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Urban Farming in Texas: Local Food Movement has Taken Root and is as Ripe as a Texas Tomato

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Abstract

Urban Farming in Texas: Local Food Movement has Taken Root and is as Ripe as a Texas Tomato

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The urban farming, local food movement, which started as a trend, has sharply increased since the recession in 2008. Financial, nutritional and community-based benefits accompany this movement along with a sense of control over one's own food. Texas has the potential to be the country's model state when looking at this new way of life and food consumption. Local food production is much more sustainable than the current food system the U.S. has in place and it is the direction the U.S. is moving.

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"When the world wearies, and society ceases to satisfy, there is always the garden."
– Minnie Aumonier

The sun was high in the bright, blue sky as Terry Dyke, manager of the Cherrywood neighborhood community garden in Austin, circled the 800-square-foot "show plot" examining the plants. He had a proud look on his face, like a father watching his kid ride a bike for the first time, as he explained, "Growing food takes a lot of work." Dyke, a tall 67-year-old, with wire-rimmed glasses and a short, gray ponytail, spends most of his time now that he has retired from working on telephone policy at city hall overseeing the Cherrywood garden.

Cherrywood is a small neighborhood in East Austin located in a warren of curvy streets lined with brightly colored homes and large trees. There, in fall of 2011, Dyke along with 10 other Cherrywood families inaugurated the garden's first growing season. Today, a total of 20 families work nine plots, growing a variety of vegetables fitting the season. . According to Dyke, "[The garden] has been financially successful from the beginning." Since the garden's inception it has been able to reap enough profit from selling its excess produce in conjunction with the membership share fees to support costs for each season. The garden is run much like a community supported agriculture project, or CSA, a model for community gardening that was first introduced in the United States in the 1980's and was based on ideas developed by Rudolf Steiner, a British biodynamic agriculturist. The CSA model requires each participant to buy a share; these costs are dependent upon each CSAs need. In Cherrywood's case, you can choose to simply buy a share for $280 per

season, be a land host, which entails donating a piece of one's land for a plot, or commit to gardening 46 hours a week, to receive benefits, or produce, from the garden.

Urban do-it-yourself agriculture has taken the United States by storm in the wake of the 2008 economic recession. In New York City, residents are raising honeybees on rooftops to augment healthy diets. In Seattle, urban agriculturists are experimenting with vertical or stand-up farming, which allows crops to be grown where there is limited space. In Detroit, 1,500 pieces of unused public land were bought and turned into the U.S.'s largest urban garden. According to the National Garden Association, located in Williston, Vt., the percentage of households in the U.S. that had their own vegetable garden grew from 23 percent to 27 percent between 2008 and 2009, as the recession hit, and the numbers have continued to increase ever since. As of April 2014, 35 percent of American households grow their own food, either at home or in a community garden.

Although urban farming has grown, it has yet to make much of a dent in the nation's food supply. The North American Urban Agriculture Committee reported that only 5 percent of urban food consumption is produced in urban areas, while the 2010 U.S. Census showed that 80.7 percent of the country's population lives in urban areas. There is a huge gap between the amount of food needed in urban areas and the quantity of food produced in those same places.

Urban agriculture is spreading throughout the country, becoming a popular way of life. The National Garden Association says that in 2008, 36 million U.S.

households grew their own produce. A year later, 41 million U.S. households were growing food. The increase in urban farming shows the newfound awareness of the financial, health, and community-based benefits the urban farming lifestyle promotes. In his article "How Change is Going to Come in the Food System" in The Nation in 2011, Michael Pollen, a journalism professor at the University of California at Berkley and food activist, said, "The most promising food activism is taking place at the grassroots: local policy initiatives are popping up in municipalities across the country, alongside urban agriculture ventures in underserved areas."

Healthy food has become popular not only at the grassroots level, but also in Washington at the policy level. Efforts to combat obesity by the first lady, Michelle Obama, and the expanding national interest in the local food movement have pushed urban farming to become politically popular. "Michelle Obama began a national conversation about food and health – soft politics, yes, but these often help prepare the soil for the other kind," said Pollen in an October 2012 issue of The New York Times Magazine. Just this year a new farm bill was signed by President Obama in which there was an emphasis made on locally grown, healthy foods as well as an increase in programs that help get healthy food into food deserts and schools, specifically through food stamps and education programs. The funding for fruits and vegetables programs increased by more than 50 percent, making the amount set aside for them to total about $3 billion, while traditional products subsidies were cut by more than 30 percent.

