

## Case Studies of Community Gardens :

### Sacramento Area Community Garden Coalition

By David Hess

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Bill Maynard is a civil engineer by day, but as the founder of the Sacramento Area Community Gardens Coalition he spends about 20 hours per week working on his passion of food, community gardens, and antihunger work in Sacramento. He is also on the boards of the American Community Gardens Association and the City of Sacramento Parks and Recreation Commission, and he works on the Sacramento Hunger Commission. In April 2005 he also joined the city as a part-time community garden coordinator. He had been interested in community gardening for some time, but when the state decided not to renew the lease on the thirty-year-old Ron Mandela Community Garden, a controversy erupted with the gardeners and Maynard became involved. The Mandela Garden became a site of protest in 2003, when the police arrested garden members who had chained themselves together under an apricot tree in the garden. The state went ahead and built a building on the site, and it left a small portion of the land for a garden or green space. Two other community gardens in the city were also lost to housing developments.

“I knew that we couldn’t save it,” Mr. Maynard said. “It was impossible. The state was going to go ahead and build on it, and the city wanted the tax base. So in 2002 I formed the Sacramento Area Community Garden Coalition. I was on the Park and Recreation board at the time, so I met with the city council, the parks department, and the Capital Area Development Authority (CADA), to try to work a compromise. Their compromise was finding other gardens. The first garden they found was too toxic, then they found this piece (the South Side Community Garden at 5<sup>th</sup> and W). CADA bought this and removed 24 inches of soil from the whole site, tested again, removed some more soil, and they brought in clean soil, put the fence up, and installed irrigation.”

The new garden opened in January 2004. CADA donated the property to the city, so the South Side Community Garden became the first community garden run and own by the city on park land. The city’s response has been positive, and it may even develop a position for a community gardens manager.

Maynard continued, “When they were given this garden by CADA, that’s when they got into the community gardens. I remember one of them saying, ‘Now we’re in the community garden business.’ They did a big report about three years before the protest with the Mandela garden hit the wall, so they were interested in it before 2003. So now we have two that are going to be opening up this year, one downtown inside a park. It’s a little ‘postage stamp’ garden—that’s what I call it—the plots are just ten by ten feet and there are maybe a dozen of them. Then we found some other land outside of but next to a park, and that’s open. And we have another park that they just developed, and it’s next to a school, so the school will be sharing the garden space on the park property. There have

been a lot of articles in the newspaper, and now people from all around town want a community garden.”<sup>1</sup>

He estimates that there are about 12-16 formally organized community gardens in the city of Sacramento, with another four to six in development; about one or two dozen “guerilla gardens,” or gardens located on vacant lots with tenuous land tenure; and several gardens on church lands. One of the tasks of the Sacramento Hunger Commission is to inventory and map all of the community gardens in the city. The Sacramento Hunger Commission also serves as the umbrella organization for the Sacramento Area Community Gardens coalition, which as of March 2005 was a grassroots network of gardeners that hoped to develop 501(c)(3) status. The coalition’s goals include promoting community gardens in various locations (not just park land), preserving and expanding urban green spaces, provide a resource for area community gardeners, and promote sustainable gardening and organic farmers’ markets. Maynard has been recognized as one of the top three environmental leaders in the Volvo for Life leadership awards, of out 4300 people nominated. The award grants him \$25,000 to donate to the charity of his choice, and he will be putting the money toward the development of school and community gardens in Sacramento.<sup>2</sup>

### Equity and Sustainability

The South Side Community Garden is completely organic, and it offers waivers and reductions on plot fees for low-income gardeners. Maynard also described how he had worked with the city to develop edible landscaping in a housing project. They surveyed the residents, with translators in seven languages, to find out what fruit trees the residents would like to see planted. He sees great potential in integrating hunger issues into the landscaping around low-income housing.

Another mechanism for low-income gardening is through school gardens. “We have a few community gardens on school property, and we received a grant from WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program. The gardens have to have kids zero to five years old to garden there, so it’s a family garden. In California we have a tobacco tax of fifty cents per pack, and that goes to the Kids’ First program, and so they make available a pool of money for projects. We got some money for a community garden with the Hmong families, and they also get nutrition classes. It’s hard, when you work with translators, to translate ‘organic.’ A lot of times we’ll find them stirring this big garbage can of blue liquid; it’s the Miracle Gro. They’re making a big batch of that. For them it’s a hunger issue; they want the biggest crop, and that’s how they figure they can get it. So we end up putting labels on the cartons with a circle with an X over it, saying no Miracle Gro, no this, no that. But I’m well aware of the hunger issue, because I’m involved with the Sacramento Hunger Commission, and we did a survey called ‘Hunger Hits Home.’ Of the people in soup kitchens, shelters, and food lines, 48% said they would garden in a community garden if they had access to one. But as for sustainability and organic, it is a toss-up sometimes. Some people garden for recreation, and some people garden for food, to supplement their family’s food, and it’s hard to make that distinction if they’re feeding their families.”<sup>3</sup>

### Policy Issues and Recommendations

One of the key policy issues for community gardens in Sacramento is developing a place for them in the city's master plan. As Maynard explained, "It was weakly in the Parks and Recreation Department master plan back in the 1990s. The plan mentioned community gardens maybe once. Recently, we did an update of the master plan, and I injected community gardens everywhere I could. Now we have new items like skateboard parks and bocce ball courts, things that we didn't have back in the early 1990s. So I made sure that everywhere they had plans for skateboard parks and bocce ball courts, community gardens were there, too. In Seattle or Portland, they have a ratio in their planning document of about one community garden for every 2500 people, and right now ours is one for every 100,000 people. Their goal, and I couldn't get them to raise it, was to make eight community gardens in the next ten years, and that's way out of line. We should be making about eight a year. There are people who want them all over town in all income levels, and they don't cost much. Some of the parks cost \$50,000 to \$300,000 per year to maintain, and this community garden doesn't cost anything to maintain, just the water."

Maynard also noted that planning for new community subdivisions could include community gardens. "In my job in a land development civil engineering firm, I'm working with my planners to create community gardens in new subdivisions. We have two community gardens in two new subdivisions that will be coming on line in the next year or two. This is going to be a selling point in the future."

Another area for policy development is to create standardized rules for gardens across the city. "I'm on the national board of the American Community Garden Association, and we modeled our rules after the ones used across the country. The city wants a standard set of rules. We'll recommend that each garden has its own board and a leader who can disseminate information to its members."

Maynard was also involved in developing a food charter for the city, and he hoped that the Sacramento food charter would become a model for other cities. "In 2004 the Sacramento Hunger Commission wrote a food charter for the city of Sacramento, modeled after Toronto's food charter. We might even be the first one in the United States. It talks about everyone's right to have access to fresh foods in farmers' markets, community gardens, grocery stores, schools, and workplaces. We wanted the city to promote healthy eating habits. It's been approved by the city, and now we're going to take it to the county and some outlying cities. We had a food summit to let everyone know that we have a food charter."<sup>4</sup>

Schools have been very open to community gardening, and Maynard sees school gardens as a major area in need of development. "The main issue is to tie it to the curriculum. There are many publications and books that can do that. You can teach math in the garden, not to mention art and science. You can calculate how many cubic yards of soil is needed to fill up the raised bed. In one of the programs, the kids make salsa and flowers to sell at the coop. Really, it has to come from the teachers. You have to have the teachers involved." Once a year he also organizes a National Make a Difference Day, where he gets about 350 Americore workers, plus another 100-150 additional volunteers, all of whom work in the school and community gardens.

Web site:

[www.saccommunitygardens.org](http://www.saccommunitygardens.org)

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