

Farming the Concrete Jungle

In cities across the country urban farmers are growing communities, greening the landscape and revolutionizing food politics.

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August 24, 2007

At 9 a.m. on a cool, bright Saturday in mid-June, Robert Burns and Diana Baldelomar set up a farm stand outside the YMCA in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood. The stand is simple: a tent to keep out the sun, two folding tables set in an L-shape and a handful of zinc washtubs filled with two inches of water. In the tubs stand heads of green and red lettuce, greens, broccoli, and bunches of mint and basil.

When two women approach and ask the price of the greens, Baldelomar tells them that the turnip, mustard and collard greens are a dollar a bunch. "Honey," the woman says, "in this neighborhood, if someone asks you for greens, they are only talking about the collards." Her companion asks, "Did you ship it in from the country?"

"No ma'am. These are from right around the corner, West Cottage and Brook. We went out and harvested them this morning. You should stop by sometime."

Burns and Baldelomar work with the Food Project, a community-based urban agriculture program founded in 1991 to get Boston's youth involved in food production. Their West Cottage plot is one of four farms on vacant lots in the Dorchester neighborhood.

The Food Project is part of a growing urban agriculture movement to improve access to quality food in cities by creating local sources of fresh produce. The movement is showing that sustainable, local food systems are not only a way to ensure food security but also a means of addressing social justice issues.

And the movement is getting stronger. Community urban agriculture programs are gaining support from city governments desperate to increase green space and capitalize on public interest in environmental responsibility. As *In These Times* went to press, the 2007 farm bill had passed in the House of Representatives with a \$30 million appropriation for community food projects.

"The biggest crisis in our food system is the lack of access to good, healthy, fresh food, for people living in cities, particularly in low-income communities," says Anna Lappé, co-founder with her mother Frances Moore Lappé of the Small Planet Institute. "Urban agriculture work is one of the most powerful solutions, because it brings food directly into the communities."

Not just another garden

In her book, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening In America*, Laura Lawson charts a movement that stretches back to the 1880s. Lawson, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, says that urban gardening programs have had three missions: bringing nature to the city, offering educational opportunities to low-income and immigrant children, and cultivating a self-help ethos in a democratic space. "The garden itself," she writes, "is rarely the end goal but rather facilitates agendas that reach beyond the scope of gardening."

The Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC), a food policy organization with more than 200 member groups, defines urban agriculture as "the growing, processing, and distribution of food and other products through intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities." It divides urban agriculture into commercial farms, community gardens and backyard gardens. But programs like Boston's Food Project have begun to collapse such distinctions. They run commercial farms, but they also invest in their communities and create local supply networks.

According to the 2000 Census, 80 percent of the U.S. population lives in cities or suburbs. Food travels 25 percent farther than it did in 1980, and fruits and vegetables spend up to 14 days in transit. The CFSC notes, "Most fruit and vegetable varieties sold in supermarkets are chosen for their ability to withstand industrial harvesting equipment and extended travel, not for their taste or nutritional quality."

The Food Project began on Ward Cheney's farm in Lincoln, Mass., about 24 miles west of Boston, with the goal of strengthening young people's connection to the land. They started by busing city kids out to the country, but the group now farms five urban plots--a total of 2.5 acres. Each summer the Food Project employs 60 kids to work on both the urban and rural farms. After the summer, the youth can return as interns to learn how to run the project's farmers' markets and commercial kitchen.

In the Midwest, Growing Power runs three farms in Chicago, youth employment and education programs and a world famous vermiculture (worm compost) project.

In Oakland, Calif., People's Grocery operates five urban gardens in the largely black and Latino communities of West and North Oakland, as well as a youth nutrition program staffed by young people.

In Brooklyn, Added Value has turned an old asphalt baseball diamond into a full-functioning farm. And in Philadelphia, Mill Creek Farm is using storm runoff to irrigate its urban farm. Indeed, community agriculture projects are sprouting up in cities across the country--in San Francisco (Alemany Farm), Buffalo (Massachusetts Avenue Project), Birmingham, Ala. (Jones Valley Urban Farm), and Houston (Urban Harvest). According to the USDA, the number of farmers' markets has grown by 50 percent since 1994, and the federal Community Food Projects Competitive Grant Program is funding more than twice as many groups as it did a decade ago.