Meanwhile, the state of Texas has become a model for the U.S. regarding urban agriculture. More households and communities across the U.S., particularly Texas, are growing their own food and becoming more health conscience. Texas has the motivation to expand and spread the local food movement more than other states. Texas is in route for 57 percent of the population to be obese by 2030, according to The Dallas Morning News in 2012, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that Texas has one of the highest number, almost 500,000, of people living in food deserts in the nation. These issues make Texas the perfect place to monitor the growth and sustainability of urban farming because it is the state that has the most to gain. In addition, this movement has become popular in Texas because the state and its urban areas have more land and, due to the state's agriculture history, there is much local knowledge of plant growing. "Texas is a great spot for urban farming. Texas has a huge amount of green space, which is a huge advantage," said Hannah Koski, the farm manager at Paul Quinn College's We Over Me Farm in Dallas.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that in the state of Texas 15 percent of the population resides in what is considered a food desert, more than 10 miles to a supermarket, while 460,000 central Texans do not live with food security, access to safe and nutritious food. Locally producing healthy food options relieves the food accessibility and security problem in Texas as well as provides high quality food to all economic classes. According to Koski, "urban farms provide an

opportunity for people living in food deserts to learn how to grow food [and] take control over their food access."

Urban farming is not without its challenges. People farming in urban areas have given way to local conflicts between neighbors regarding zoning, odors, and destruction of property. However, solutions are on the horizon. Issues with city codes, education, and knowledge of produce and food accessibility have worked their way to the forefront of many city and state officials' concerns. According to Texas Impact, a statewide grassroots organization that works to promote public policy, during the 82nd legislative session in 2011 bills were submitted that promoted urban agriculture and increased access to fresh and affordable food. Unfortunately, these bills did not pass in the State Legislative session. However, cities, counties and local community action groups, like the Sustainable Food Policy Board in Austin, which works to strengthen the food system in Austin and Travis County, are continuing to work on amending code and zoning laws. Food accessibility, supply and cost are major issues that need to be addressed and the urban agriculture movement has helped create awareness of these topics and pushed them to be part of the conversation.

The urban farming movement was first noticed in 2003 as a trendy way to be environmentally friendly and live a healthy lifestyle. However, leading up to the recession in 2008 and since then, the urban agriculture movement has become a way to help urbanites financially, nutritiously and have better access to better food.

There is no question that this movement exists or is growing in Texas, but is urban agriculture and the healthy lifestyle it promotes sustainable?

Since the Industrial Revolution, people have migrated away from in rural areas and into cities. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1910 only 45.6 percent of the country's population lived in urban areas, while in 2010 that percentage was 80.7 percent, and that number continues to grow. With more people living urban lives, people are residing in areas where food is not produced. A food desert is defined as an area that is more than one mile from a grocery store or supermarket. One possible answer to this deficiency is urban farming. According to Koski, manager of The We Over Me Farm, "urban farms are not only a source of healthy, fresh, affordable food in food deserts where access is limited, but almost more importantly, they provide an opportunity for exposure, engagement, and education."

The financial benefits of urban agriculture became apparent to Holly Hirshberg and her family throughout the economic recession beginning in 2008.

It was a cloudy afternoon in January of this year and Hirschberg, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, wandered through her backyard garden looking for ripe vegetables to harvest. Walking past the broccoli, she knelt down and plucked a large, deep violet eggplant from its stem. She used caution so other not-as-ripe vegetables would not come loose. Hirshberg said, "You can grow [a personal garden] using what you have in your house. You can make your own compost out of kitchen scraps. The only things you need to buy are the seeds."

Hirshberg is a retired librarian, mother of two, wife and founder of a nonprofit, The Dinner Garden. As the economic collapse began to flood the United States in 2008, Hirshberg, 41, noticed the toll it was taking on people. She realized her husband Sean, who was working in the banking industry, might lose his job. Hirshberg planted a vegetable garden in her backyard. “In 2008 my husband lost his job just like many other Americans, and we were living off our garden,” said Hirshberg.

Hirshberg is one of many who have financially benefited from the urban agriculture movement, particularly in the wake of the 2008 recession. In addition to Hirshberg and her family finding financial relief through urban farming by helping reduce the family grocery bill, she has promoted her lifestyle to others who have come into tough economic situations. It is estimated that The Dinner Garden, Hirshberg’s nonprofit, has provided seeds to over 65,000 Americans. The Dinner Garden grew out of her own experience. She recognized what she had gained from her backyard garden and turned her idea into a non-profit that focuses on educating and providing seeds to families facing similar economic stresses that she and her family did in 2008.

There is still a large part of the U.S. population that has not recovered from the recession. People have fed their families through urban and community gardening. According to the National Garden Association, the amount of investment on a 600-square-foot garden is about $70. Such a garden can produce about 300 pounds of produce, which can amount to $600 worth of food.

