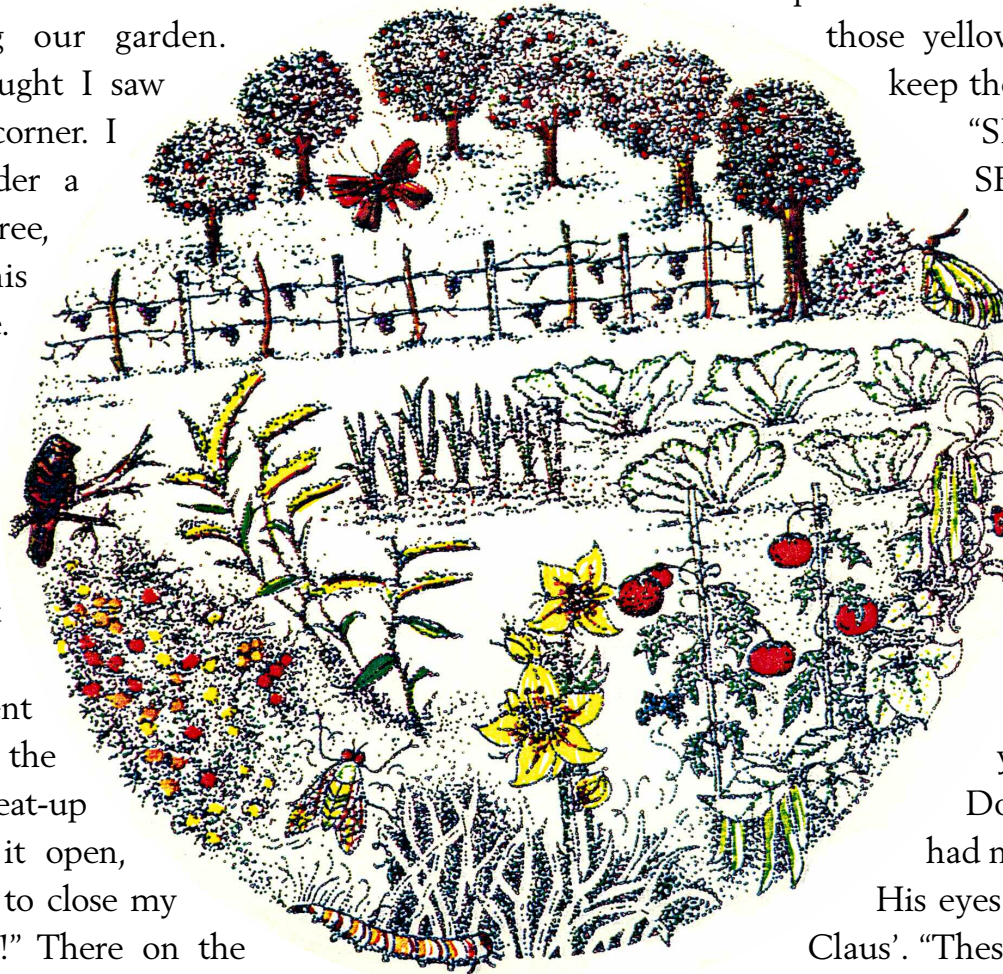
His eyes were twinkling like Santa

Claus'. "These seeds are the beginning;

the opening to another world. We'll find a

vacant lot and, come next spring, plant another garden

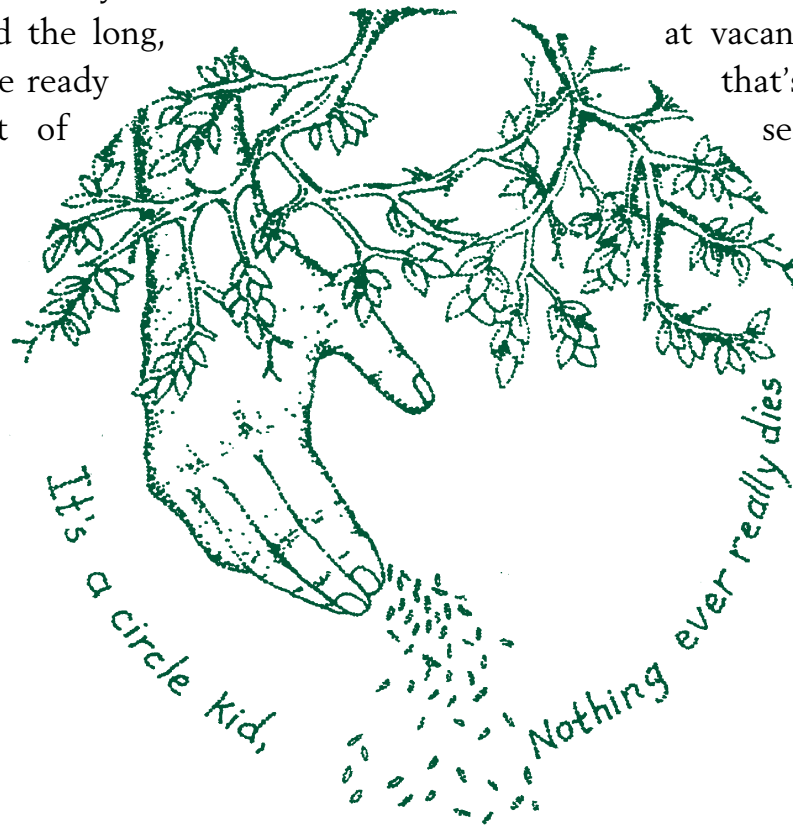
together. What do you think of that?"