Beyond organic

The organic food movement is rapidly changing how America eats and grows its food. Between 1997 and 2001, farmers added a million acres of certified organic land, doubling the amount of organic pasture and more than doubling organic cropland. This reflects not just a rise of specialty retailers like Whole Foods. By 2003 organic products could be found in 73 percent of conventional grocery stores according to a USDA study, and last summer, the retail giant Wal-Mart began selling organics. But Erika Allen, development director of Growing Power, says the organic label doesn't tell the whole story. "There are organic farmers on the walls of Whole Foods who have some atrocious labor practices--atrocious. They're just like plantation owners. People don't know that."

Moreover, organic food is still largely inaccessible to low-income communities and communities of color. And the costs associated with being certified organic have led many urban agriculture programs to shy away from being certified. "We are what most folks would consider organic, but we're not certified," the Food Project's Burns says. "That's not as important to us. We're in the community; folks can just come by and see our practices. It's about transparency."

Accessibility is at the heart of what these groups call food security. "It's about everyone having access to culturally appropriate and nutritional food at all times," says Danielle Andrews, who heads up farming for Food Project's Dorchester plots.

"We're using food to make social connections," says Growing Power's Allen. "It's not just about growing food--it's about practices and how people form relationships, get comfortable with each other and learn to communicate through really owning the food system."

Forming such sustainable relationships inherently requires addressing issues of privilege. Growing Power manages a farm on the edge of Cabrini Green, Chicago's most notorious housing project. The site is owned by Fourth Presbyterian Church, the wealthiest congregations in the city. "The work that we're doing is social justice work," says Allen, who is bi-racial. "For white folks to support and ally with people of color and communities that are struggling, they have to understand that it's not just about knowing how to grow lettuce. It's important that people doing these projects are very transparent about why they're there."

Oases in the food desert

In West Oakland, home to City Slickers and People's Grocery, liquor stores outnumber grocery stores 40 to one. The most readily available food is fried. On the other side of the country, in Added Value's Brooklyn neighborhood, the last grocery store shut its doors in 2001. Federal studies classify such communities as "food insecure," but they are popularly known as "food deserts." A study in the June 2001 *Journal of Nutrition* found that women living in "food insecure" areas were more likely to be overweight and thus at risk for obesity-related illnesses like diabetes and heart disease.

To counter the harm caused by food deserts, urban agriculture focuses on high-density food production--optimizing the amount of food grown on the least amount of land. City Slicker grew 6,500 pounds of produce last year on less than one acre of land. "If the average person eats three to four hundred pounds of produce per year, that doesn't feed that many people," says City Slicker's Rosenthal. "But I'm not saying it's insignificant, because those couple dozen people improved their diet."

These projects also help people sustain themselves. Both City Slicker and Food Project run backyard gardening programs that provide lead testing to determine the safety of soil, wooden planters, seeds, seedlings and ongoing assistance for the life of the garden.

"Our backyard garden program fits with the idea that the human resources are here, what's lacking are the materials," says Willow Rosenthal, founder of City Slicker. "There are folks coming to us in their 20s and 40s saying, 'I really want to know how to do this. I remember farming when I was five with my grandmother.'"

Since the program's inception in 2005, City Slicker has helped build 50 backyard gardens and has set a goal of 50 per year in the future. "We're building a whole community of urban gardeners," says Rosenthal.

Two years ago, City Slicker helped Shirley Chunn start a garden. What started as two boxes has now taken over her yard. "It's really nice to just go out and relax in the morning and see all my vegetables," says Chunn. Four of her neighbors now have City Slicker gardens.

According to City Slicker, 40 percent of the 2006 participants were able to grow half or more of their household's produce, 30 percent experienced a positive change in their health, and 50 percent added more fresh vegetables to their diet. City Slicker also buys excess produce from these backyard gardens at a premium organic rate, which it then sells at a lower price at its community farm stand.