Even the U.S. government believes that citizens, especially lower-income, citizens, can benefit from growing their own produce. The SNAP benefits program, known as food stamps, is one way the federal government helps those who don't have the means to support themselves. Food stamps can be used at an array of supermarkets and can only be used to purchase breads, fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, poultry, dairy products and seeds and plants to produce one's own food. According to the USDA, more than 44 million people use SNAP benefits each month.

The USDA added seeds and plants to the list of items that SNAP benefits can purchase. This addition was made to enable people to grow their own food through the SNAP Benefits program because of the financial and psychological benefits urban farming can have on those who participate. Supplementing SNAP benefits with homegrown produce allows families to buy food they normally wouldn't be able to afford. Purchasing seeds or plants also helps make SNAP benefits last longer. "For every one dollar spent on seeds and fertilizer, home gardeners grow an average of $25 worth of produce," according to the USDA blog. Urban gardening can provide people with the feeling of being self-reliant and prideful, which can be important for those who cannot provide for their family and have been out of work. Urban farming also encourages better nutrition and eating habits.

Urban agriculture benefits families, but it also has the potential to help boost local economies. The city of Austin recently commissioned a report by TXP, an economic analysis and public policy consulting firm founded in 1987 and based in Austin, on the economic impact of Austin's food sector. One finding: "Locally

produced food has larger multiplier effects than food 'imported' from outside the region that is consumed in Austin." The idea that locally produced food can increase the local economy and can be capitalized on through more people locally producing as well as processing food. The benefit of localizing business allows for dollars to be kept circulating though the community rather than contributing to other economies. The local characteristics of urban farming create a larger overall economic impact for a city or area.

Urban agriculture also helps create jobs. By creating CSAs, community supported local agriculture in which the growers and consumers share the risk, reward, and, in some cases, work, and personal gardens, more people have the opportunity to grow more than they need for their own consumption and sell that excess for profit. Farmer's markets can be found in almost every city and town across the state, allowing an outlet for urban farmers to benefit economically from their labors.

The local food movement has not only captured chefs in home kitchens, but it has also created a niche for fresh and local-centric chefs. Many of the restaurants that pride themselves of serving local produce buy from local urban farmers. This is a whole other market for urban farmers to tap into. As the seasons shift and the produce available changes, chefs are able to take advantage and create new and updated menus, exposing consumers to produce they might have not known about before.

For alumni returning to Paul Quinn College, a small, liberal arts school in southeast Dallas, there is one part of the school they might find to be missing, the football field. In 2007 the school got rid of its football team. “They weren’t winning many games, and they were costing quite a bit of money, so it was just the smartest decision to dismantle the team,” said Elizabeth Wattely, the director of service learning and servant leadership at Paul Quinn. After a few years of the football field sitting unused, the college, along with partner PepsiCo’s Food for Good Initiative, a social enterprise that works to increase nutrition access for low-income families, built a garden, the We Over Me Farm, between the goal posts and scoreboard. Paul Quinn is in a federally recognized food desert. For those that live at and around the school, they have to travel 10 miles to get to the closest supermarket. “We had the means to make better [food] choices. We just have limited access,” said Michael Sorrell, the president of Paul Quinn.

The farm, created in March 2010, has grown over 20,000 pounds of organic produce. Within its two acres of space, there are 108 plant beds and 300 square feet of plantable space. In addition to produce, Paul Quinn College has begun raising chickens and bees, and has installed an aquaponic system that is home to more than 100 edible tilapia fish.

According to the farm’s manager, Hannah Koski, who has a master's degree in horticulture with an emphasis on urban agriculture and extension from Cornell University, the We Over Me Farm has been remarkably successful. “The biggest issue we’ve had is keeping up with the [produce] demand,” said Koski. She also

mentioned that colleges and secondary schools, from all over the country, including Texas A&M, have asked Paul Quinn College for advice on community gardens.

The We Over Me Farm has sold some of its produce to local restaurants and even the catering service Legends, which serves the Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas. In addition to its profits from sales, the We Over Me Farm is also financed through their partnership with PepsiCo's Food for Good Initiative. Through the process of planting, growing, harvesting and either selling or donating the produce, students at Paul Quinn College are learning the economic and social impact of community gardens. Many students who need jobs are able to find them on the farm. As Koski explained:

> [Urban farms] provide an opportunity for people living in food deserts to learn about healthy eating and cooking…[and] issues pertaining to food deserts, ideally engaging them in food policy and advocacy, and encouraging long-term positive impacts on the food system.

