



Urban Gardens Grow Healthy Communities

By DAVID LEWELLEN

Environment and community meet in an urban garden. It taps into cultural heritage and renews human rootedness in the soil and the climate. “The garden is the new front porch,” said Gretchen Mead of Victory Garden Initiative, a nonprofit in Milwaukee that teaches and promotes urban vegetable gardening. Her program runs a 1.5-acre urban farm, but its main focus is on helping people grow food in their yards, front or back. Urban gardening builds community, she said, and “community building promotes wellness in the same way that eating promotes wellness.”

Many such food activists believe good urban food can help promote good urban society. “Food may be our most important connection to understand how the world works,” said Mead. Among mental health, social justice, nutrition and the environment, “in the middle is the sweet spot where you grow your own food and affect the world for the better,” she said.

Interest in community gardens, farmers markets and local produce has exploded over the past decade, as fresh, organic fruits and vegetables have become fashionable. But like so many other things, the benefits have not spread equally by race and class.

FOOD AS AN EMBLEM

Food has meaning. All humans, all cultures, construct elaborate systems of ritual around it. Food evokes memories and emotions. But in the United States, conscious enjoyment of eating has long been seen as effete or decadent — probably tied to the Puritan fear of sensual pleasure. Even as more people look for locally grown vegetables, even as Wal-Mart stocks organic produce, hardly anyone wants to be labeled a “foodie.” Food as a subject of its own diminishes itself; food as one important

thread in a larger tapestry of culture is an alluring vision.

Aside from food as fuel, the average person likely thinks of food as medicinal — eat oat bran for fiber, eat fish for omega-3s. But can food make the further jump to being an environmentally sustainable emblem of culture and community?

Yes, said Will Allen, founder of Growing Power Inc., an urban farm in a poor, African-American neighborhood of Milwaukee that spent its first decade or so training young people to cultivate fresh produce.

If the farm got publicity, it was mostly among white people. But when first lady Michelle Obama installed a vegetable garden at the White House and invited Allen there to speak in 2010, “Ten million folks all of a sudden wanted to learn to grow food,” Allen said, “especially people of color.”

Growing Power is now a nationally known leader in the urban agriculture movement, and Allen was recognized with a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” in 2008.

A large urban garden can improve its little corner of the soil and air, and it can be a productive, sustainable use for land that was fallow. In terms



Roy Scott

of overall impact on the environment, however, even if every urban vacant lot were converted to vegetable production, most activists acknowledge that the results could not feed a city. But again and again, they return to the power of a garden as a teaching tool and a community builder. As much as it benefits the physical environment, a garden's impact on the human environment can be even greater.

"It's community health, social health, emotional health, spiritual health," said Milwaukee food activist Martha Davis Kipcak. But, she added, "we can't talk about any of these issues without addressing race."

URBAN GARDENING AND RACE

Referring to a low-income Milwaukee neighborhood, Mead said, "I used to think I could show up in Harambee and make it work by myself. But it's almost the opposite effect: 'I'm not doing what that white lady told me to do.' And I respect that. You find people from the neighborhood to be leaders and foster them any way you can."

"We can't be righteous and crusading, with an attitude of 'Here, let me help you,'" Davis Kipcak agreed. "You don't need to hold up broccoli and say, 'This is broccoli.'" Also, she added, "The kids in suburbs and private schools are just as [unaware]. And it's not just the kids, it's the adults."

Across all races and classes, the knowledge of how to grow healthy food atrophied in recent generations. During World War II, a great deal of "victory garden" vegetables were grown with no greater ambition than to put food on the table. But the end of the war and the prosperity that followed led many people to value the convenience and modernity of buying fruit and vegetables at the grocery store over grow-your-own produce. Moving on from an agricultural past was seen to represent progress.

Mead speaks of "decolonizing" the food system, which she characterizes as running on the labor of the poor and marginalized — slaves long ago, underpaid Hispanic immigrants today. She sees a parallel to breast-feeding, another ancient norm that is now being reclaimed by the affluent at much higher rates than the poor.

Historically, "agriculture has not been kind to everyone," said Young Kim, executive director of Fondy Farmers Market in Milwaukee. "It's not kind to people now."