The economics--whether through production or backyard programs--are not insignificant. In its primer on urban agriculture the CFSC writes, "Maintaining regional and local farm-to-consumer enterprises helps keep the entire industry accountable for the food system, increasing the likelihood that food is produced and consumed in sustainable ways." The CFSC cites the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association which estimates that if every family in Maine spent \$10 a week on local food, \$104 million would be kept in the local economy.

Cultivating leaders

Four years ago, Geralina Fortier, then 17, got involved with People's Grocery to fulfill a high school community service requirement. Today, Fortier coordinates People's youth nutrition programs. "We believe that youth are the best agents for change, especially to one another, so we create workshops and presentations about eating healthy," says Fortier, as she shovels compost onto a new bed at People's 55th Street garden in West Oakland.

Now a college student majoring in community and health education, Fortier says her work with People's Grocery has changed her life. Asked what she would be doing if she hadn't gotten involved with People's Grocery, she replies, "I'd be fat."

"I'm pretty radical about my diet," says Fortier, "A lot of my friends thought I was crazy and still do." After three years as a strict vegan, she recently switched to a raw food diet because "that's how we should be eating anyway."

At Brooklyn's Added Value, the conversation about nutrition starts in grade school. Almost every child in the local school district has visited the farm at least once through its "Farm to School" program. Added Value also runs a youth program that teaches high school kids food production and sales, media literacy, sustainable business development and community education and organizing.

"We're not growing farmers, we're trying to grow young people who are inspired by the world around them and who care and see themselves as empowered to take action in fixing things," says Caroline Loomis, Added Value's community education coordinator.

Greening the concrete jungle

Loomis sees urban agriculture as a way to transform the meaning of urban green space. "Can you imagine what our cities would like if every park had a farm built into it?" she asks.

Three years ago, the Boston Area Health Education Center asked the Food Project to farm raised flowerbeds on the roof of Boston Medical Center's parking garage. The Food Project hauled 50 crates of compost to the roof in shopping carts and started with a crop of tomatoes, summer squash and eggplant. Andrews says that neighborhood people have "come over really excited about this lot. The roof is pretty ugly. Even with the vegetables, it's still pretty ugly. But it's a great improvement from what was here."

Increased green space also has a measurable effect on crime. University of Illinois researchers found that housing projects with trees have a 7 percent lower crime rate than their treeless counterparts. They also found that the greener the environment the lower the level of domestic violence.

The recognition that the urban landscape needs green space has opened doors to city partnerships. The asphalt lot that Added Value farms is owned by New York City, and the Brooklyn Zoo supplies compost. In Chicago, Growing Power has partnered with the Chicago Park District to operate two quarter-acre model urban farms, one next to Michigan Avenue in downtown Grant Park and the other in Jackson Park on the South Side.

But Rosenthal says that expanding these relationships is not enough. "What we really need to do is to start working with the city governments and the county governments and the state, and hopefully with the federal level, to create programs that actually support doing productive urban agriculture on a scale that would be meaningful," she says. "And that really means addressing the farm bill."

A food, not farm bill

Andy Fisher is one of the founders of the CFSC, which formed in 1994 to lobby for changes in the 1996 bill. For Fisher and others wanting to transform food access and production in the United States, changing what the government funds in the farm bill is crucial. "You've got a structure of commodity programs subsidizing--corn, dairy and meat--to the exclusion of other crops," says Fisher. "Take the food pyramid: The farm bill subsidizes the exact opposite of that: 72 percent of all farm subsidies are going into dairy and meat production and smaller amounts into grains for human consumption. The only fruits or vegetables subsidized are apples. So there is a real impact on people's diets. In a very broad sense the farm bill is a food bill, and should be thought of that way."

In addition to subsidizing Big Ag, the farm bill allocates funds for the food stamp program, which, as the nation's largest nutrition program, has a significant impact on consumption patterns. In 2006, 26.7 million Americans received food stamps.

The version of the farm bill passed in the House this summer has expanded funding to encourage food stamp recipients to shop at farmers' markets: \$32 million is allocated to the renamed Farmers' Market Promotion Program; also the bill expands both who is eligible to sell at markets, and the availability of Electronic Benefit Transfer technology to process food stamps as payment. A 2004 UCLA study by researchers at the School of Public Health found that offering those receiving government food assistance (in this case, the Women, Infants and Children program) access to farmers' markets resulted in increased fruit and vegetable consumption that continued beyond the offered incentive.