Texas has one of the largest "grocery gaps," or food deserts, in the entire country. The state has the fewest number of grocery stores per capita of any state in the U.S., and Texas' major cities, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio, have numerous local deserts. "Urban agriculture is a necessary piece [in solving the food desert crisis], but urban agriculture is not going to fix the problem by itself. More people need to get engaged, there needs to be more awareness and policy change," said Koski.

In 2010, 31 percent of Texans were considered to be obese, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This number indicates that

Texas is the most obese state in the U.S., tied with Louisiana. The CDC has also stated, “High-income women are less likely to be obese than low-income women.” These statistics suggest that Texans need to work on nutrition. National studies have linked the lack of access to healthy food with diet-related diseases. The report “F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America’s Future 2012” by Trust for America’s Health, a non-profit that is dedicated to protecting health in every community, states that “reducing the average body mass index in the state [of Texas] by 5 percent could lead to health care savings of more than $10 billion in 10 years and $54 billion in 20 years.” One way to influence healthy eating habits is through urban farming. This means that everyone, not just the privileged few, will have access to high quality food. According to Michael Pollen, journalist and food activist, “In the end, if we want healthful and conscientiously produced food for everyone, we’re simply going to have to pay people enough [or lower the prices of healthy food] so that they can afford it.”

In 2009, Paige Hill, who has a background in horticulture and has grown food for herself and neighborhood community since 2006, wanted to come up with a way for city dwellers to use their yards and vacant land more efficiently. She noticed a lack of healthy food options. Hill came up with the idea of creating a community garden, using her home and her neighborhood in the Cherryhill area of Austin as a trial run with the goal of growing and selling produce as the same cost as a consumer price at her local HEB.

Hill, 38, started her pilot garden in her own front yard and invited neighbors to participate. Seventeen other families along with Hill, herself, committed to the project. They planted and harvested twice year. The first season spanned October to January, and the second was from March to May. The Cherryhill neighborhood grew a variety of vegetables based on the season.

The group registered its garden as a community supported agriculture. A CSA allows a farmer to sell a various number of shares of their "farm," which then translates into a share's worth of produced grown. By making her garden a CSA, Hill was able to receive the funds up front, from the participating families, to finance the garden for her to not be out of money for the start-up materials before a profit was produced. This model has been around for the past 25 years. However over the past decade or so it has become better known and more people have joined. There are no exact records kept on how many CSAs are registered in the U.S., however, the National Garden Association has compiled a list of over 6,000.

After Hill's successful trial within her own neighborhood, she said she "wanted to come up with a model for the city of Austin with the goal to create jobs and a way for people to work from home with the community building aspect as more important than the farming." She created the educational nonprofit Urban Patchwork in 2011. Now, Hill and Urban Patchwork have helped start and create three successful community gardens throughout Austin. Hill and Urban Patchwork are only onsite and working with communities at the start of each garden project. "There is still a huge knowledge gap in reference to how to farm and garden," said

Hill. The goal of Urban Patchwork is to each community the basics of gardening – making Urban Patchwork's labors sustainable. Terry Dyke, the manager of the Cherrywood neighborhood's community garden and participant in Urban Patchwork said, "The strength of the Urban Patchwork model is that they teach you how to garden and about healthy food." Urban Patchwork only helps initiate community gardens where they are wanted. Each community must pay for and take care of the garden. One of the most successful gardens is the one located in the Cherrywood neighborhood managed by Dyke.

Hill said, "the consumer-centric process is what makes [grocery store food] so expensive." Urban farming is a way to make food healthier and more affordable, said Hill. There are also financial benefits. "A community garden can just about pay for itself," said Hill. She said that space and land have never been difficult to find. Many people are willing to donate their back yards and vacant commercial space. According to Dyke, "The time and availability to work is an issue, but land is not a problem." The missing piece, according to Hill, is the lack knowledge of farming. Educating each community that enlists Urban Patchwork's help is the focus of their initiative.

Susan Hausmann and Dorsey Barger started HausBar Farms, an urban farm in an East Austin neighborhood in 2009. When they bought the property, there was trash all over and the land had not been maintained. The home on the land was all but condemned. Since then Barger and Hausmann have hand dug 51 plant beds, which produce vegetables according to the season, as well as raised over 100

chickens, two donkeys, about a dozen rabbits and a few other pets. Recently the women have installed a 30,000-gallon rainwater capture system. Barger said, "Buying food shipped to us from all over the world is not sustainable. We were looking forward to having locavore chefs teach cooking classes so that consumers can learn to shop at the local farmers' markets and cook and eat seasonally." That vision has been suspended because of pending investigations by a variety of city inspectors due to complaints made by Louis Polaco, a neighbor of Hausbar Farm, and reports to the Austin City Council by PODER, a group that works to limit the effects of gentrification in East Austin.

