

## Local Garden, A Home For Many, Is Facing Property Threats

[California Native Garden Foundation \(CNGF\)](#) is a non-profit organization that desires to help communities have access to beautiful, sustainable gardens in schools and parks in need, and is threatened to be demolished due to San Jose city projects and potential Panera site plan in California's third largest city, San Jose.

CNGF was founded to collaborate with others who strive to build a network of carbon-neutral urban land models demonstrating local solutions that can solve the current environmental issues. CNGF demonstrates goals, which include teaching citizens of all ages regarding the world, and the skills to create regenerative urban food systems, protect ecosystems services, build healthy soils, and to sequester carbon.

This organization was founded by Alrie Middlebrook, CNGF's Executive Director and Co-Founder. Middlebrook is a passionate advocate and practitioner of a sustainable lifestyle, landscape professional, and California native plant specialist. She remains on the leading edge of the rising sustainability movement. CNGF, previously known as Middlebrook Gardens, has installed over eight-hundred native, sustainable gardens throughout Northern California. Middlebrook is committed to educating the public and promoting sustainability through native gardening, holding workshops throughout California. She received a variety of awards and recognition; her company became the second business in Santa Clara Valley to achieve the status of a certified green business. A few years later, Middlebrook, along with a group of environmental enthusiasts formed a nonprofit organization, the California Native Garden Foundation. As of now, the site is operated as a lab for nature-based urban living.

Furthermore, CNGF works on many other projects such as the Garden for Ghana project, in a village named Yamoransa in Ghana, Africa. It was led by Middlebrook early on, to provide crops for eating, medicinal purposes, erosion control, and ecological restoration. This organization is also working on the Build 25 x 25 Initiative is another one of CNGF's aspirations, which aims to create twenty-five urban ecovillages with teaching gardens and farms by 2025. These sites will transform land use in the region, and serve as a model for sustainable urban land use everywhere that people are able to live, eat, learn, and grow. These ecovillage sites train interns and volunteers in sustainable agriculture, food preparation, local ecology, and outdoor education.

One of CNGF's many gardens, ELSEE garden, began as an expansive, empty parking lot over twenty years ago. Seeing this, Middlebrook transformed it into a living garden, educating people on native plants. CNGF is driven to prepare youth for life outside the "digital world." When asked what their goal was with CNGF, Middlebrook stated, "The argument we're making is what can we do with land use in urban areas that is going to protect our ability to meet all of our life cycle needs without using a lot of fossil fuels."

Nearly twenty-two years ago, Middlebrook transformed a deserted, half-acre concrete parking lot at 76 Race Street located in downtown San Jose, into a thriving garden filled with native plant communities. However, Melissa B. states, "Our landlord for many years has been threatening to develop the property but he is more interested in selling it to us. Our goal over the next year or two is to raise the money to buy it for ourselves." Over twenty-two years, there have been many twists and turns in the road over the last since the garden was built. They aim to purchase the land at the location, to continue to fulfill their desires of aiding the community.

When asked about their plan for the next one to two years resolving the issue of buying land, Alrie Middlebrook notes, “Our landlord said four and a half months ago that we had to give him some money to buy the land. He has given up the idea of building the Panera, and he wanted to sell the land to us... but he wants 3.3 million dollars for it.”

Middlebrook felt that getting their message out to a national audience would help capture people's interests in nature-based urban solutions, as she says, “That may make some people who have money or knowledge and are interested in what we're doing here in Silicon Valley, to step up and maybe make some contributions to this 3.3 million dollars that they want for the property... We need to educate our youth for them to really understand what it means to be ecoliterate and live on the planet. We want them to live on a real planet, not a virtual one.”

Looking towards the future of their sprouting organization, Middlebrook states, “We're also raising money to hire two or three people to work here to replace what I do, since I manage this non-profit organization without salary. We want to continue our work here.” Alrie Middlebrook hopes for a bright future with CNGF, and that it will thrive for years on, into the future.