African-Americans coming north during the

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Great Migration were escaping, among other things, cultural memories of slavery and post-Civil War sharecropping. Buying food from a store was a sign of success. The painful heritage must be acknowledged and confronted, Kim said. He recalled a conversation with one African-American food activist in Milwaukee who plants a demonstration slave garden that might have been found 200 years ago in the Deep South. "I said, 'You're not really going there, are you?' and she said, 'I have to go there.'"

Meanwhile, affluent whites have decided that gardening is a sign of health, raised consciousness and higher status. Growing one's own food takes more time and effort than going to a supermarket; buying fresh from a farmers market often takes more money. Healthy local produce, aside from its intrinsic worth, is also now a status symbol.

RECLAIMING THE LAND

Urban soil is notoriously poor. Even if gasoline or chemicals or other long-ago toxins spared a particular lot, topsoil frequently has been scraped off and moved, leaving mostly packed clay behind. For that reason, most city gardens use raised beds, or layers of material on top of existing surfaces. Municipal composting systems can play a vital role in supplying new, quality soil for producing food, and some cities allow community gardens to tap into hydrants for water.

Allen looks around Milwaukee and sees plenty of land, including underused school playgrounds, that could grow food if covered with a 2-foot layer of compost. "The bigger a site is, the easier it is to manage," he said. City governments tend to focus on glitzy downtown development projects, he pointed out, but agriculture can help neglected neighborhoods prosper.

In poor neighborhoods, Mead said, "everyone knows what diabetes is." Nutrition, however, is "one tiny little slice" of the overall urban agriculture picture, which includes social issues such as labor, environment and culture, as well as health, according to Davis Kipcak.



Some in the urban food movement originally suggested setting goals such as producing 10 percent of a city’s food locally by a certain date, Davis Kipcak said. A goal to aim for, even if unattainable, may be valuable, but she believes it is more important to improve neighborhood cohesion and environment.

“What does urban agriculture do well? Community connections, education, social cohesion,” said Anne Palmer, program director for food communities at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future in Baltimore. The city, like others in the North and Midwest, has surplus land that holds little potential for redevelopment and could be converted to growing food — but not enough to feed the population.

Palmer also studies what she calls peri-urban food, which involves cities serving as centers for distributing and processing food grown nearby. But land in the suburbs and exurbs that could be farmed is now being lost to light industrial uses. The next step, she thinks, is raising the political awareness of food, a tactic which has yet to show many concrete results. Still, she takes the long view as she looks for a way to harness local enthusiasm around good food to influence federal and state policy. And again, she said, food can be an entry point for better public policy on environment, labor and other issues.

“People thought food was going to go away” and be replaced by the next fad, Palmer said. But looking at the urban food supply from the standpoint of public health is a valuable way to make connections into other issues. Everyone can remember what they ate — and then wonder where it came from.

Part of Palmer’s job is to bring stakeholders together. She can help small producers get into big supply chains, she said, such as public school systems that are now mandated to provide some local food in their mass-produced lunches.

INTERCONNECTIONS

Food, gentrification, schools and access to medical care “are all connected. You can’t separate one from the other,” said Hilda Gutierrez, food access manager for the Sustainable Food Center in Austin, Texas. Workers should be able to afford the fruits and vegetables that they harvest for others, Gutierrez said, and her organization must fight “the misconception that farmers markets

are exclusively for white people. It’s a challenge to make farmers markets into places where everyone feels welcome.”

Unlike many northern cities, land in Austin is at a premium, and gentrification means there is little room available for growing food in the city limits, Gutierrez said, so farmers markets must draw producers from a wide radius.

Gutierrez sees people using food stamps in farmers markets, and her staff does not have to tell them about the benefits of fresh produce — immigrants are accustomed to buying small amounts of

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— ANNE PALMER

fresh, local food in their countries of origin.

One market in a “food desert” area of Austin is shrinking, Gutierrez said, because farmers aren’t making a profit there. To improve, the market will need to match the music and ambience of its neighborhood, as well as the value-added products such as baked goods or other prepared foods that are available, she said.

“A good farmers market is joyful, it’s celebratory,” said Kim, whose customers at the Fondy Farmers Market are mostly African-American. But that customer base makes the large, successful market in a low-income area of Milwaukee an anomaly. Another anomaly is that by an accident of immigration, most of the farmers who sell the produce are Hmong. White growers predominate in wealthier Milwaukee neighborhoods and suburbs, but “in a neighborhood that has an iffy reputation, you’re going to get more immigrant farmers,” Kim said.