In November 2011, Louis Polanco, 50, called 311 to report a foul odor. The smell was coming from a composting system that uses black soldier fly larvae to break down farm waste and turn it into a source of protein for HausBar Farm's chickens. The reason for the stench was that the compost was out of balance. This incident caused a series of visits by city inspectors.

PODER got wind of Polaco's complaints and made various claims to Austin's City Council about HausBar Farm having a commercial operation in a residential zone. Although PODER is an environmental activist group, it also fights against gentrification in East Austin, specifically the Govalle-Johnston neighborhood where HausBar Farm is located.

As reported by the San Marcos Mercury newspaper in February 2012, two neighbors in Wimberly, Texas, had to deal with a similar dispute over urban farming. In February 2012 the city of San Marcos' regional animal shelter

euthanized two dogs after they had reportedly killed 12 chickens in a neighbor's yard.

Sheriff's deputies had responded to a dog-related complaint at a home in Wimberly. The officers saw 12 dead chickens. The homeowner reported that he shot, but only injured one of the two dogs that had killed his chickens. The dogs were nowhere to be found. That night the dogs returned and were scared away by the homeowner once again. The officers became aware that the dogs lived next door. Because the dogs had attacked and killed 12 chickens, they were put to death.

These two instances of local conflict lead to the question of will urban farming and city life clash or coalesce? With the increase in urban agriculture and the desire to buy locally, the city will have to do some work to help bring these two ways of life together under the same code of law.

Many of the city's zoning laws and permitting practices are out of date and do not address urban farms in the city. "There are code and laws that prevent people from participating and contributing to urban agriculture to the extent they desire and could be beneficial," said Pagie Hill, founder of Urban Patchwork. The Sustainable Food Policy Board, which advises the Austin City Council and Travis Commissioner's Court on the need to increase access of nutritious, locally, and sustainable-grown food at sensible prices, have put a group together to research and evaluate city codes and residents' access to affordable local food supply. Katherine Avalose Nicely, chair of the Urban Farms-Process and Code Coordination, said:

> We recommend policies that facilitate equitable access to health food as well as culture of good food as a right. Historically every culture has embraced food as part of their community development and history. As a planner I see urban farm and community gardens as community institutions and urban places that define neighborhoods.

The state of Texas has taken action to help accommodate urban farming. In 2011, Texas' 82nd Legislature produced three House bills focusing on urban agriculture and accessibility to healthy food. The three bills called for urban farming pilot programs, creating the Texas Urban Agriculture Innovation Authority and an innovative loan program. Only HB 2994, which "supports innovative urban farming technologies and research advancements through an innovation loan program," was enacted into law. Gov. Rick Perry vetoed the other two bills, HB 2996 and HB 2997.

The most recent legislative session in 2013 was much more of a success for local and urban farming. Nine bills were filed and three were passed, HB 970, HB1392 and HB 1382. The three bills that were passed "all [made] it easier for local farmers and food producers to raise and sell healthy, local foods that so many consumers are increasingly seeking out," according to the Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance, a national organization that promotes local agriculture policies.

State government, through the bills submitted in 2011 and those passed in 2013, has worked to give more Texans greater access to healthy and affordable food. They have also made an effort to create more jobs by increasing economic investment in low-income zones.

The 2008 recession, along with the local food trend has allowed the urban agriculture movement to blossom and emphasize the nutritional, financial and food

accessibility issues the state of Texas needs to address. With a hangover from the 2008 recession, urban agriculture has helped people "make a statement over control of one's sense of self," said We Over Me Farm's Hannah Koski. Continuing to expand urban farming will benefit the lower and middle classes just as much or even more than the upper class. In his 2010 article, "The Food Movement Rising," in The New York Review of Books, Michael Pollen said:

> The food movement coalesces around the recognition that today's food and farming economy is 'unsustainable' – it can't go on in its current form much longer without courting a breakdown of some kind, whether environmental, economic, or both,

It is time for urban farming to "become part of a way of life," according to Hill of Urban Patchwork.

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Vita

Meredith Leigh Diers was born in Dallas, Texas. After completing her work at The Hockaday School, Dallas, Texas in 2005, she entered Colorado College in Colorado College in Colorado Springs, Colorado. During the fall of 2007 she attended Denmark International Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark. She received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from Colorado College May 2009. During the following 2 years, she served as a Peace Corps in Albania. In September 2012, she entered the Graduate School of Journalism at The University of Texas at Austin.

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