“Hmmm,” I replied as the bags began to take on new life. Fingering the bags one-by-one, I began to see shriveled brown specks as lettuce, brown dust-like particles as tomatoes, little brownish balls as pea plants climbing their way up high stakes and thought: All these seeds—the black ones, the shiny ones, the tiny ones and the giant ones, the round and the long, the specks, and the bulbs were ready to grow and become part of another garden.

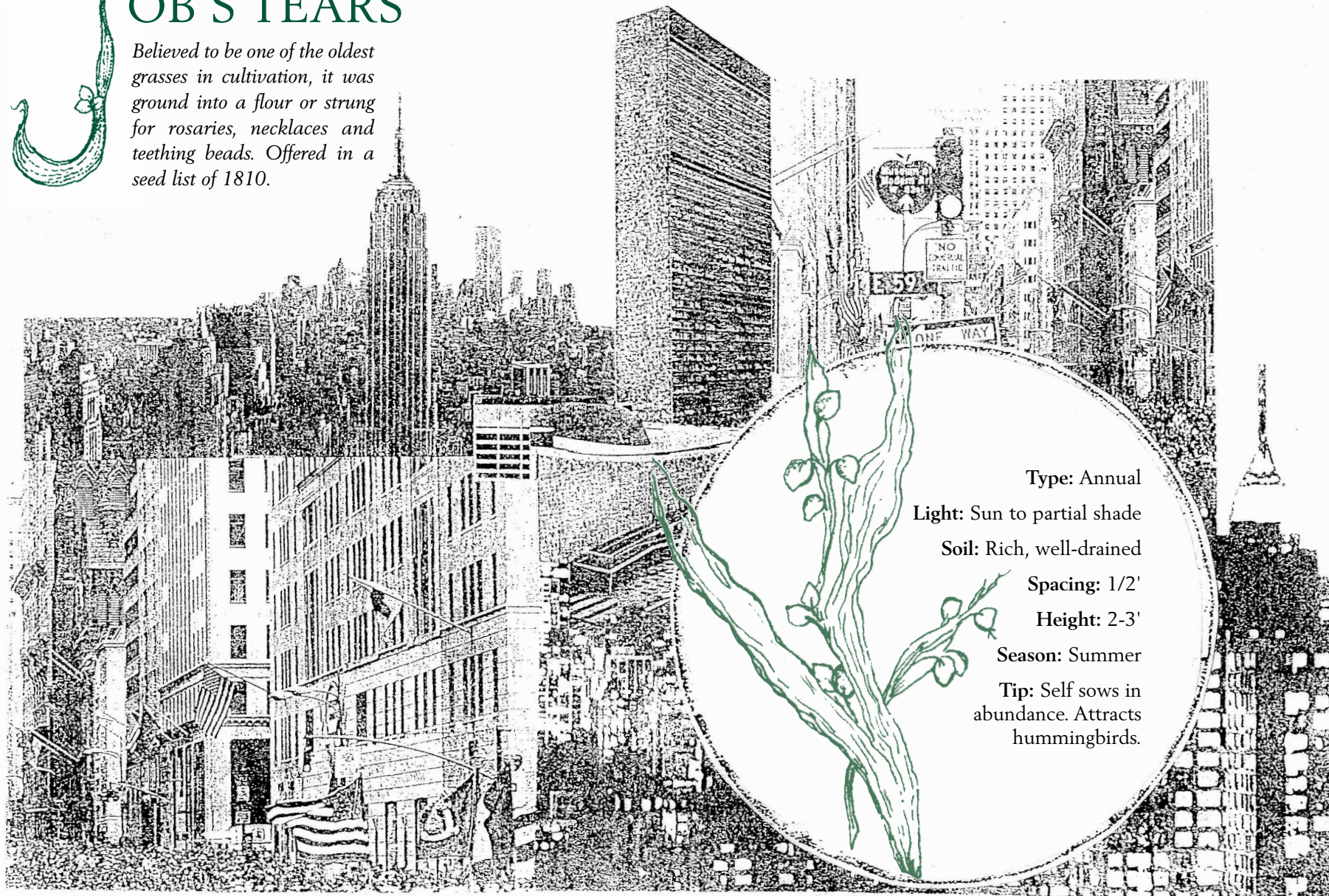
Aha! A light snapped on...and, I remembered what Joseph had said the day he drew the circle: “Nothing ever really dies, Kid,” and I knew from a place deep, deep inside that he is right.

And now in my travels around the City, I look at vacant lots and say to myself, “Now, that’s a garden” and I never would’ve seen that before I met Joseph.



JOB'S TEARS

Believed to be one of the oldest grasses in cultivation, it was ground into a flour or strung for rosaries, necklaces and teething beads. Offered in a seed list of 1810.



Type: Annual

Light: Sun to partial shade

Soil: Rich, well-drained

Spacing: 1/2'

Height: 2-3'

Season: Summer

Tip: Self sows in abundance. Attracts hummingbirds.