

Greening for All

The Right to Access Healthy Food

By Marcy Rein and Clifton Ross

On a mild late-winter afternoon, fifth-graders at Verde Elementary School in North Richmond squat on soggy ground, poking beans into the dirt with thin sticks. They move on to carrots, marveling at the tiny seeds that get stuck on the palms of their hands. Fava beans, bright yellow and orange calendula, and a whole pharmacy of herbs are flourishing in the garden's rock-rimmed plots.

Last year Verde Partnership Garden produced close to 1000 pounds of vegetables. The students set up a farmers market in front of the school every two weeks. Parents were so eager to buy that they sent orders in with their children, said garden co-coordinator Bienvenida Mesa. North Richmond, like many depressed communities across the nation, has more than its share of liquor stores, but no stores that sell decent, much less organic, produce.

Verde Garden gives much to the school as well as to the community. Teachers work it into lesson plans. Students come for recess or respite and don't want to leave. Mesa and the other garden coordinator, Cassie Scott, have to gently herd them back inside.

The garden started in 1995, after a group of Laotian immigrants simply began digging there. Hmong and Mien women who went to an ESL class at Verde decided they needed a garden and began hand-tilling the rubbish-filled vacant lot next to the school. Scott worked as a play therapist at Verde at the time.

"I saw a large number of women with hoes working there and within a short time they'd dug up a vacant piece of land next to the football field. And I was inspired," says Scott.

Modern Diggers

Like the "Diggers" who began farming on Saint George's Hill in the spring of 1649 and inspired a brief, but radical, chapter in British history, the Laotian women's act called into question the meaning of "public property." They exercised their right to

land by putting hoe to dirt, and joined Richmond's deeply rooted and lively gardening tradition.

Other gardeners here have dug on vacant land, but asked permission first. Today, some are finding they need to claim their rights first in the city planning process. Urban agriculture, with its potential to build food security along with community well-being, has hit the public policy agenda. Funds are becoming available, and questions of access and inclusion are raising their heads.

In the early 1900s, the North Richmond area around Verde School was called "Cabbage Patch" for its dozens of truck farms. Victory gardens bloomed around Richmond during World War II, when waves of rural migrants swelled the city's population to around 100,000. Okies and Arkies and African Americans from the South worked the shipyards and defense plants, and grew their fruits and vegetables.

"Sure, we had gardens all over the city," says long-time community and environmental activist Lillie Mae Jones. "People had to have gardens so they could survive." Like today's urban gardeners, they used techniques such as sheet mulching, composting, and companion planting to raise more and healthier crops.

Today Richmond has about a dozen garden projects, including an urban agriculture class at Richmond High School, several school gardens—at least two of which may be casualties of the school district's financial woes—and "Lots of Crops."

North Richmond has upwards of 40 vacant lots that invite illegal dumping and become eyesores and

health hazards, according to Saleem Bey of North Richmond Green, which runs Lots of Crops. So far, the group has gotten permission from owners of 10 of those lots to use them. It plans to build raised beds, employ community youth as gardeners, and distribute the produce in the neighborhood—free or at low cost.

“We consider these lots public lands,” Bey says. “We walk by them every day. We think that if you have a need and the land is available, the greater good supercedes ownership. While they are not being used, we have the right to use the land in our community.”

Food Self-Sufficiency

Richmond has been known for crime and violence, poverty and pollution since the postwar years when industry fled and malls destroyed downtown. “But Richmond could be the most food self-sufficient urban community in the U.S.,” says Park Guthrie, who works with the nonprofit Urban Tilth and the 5% Local Coalition, which wants to see 5 percent of west Contra Costa County’s food grown locally. “We have a climate that lets us grow year-round, a number of agrarian traditions, lots of open space and public officials who are interested,” says Guthrie.

Richmond elected a Green mayor, Gayle McLaughlin, in 2006, and she and her allies on the City Council express active interest in the prospect.

“All our development has to produce an equitable society and we have everything here to go forward,” says City Council member Jeff Ritterman. “And we have the California Endowment being interested in Richmond for a 10-year investment, and I think they’ll be interested in this.”

City planners see the newly minted Richmond Greenway as a prime site for urban gardens. The Greenway runs a mile up an old railroad right-of-way, past cyclone fences and boarded-up windows, broken-down factories and neat bungalow homes. Near the west end of the trail, the Lincoln School Garden and



Lincoln Community Garden make use of the Greenway’s wide swath of open space.

At the east end, Khmhu immigrants—who like the Hmong and Mien come from the hill country in Laos—raise eggplants and peppers, cilantro, cucumbers, squash, and beans. Father Don McKinnon and Sr. Micaela O’Connor of the Catholic Church’s Khmhu Pastoral Mission helped them work through the city’s bureaucracy to get permission to use the land—a process that seemed odd to the Khmhu.

“In my country, when you want to garden, you just find some place, cut down the trees and plant,” says Kham Sousamphan. “We don’t have fences.” Her smile says she found the idea of fenced lands not so much offensive as ridiculous.

Now staffers from city agencies and nonprofits are working with Friends of the Richmond Greenway (FORG) under a planning grant from the National Park Services’ Groundwork Program—and some community activists are getting nervous. The history of the Greenway project itself is feeding their anxiety.

When she was head of Richmond’s Neighborhood Coordinating Council in the late 1980s, Lillie Mae Jones started an organization called CYCLE (Community Youth Council for Leadership and Education). Every summer, CYCLE gave young people small stipends for environmental learning and service. In 1999, CYCLE got \$1.9 million in grants to begin developing the Greenway.

“We did all the footwork,” says Jones—but she fell ill, and while she was in a convalescent home, the project moved forward and left her behind.



“When the Greenway opened in 2007, I found out about the dedication by accident,” she says. Now Doria Robinson from the 5% Local Coalition is the only person from the neighborhoods near the Greenway who sits on the steering committee for the planning project.

“As FORG, we’ve struggled along as volunteers for years,” says the group’s co-chair, Cheryl Maier. “We’ve worked with the neighborhood councils, which are supportive, but taking on green issues is difficult for them. They’re organized around issues of safety, crime, and property valuation.”

Gardens and open space can be attractive amenities that boost property values, according to a 2006 study done by New York University. Property values went up as much as 9.4 percent over five years in neighborhoods next to well-kept community gardens in the Bronx—and low-income areas benefited most from the gardens.

This means Richmond will need to move carefully to be sure the Greenway doesn’t turn into “a Roman road to gentrification,” says Robinson. The Romans

first built roads and made other “public improvements” in areas they conquered or hoped to conquer.

“Communities like mine deserve greenways and open space,” Robinson says, “but when we’re moving forward with greening we can’t get myopic. We have to be clear that we’re working for the people who live here, not doing things that will end up moving them out and moving in people with more means.”

A real commitment to “greening for all” will involve patient work in the neighborhoods to draw people in and be sure they have a meaningful voice in land use planning.

History suggests another path as well, the one taken by the Hmong and Mien women at Verde School. From the 1400s to the mid-1600s, Europe’s landed gentry gradually “enclosed” or privatized public lands that had been used for grazing and farming. People who depended on those lands for survival launched struggles to reclaim them. The Diggers chose direct action against the gentrification of their time: they began to dig and plant, hoping to overturn society with the turning of the soil. ■

Photo:
The urban agriculture class at Richmond High School learns about tree grafting.

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