The House version of the farm bill also allocates \$30 million over the next five years to the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program, which, since its inception in 1996, has funded 240 programs to help low-income communities meet their nutritional needs. (The Food Project and Growing Power have received three grants each.) Stephanie Larsen, policy organizer with the CFSC cautions however that in the 2007 bill CFP funds were changed from mandatory (that is, guaranteed at that level each year) to discretionary (subject to the annual budget approval). "Due to the nature of the appropriations process, there is always a significant possibility that CFP will get much less than \$30 million a year and we would have to fight for it annually against all other programs."

It remains to be seen what will happen in the Senate, but legislators are starting to realize the importance of urban agriculture funding. "I rise today to express my support for the [farm bill] ... but also to express my concern about the lack of funding for community food projects," said Rep. Rush Holt (D-N.J.) on the House floor.

Owning what you till

The 2007 farm bill may help urban agriculture, but larger questions about sustainability remain. "No one is against gardening," says UIC's Lawson, "but not everyone wants to fund it."

The massive federal subsidies received by Big Ag companies help keep food prices artificially low. That means small-scale, sustainable agriculture must self-subsidize its prices to compete in the marketplace. And as the profile of urban agriculture rises, urban farms are also confronting questions about whether to participate in the high-priced, organic farmers' markets cropping up around the country.

"It's important to us that the food we grow here is available to people in the community," says the Food Project's Andrews. "That means it's not sold at the prices it would be if it was sold downtown." Selling at high-end markets is an issue that the Food Project grapples with because it has the potential to allow the organization to sustain itself. Right now, the group makes around \$20,000 off the produce grown on its Dorchester land. If the Food Project sold it at the Copley Square farmers' market, opposite the Neiman Marcus, Andrews estimates they could get twice as much. "I think there is a sense at the organization that it could lend something to the urban agriculture movement if we were economically sustainable."

So far, however, the Food Project is opting out. "Our community is patient with what goes along with urban agriculture. Sometimes our compost smells, or we'll have a little rat infestation," Andrews says. "If we were selling downtown, it could become uncomfortable. I don't think it would make a whole lot of sense."

Because of funding difficulties, over the years many community food projects have died, which hurts those communities that have come to rely on their resources.

"Everyone keeps reinventing this thing over and over again, which tells me it has a really important function, and it should be supported," says Lawson. "But we shouldn't have to keep finding new land and new leaders."

For this reason, Lawson stresses land ownership as one path to sustainability. "The exact audience will change over time--but the hardest thing is transforming that space, that earth," she says. "Once you have that tillable soil, it's there for whatever programs want to come along and claim it. The gardeners need to look at land use and ownership of sites, and work with the city to keep them permanent."

Many hold up Philadelphia as the gold standard of land stewardship. Founded in 1986, the Neighborhood Gardens Association (NGA) is a community land trust that holds land reclaimed by gardeners in order to save it from development when property values rise. (One of the quandaries urban agriculture programs face is that when they transform previous "worthless" land, they simultaneously raise its property value and that of the surrounding area.) The NGA currently holds 24 plots in trust. In Chicago, a similar program called NeighborSpace has been around since 1996. Both programs focus on community gardens, but the overall aim of creating community land is one that resonates with everyone working in urban agriculture. "If you have control over the land and the water, if you can feed yourself, you can really transform society," says Erika Allen. "But these communities don't have any of those things, so how can you have a just society?"

For urban agriculturists it all comes back to empowering and investing in community. "[W]e expect to see more people of all ages and backgrounds first becoming educated food consumers, and then becoming engaged food citizens," concludes the Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program 10 year progress report. "As healthful food and healthy eating become the norm, we anticipate that more people will look for broader regional and policy-based answers to the problems that continue to beset their communities."

But for Allen and her colleagues, food is not only an end, it's the means. "We're working towards a just world where everyone has full bellies and land and water," she says. "We're using food as a tool to get there. And it's completely doable."