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Ric Francis / AP

## As the Economy Struggles, Urban Gardens Grow

By reclaiming vacant lots, providing cheap produce, and giving community members a sense or purpose, city gardens reap a bounty of benefits.

By Natalie McDonald | Newsweek Web Exclusive  
Jul 27, 2009

**A Pasadena, Calif., family replaced their lawn with a vegetable garden**

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A little garden between the skyscrapers and busy streets of a metropolis is no longer a luxury only for those with deep pockets and great patios. Urban farms and gardens are being planted in major cities throughout the U.S. thanks, in part, to an increasing need to lower the cost of locally grown, organic food. While it's impossible to gauge just how many urban farms and gardens there are across the country (they range from personal plots to full-scale farms with viable acreage), many are found in urban epicenters, often in low-income neighborhoods lacking grocery stores and farmers markets. They're wedged between government housing, abandoned buildings, halted construction projects and streets known more for their crime problems than their heirloom tomatoes. And as the economy fails to thrive, advocates say the benefits of these gardens are even more pronounced.

"The recession has increased interest in home food gardening," says Colin McCrate of the Seattle Urban Farm Co. "Although the failing economy gives yet another reason to start growing vegetables, I think that most people are growing their own food because they believe this is a tangible way to reduce their impact on the environment and improve the quality of their diets."

Proponents say there are several reasons why urban agriculture makes sense in 2009.

"Before the recession, there was an interest in greening and thinking about food systems," says Patrick Crouch of Detroit-based Earthworks Urban Farm. But he believes a perfect storm of economics, ecological awareness, and basic supply-and-demand could push urban agriculture forward in cities.

"A huge number of vacant lots is usually seen as a detriment to a community," he says. But by turning these spaces into farms and gardens, they present long-term greening and financial opportunities for residents that lack basic health and nutritional care, not to mention radically decreased economic opportunities during the

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Source: www.newsweek.com

The Law & Order creator has almost certainly told more crime stories than anyone, ever (and that's not counting reruns). So we asked him which cases fascinate him the most, and why. Nine of his choices are below, but the 10th needs no explanation: Manson, of course.

about an hour ago

**Newsweek** There's a single image i have of her. It was culled from a party her parents threw 13 months ago. It's a defining image and a freeze frame now. I'll

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recession.

Today's urban agricultural movement began visibly in the U.S. with victory gardens during the world wars and experienced a renaissance after the nation's last economic crisis in the 1970s. With more Americans becoming conscious of "green" issues, recent economic challenges have once again introduced it as an alternative for people impacted by financial shortfalls across the country.

At Philadelphia's Greensgrow, a hydroponic farm situated on a lot once belonging to an abandoned galvanized steel plant, visitors are greeted by beds of organic soil blooming with vegetables that are sold for nominal fees to neighbors, nonprofits, and nearby restaurants. Similarly, at Seattle's P-Patch network of community gardens, 7 to 10 tons of produce is harvested each year for local food banks, and more than 23 acres of land serves up affordable food to low-income and immigrant populations.

And at Backdoor Harvest, an urban agricultural organization in St. Louis, novice and longtime tillers are busy planting "recession gardens," private plots that supply individuals and families with well-rounded ingredients for meals that save substantially on grocery bills. Founder Marsha Giambalvo helps members design their own sustainable gardens depending on the sorts of meals they plan to prepare using fruits, vegetables and even herbs. Backdoor Harvest also sells fresh, organic crops to local farmer's markets and eateries at lower cost than most supermarkets. She's encouraging neighbors to adopt and prune trees that may already grow wild in neighborhoods, and to plant trees for harvesting apples, oranges, lemons, and other fruits.

In Detroit, a hot bed for reforestation initiatives thanks to The Greening of Detroit, a nonprofit dedicated to streetscaping, Earthworks Urban Farm provides low-cost produce at volunteer-run markets. Bordering an old railroad track in a residential neighborhood, the farm also supplies food to its parent organization, Capuchin Soup Kitchen, which has witnessed a boom among families who can no longer afford to provide meals for their children.

These farms also fill the void of community improvement projects as funding is slashed by local governments. Added Value, a nonprofit in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, N.Y., has spent the past decade revitalizing local parks and transforming vacant land into green space. An army of volunteers now harvests food on its 2.75 acres, once the site of a dilapidated playground. Funds for many of the projects come from the farms themselves. As community members buy and sell produce, money is filtered back into that same community.

"Urban farms carry the message of food self-sufficiency and healthy living," says Katherine Kelly, executive director of the K.C. Center for Urban Agriculture in Kansas City, Kans. "What the recession has done is remind us how costly food can be."

Not all gardens grow out of formally structured organizations. Three years ago, Bruce Fields and several neighbors turned a tar beach in Chicago's Wicker Park into a lush garden that he blogs about on [Greenroofgrowers.blogspot.com](http://Greenroofgrowers.blogspot.com). This wave of "guerrilla gardening," or taking over space for greening's sake, is becoming another way city folks are rescuing unused, and often unattractive space (legally and otherwise) to grow food and flora. As the recession slows construction and leaves vacant lots empty where perhaps a condo would have stood before the real-estate slump, this radical form of gardening stakes its claim anywhere a plant or tree can take root.

Gardening may be a subtle form of control as people face dwindling 401(k)s and shaky employment prospects. "These are often symbolic actions," says Erik Knutzen, co-author of *The Urban Homestead: Your Guide to Self-Sufficient Living in the Heart of the City* (Process, 2008). "It leads to a sense of empowerment," he says. Finding new ways of sustaining basic needs (in this case, food security) and creating social opportunities (growing, buying and selling produce with neighbors) inspire people to take charge of their communities.

"There's nothing like picking a tomato and bringing it to the table," says Knutzen, who attributes urban agriculture to saving money and inspiring better health and community habits overall. "And this leads to other improvements," he says, "like caring more about our neighborhoods and bringing about more positive change right where we live."

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**Posted By: REBAR @ 07/31/2009 3:28:30 PM**

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Urban gardening is a great way to engage the neighborhood and get an opportunity to strip yourself from social strata, egos and engage in an activity which connects one to simpler times and simpler ways. Urban gardens would sprout out everywhere with community involvement- temporary use for vacant lots, gorilla style gardening, parking lots and many more... [www.rebargroup.org](http://www.rebargroup.org)

**Posted By: chefshelleypogue @ 07/28/2009 10:39:54 AM**

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I am all for urban gardening, and or organic gardening. I think that it is much better to grow, or buy locally. It is good for the people who are able to maintain and grow on an available urban space. It is also good for the local growers, who are going to reap the benefits of people who are going to start to buy locally grown produce. I think that everyone around the country should be doing this. It is good for communities, it will help them come together if there are larger plots of land for them to work together. We need to stay local, organic, and stay away from chemically engineered foods.

(<http://www.organicconsumers.org>) (<http://www.chefshelleypogue.com>)

**Posted By: urbangardens @ 07/27/2009 5:05:48 PM**

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Fantastic article showing urban dwellers taking charge of their own health by controlling some of their food production. I recently wrote about Carl Skalak, of Blue Pike Farm, who started the ???first farm in Cleveland in the 21st century??? on a city acre where he is planting organic, petrochemical free crops.

(<http://www.urbangardensweb.com/2009/07/06/the-full-green-cleveland>)

For gardeners without yards and people with land who don???t want to garden, GrowFriend ([www.growfriend.org](http://www.growfriend.org)) is a great tool that aims to bring people together to plant gardens by focusing on creating the relationships that will support successful gardens.

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