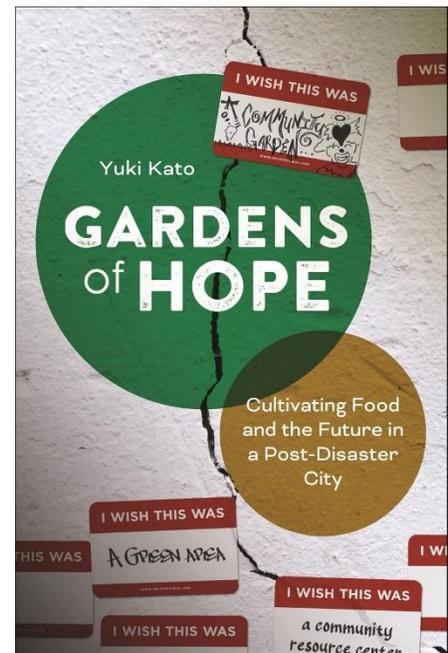


## ***Do something:* Lessons on pragmatic urbanism and cultivating hope from post-disaster New Orleans**

*Book review by*  
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<https://nyupress.org/9781479827404/gardens-of-hope/>



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**G***ardens of Hope* provides both an inspiring and cautionary tale of hope and burnout among urban cultivators in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the time since Hurricane Katrina devastated the city (and region) in August 2005. Kato's project spans

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from 2005 to 2023 and encompasses in-depth interviews with the growers who came and went during the eras of post-disaster recovery, transition, and redevelopment. Readers learn about the motivations, challenges, possibilities, successes, and downfalls of those who were growing in a crisis. The tension between hope and despair has undoubtedly gripped the public mind in today's current political, economic, and environmental climate. At a very timely moment, Kato gives readers a window into the experiences of growers who tried to enact the world they wanted but that did not yet exist.

Kato's work articulates two central concepts: urban cultivation and prefigurative urbanism. Using the term "urban cultivation," Kato focuses

specifically on urban growing projects in New Orleans that “practice engagement with other community members by intentionally sharing food, space, labor, or ideas” (p. 3) and “defy or expand the normative expectations of an urban lifestyle and a capitalistic valorization of land, labor, and food” (p. 4). As the book explains well, urban cultivation projects cannot do everything. They cannot address all issues with property management, land use policy, community safety, individual health, or racial inequality. But they can tangibly implement small changes in the spaces where they operate. As Kato demonstrates throughout the text, they can cultivate hope. From this, she develops the concept of “prefigurative urbanism” as “everyday practices that demonstrate alternative ways of life that do not yet exist in the city. ... [It is] civic action that aims to bring about immediate, tangible changes through direct actions that deviate from social and legal norms” (p. 11). Readers learn from urban cultivators featured in the book such as Jeanette, Pamela, Cory, and Macon about their desire to *do something*: to bring about some kind of pragmatic change in post-disaster New Orleans.

Throughout the book, the author provides useful typologies, while recognizing the nuances and blurred lines among these categorizations. Kato categorizes the aspirations of urban cultivators into five types: urban cultivation expansion, community rebuilding, alternative food systems, social entrepreneurialism, and alternative careers. These categories—although blurry—allow for distinctions to be made between the different motivations, visions, outcomes, beneficiaries, and prefigurations of different growers and their projects. As a community garden coordinator, I found myself reflecting on the project that I participate in and our place within this typology, which I expect other reader-growers will do as well. She also situates prefigurative urbanism within a typology of nine forms of social action: no action, prefigurative urbanism, do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism, prefigurative politics, social movements, nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations, market, civic engagement, and government. Readers engaged in urban cultivation and/or social action can recognize their work in these categories and perhaps challenge themselves to be more intentional in their efforts.

Kato’s analysis is attentive to the intersections of race, gender, and class, noting how aspects of identity and privilege shaped participants’ experiences and interactions without reifying these as immutable categories. She situates her work and the work of these urban cultivators within the long and varied histories of growing in New Orleans, the state of Louisiana, and the United States. The analysis is place-based and dives deep into the policies and negotiations around local organizations such as the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority (NORA), VEGGI Farmers Cooperative, and Habitat for Humanity’s Habitat Urban Garden (HUG) initiative. And the cautionary tales from this place are many. As Kato notes, “it was much more common to hear stories of failed attempts to launch cultivation projects than successful ones” (p. 90). Urban cultivators struggled repeatedly with land use issues, including barriers to accessing vacant lots, bureaucratic nightmares with getting appropriate permits, and precarious land use agreements. They also faced challenges with sustaining the necessary labor and with the difficult economics of urban food production. Some urban cultivators realized that they were not fulfilling the goals that they set out to achieve, while others chose to move on to another stage of their careers, and others burned out completely. Growers continued to address these challenges individually, coming from the pragmatic place of prefigurative urbanism, rather than work collectively to mobilize systemic changes. Yet the lessons of *Gardens of Hope* are by no means isolated to post-disaster New Orleans. As I write this, a long-standing community garden in my home province has been given 29 days to vacate its land (Sorokan, 2025), echoing the issues with land use experienced by many of Kato’s participants and reminding us that urban cultivation has by no means become the status quo.

One critique of the work is acknowledged by Kato in the text. Her work does not include interviews with members of the community outside of the growers themselves. The reader has only the perspectives of Kato and the urban cultivators. I agree with the author that including interviews with other residents may “have provided more nuanced,

potentially conflicting, accounts of the impact that these gardens and farms were having in the community” (p. 257). Although Kato makes clear that growers’ descriptions are their own subjective experiences, not objective truths, additional voices would have shed more light on the ways these urban cultivation projects unfolded and were experienced by communities throughout New Orleans. But from the growers, Kato is able to offer crucial suggestions for other urban cultivators: to first understand the history and social relationships of the place your project is situated in; to learn and work alongside others, rather than remain individualized; to be reflexive of your own social position and the wants of the community; and to be conscious of your own

capacity and of the time and energy required to exceed the boundaries of existing norms.

*Gardens of Hope* provides meaningful contributions for practitioners of urban cultivation, academics, activists, and policymakers. While their challenges were numerous, the urban cultivators in post-disaster New Orleans were able to redefine urban land productivity, reimagine agricultural work, experiment with new markets, and engage the public. Growers bent and broke social and legal norms to make a case for how things could be. There is much work to be done, and I recommend *Gardens of Hope* to anyone who is looking to learn from the experiences of New Orleans’ urban cultivators and from Yuki Kato’s keen analysis, and who seeks to *do something*. 

## Reference

Sorokan, K. (2025, August 6). City evicts community garden from land that’s been vacant for decades. *CTV News*.  
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