At Fondy, “it’s a real working-class farmers market, and stuff is priced to move. There’s not a lot of food fetishism,” Kim said, but that doesn’t mean the customers aren’t “aware of GMOs and of pesticides. The conversation about good, clean, local food penetrates every level of society, even if you have a food-stamp card in your pocket.”

Fondy’s community also has a food tradition; collard greens and mustard greens, for example, carry cultural heritage. That tradition was hard for Kim to see a decade ago, when he came to the

farmers market from a background in working with the homeless. In that job, he said, “The first question in my mind is, ‘What is wrong?’ Maybe it’s alcohol or domestic violence, but if you’re homeless, you probably have a problem.” That approach did not help him in the world of urban food, which has plenty of assets. “If I look for a deficiency, I’ll find a deficiency,” he said. “If I look for strength, I’ll find strength.”

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

A lot of community-building “happens organically, no pun intended,” said Esther Park, a program associate for the Los Angeles Food Policy Council. Creating farmers markets or community gardens brings diverse groups of people together, and “people bring their story and their history and their culture with their food.”

Park and Daniel Rizik-Baer work on a program that offers resources to owners of small neighborhood stores to help them stock and sell fresh produce. The program does something to fill in the “food deserts” of Los Angeles neighborhoods that lack supermarkets, but many unique challenges remain. The city’s neighborhoods tend to sprawl, Rizik-Baer said, which makes walking to a farmers market harder — and residents must contend with “boundaries that are invisible to people not involved with daily life, in terms of gang violence. Sometimes people are literally not allowed to cross the street.”

If white people want to help people of color in any capacity, Rizik-Baer said, they must be sensitive to “how whiteness is acted. Conversations about privilege are inherently part of this work, if you want to do it well and with sensitivity... There are many nonwhite people with a vast knowledge of nutrition. It’s about finding them.”

A consistent problem is that healthy food costs more than processed junk food. Some white middle-class activists take the attitude that “poor people need to value good food more and suck it up and pay for it,” Rizik-Baer said. But, he continued, “That doesn’t take into account what people are going through.” Some cities offer subsidies to urban growers so that they can give discounts in poor neighborhoods or to people who use SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) cards to buy their food, and some private grants support the same mission.

But subsidies or grants are not a long-term, large-scale solution. Kim believes there is cultural demand for fresh produce, but prices must follow demand, and everything must scale up;

growers and entrepreneurs must think in terms of acres instead of square feet. Rizik-Baer pointed out that the most sustainable solution would be a living wage — again, tying food into larger issues of labor and social justice.

It’s not just a problem for the would-be buyers of local organic produce. “You can’t make a decent living in urban agriculture,” Palmer said, and everyone involved needs to be honest about that. Under current realities, the best scenario for an urban farmer is that income from selling produce can supplement another job. Further, growing onions and potatoes for low-income neighborhoods is even less profitable than growing arugula and microgreens for high-end restaurants that want local suppliers.

“Be honest about who has access to that food,” Mead said. “Restaurants are doing the best that they can. But you can’t let that be the only thing.” Scaling up urban agriculture, she thinks, carries the risk that it, too, could be corporatized and industrialized, rather than keeping the benefits in the immediate community.

“People say, ‘I want to be like you,’ and I say, ‘Don’t be like us,’” Allen said, referring to Growing Power’s nonprofit status. The biggest problem he sees is a lack of access to capital among aspiring farmers. Lobbying will be necessary to get low-interest loans into the hands of people without much credit history. It takes investment and fairly paid workers to produce food the right way, he said, and in the interests of social justice, everyone should have access to the same food, whether in trendy restaurants or farmers markets.

Growing Power has been training young people in agriculture for nearly a generation, hoping to build a supply of skilled labor. “If you pay the minimum wage, it’s not going to work,” Allen said. “It’s the most challenging work a person can do.” College interns, he said, are often unwilling or unable to do the repetitive tasks and heavy work necessary for a farm.

“Healthy food is not the be-all and end-all,” Rizik-Baer said. “It’s not the magic unicorn to solve it all. It won’t.” But it is vital, Park said, as “part of a larger conversation about sustainability and long-range systems and how they can work better.”

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