Urban Farming Takes Root in Surprising Ways

Contributed by Lisa Stiffler
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There's a move afoot to spread urban farming and its healthful benefits to folks without their own plots for planting.

Will Allen is gaining national attention for Growing Power, a Milwaukee program that's growing food in the city for 10,000 urbanites (including schools and low-cost market baskets delivered to neighborhood drop off points); trains want-to-be growers in the ways of intensive farming on small plots; turns organic waste into rich soil; and employs local residents, including some from public-housing project.

His inspiring efforts were profiled in a great piece in Sunday's New York Times Magazine. For Allen, it's about more than helping the environment by supporting organic, local foods. For him, it's also a matter of equality. Low-income city 'hoods tend to have limited access to good grocery stores and are dominated by fast-food restaurants and convenience stores, creating what Allen calls a "food desert."

As Allen told the NYT:

“It’s a form of redlining. We’ve got to change the system so everyone has safe, equitable access to healthy food.”

In Seattle, a gardening twist on Match.com is expanding the reach of the urban-farming movement.

Urban Garden Share links homeowners with land available for planting with folks eager to grow food but lacking a place to do it. The site explains:

Condo and apartment dwellers are faced with containers or p-patches as their only prospects for vibrant gardens. Homeowners can be overwhelmed by yet-another-garden-project. Together, we make a great team.

Recent requests to partner include:

"Give lame grass-covered yard a purpose!"

"Large plot on north Beacon Hill, easy to get to, next to bike path, near buses

"Friendly garden space in South Seattle"

Another option for urban farming is the city's Department of Neighborhoods P-Patch Program, which aims to "serve all citizens of Seattle with an emphasis on low-income and immigrant populations

and youth." The p-patchers provide 7 to 10 tons of produce to food banks each year.

Additionally, the Seattle Market Gardens program provides veggie baskets to low-income neighborhoods. The produce comes from two community supported agriculture (CSA) plots farmed by Seattle residents.

Portland has a really impressive-sounding program called GROWING GARDENS. A description from their site:

We organize hundreds of volunteers to build organic, raised bed vegetable gardens in backyards, front yards, side yards and even on balconies. We support low income households for three years with seeds, plants, classes, mentors and more. Our Youth Grow after school garden clubs grow the next generation of veggie eaters and growers!

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