

Case Studies of Community Gardens and Farmers' Markets:

The Sustainable Food Center

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The Sustainable Food Center of Austin, Texas, is an innovative organization that combines community gardening, direct farm marketing, and educational programs. The organization is dedicated to food security, which it defines as “access to affordable, nutritious, and satisfying food, derived from non-emergency sources and produced through sustainable practices.” The definition of food security itself points to a synthetic view of the issues of hunger, local control of agriculture, and sustainable agricultural technologies. By starting with a synthetic view, the Sustainable Food Center has developed innovative programs that link environmental and antihunger goals.¹

The nonprofit organization traces its roots to 1975, when Austin Community Gardens began as a program of the University YWCA. The main garden, known today as the Sunshine Gardens, remains one of the largest community gardens in the U.S., with six acres and 250 plots. In 1987 Austin Community Gardens became a nonprofit organization, and in 1993 the Sustainable Food Center was founded. In 2001 Austin Community Gardens merged into the Sustainable Food Center, and for the next three years the organization helped the Sunshine Gardens by providing bookkeeping and other organizational support. In 2004 Sunshine Gardens underwent a friendly separation from the Sustainable Food Center, and at the time of the interview the organization Greenlights for Nonprofits was providing bookkeeping and related organizational support for the large garden. In addition to visiting various community gardens and the Austin Farmers' Market, I spoke with Jack Marrkand, the executive director of the Sustainable Food Center since he joined the organization in 2004. Mr. Marrkand brought to the center years of experience in the nonprofit sector, including work in international development.²

The Sustainable Food Center is of general interest to advocates and students of sustainable, local food systems because it links various programs that in other cities are usually located in separate organizations. As of 2005 the three main programs were community and youth gardening, farm marketing, and nutrition education generally for low-income families. The Sustainable Food Center had an annual budget of about a half million dollars, most of which came from donations, fundraising events, grants, and contracts. About 11-12% of the budget came from earned income, including fees from the farm marketing programs, classes, plot rentals, and sales of their cookbook.

In comparison with other cities, Austin has a relatively small number of community gardens, probably no more than twenty in a city of 656,000 people in the 2000 census. The city government does not have a community gardens program, but it does support at least one garden on city land, and there are plans for a community garden for the new Roy G. Guerrero Colorado River Park. During my stay in Austin, I

encountered various explanations for the relatively small number of community gardens. Some people pointed to ecological factors, such as the soil and humidity, and some pointed to cultural factors, such as the emphasis on ranching in the surrounding countryside. Mr. Marrkand also noted that gardening in the hot weather may not be especially attractive for low-income people who are exhausted by working one or more physically demanding jobs. It may also be the case that access to backyard gardens is higher in Austin than in cities where a larger percentage of the poor live in high-rise apartments, and likewise the frequency of abandoned lots is lower in Austin than in some of the northern cities. According to Dick Pierce, an Austin resident who has been involved in community gardens for quite some time, *(I will email Dick Pierce to get a quotation from him if you could supply his email.)*

The Sustainable Food Center supports two community gardens, both of which are in low-income neighborhoods, and it also assists some youth gardening projects. The organization owns the land for one of the two community gardens, and it leases the land for the other. In 2004 the leased garden saw its tax rate tripled (later reduced to double after an appeal), which was an indication of the increasing land values that have plagued community gardens in so many cities. Marrkand recognized that land values were becoming a factor for gardens on leased land, but he also noted that there are numerous other opportunities for growth: “This organization may explore some kind of workshop geared toward home and rooftop gardening, because if there is space available, it might spur greater gardening. We can also link up with schools, churches, or maybe even large corporations, because then we would be not as exposed when it comes to the land. It’s much less likely for them to sell it to a developer if the land is owned by a school, church, or big company, rather than a vacant lot owned by a private party.”

A second program of the Sustainable Food Center is farm marketing. The most visible project within this program is the Austin Farmers’ Market, which was founded in 2003 and had thirty to forty stalls when I visited it in 2005. According to Marrkand, the downtown market grew significantly during its first two years of operation, but as of 2005 it was not yet financially self-sustaining. Based on surveys, the market also attracted mainly middle-income customers, although the vendors themselves are low-income. To reach low-income customers, the Sustainable Food Center developed farm stands and a pocket market in low-income neighborhoods. Marrkand explained the concepts as follows: “The farm stands are operated by single farmers who go to the designated locations at the appointed hours and set up the stand. We also have opened a pocket market, which operates from April to July in East Austin in a low-income area. It has five to seven or eight vendors. Unlike the Austin Farmers’ Market, where about half of the vendors are non-farmers, we’re trying to ensure that a majority of the vendors are farmers, because the goal is to increase access to healthy and local food at affordable rates.”

The farm marketing program has two additional projects: “The staff in farm marketing have managed a Consumer Food Awareness program, which has operated out of a big supermarket called Central Market. It is a four-week series, with sessions on local farmers, nutrition, and food demonstrations. We structure it in a way that is of interest to people but also educational about the food system. We also started a pilot farm-to-cafeteria project with Seton Healthcare Network, a large hospital and medical network here. Right now we get the orders from four locations in the Seton network, and

we're working with one farmer. He gets the orders, and as of April, makes the deliveries himself. We'd like to get more farmers involved and see if a refrigeration system makes sense from an economic viewpoint. We're hoping that in addition to doing some good for local farmers, we'll learn some lessons as an organization that we can apply to the school system in the future."

A third main program of the Sustainable Food Center is The Happy Kitchen/La Cocina Alegre. This program is based on a six-week course on food and cooking that is aimed mostly at low-income residents, whom the Sustainable Food Center recruits to the classes. The program has been very successful, as Marrkand explained: "One of the keys to success is that it is not a lecture series. Instead, everyone who is there has to cook with the facilitators. They use recipes from our Happy Kitchen cookbook, go home during the week and try one of the recipes, and then come back and tell us how they did it. We find that over 90% of the graduates of the six-week class report major changes in the way that they buy and prepare food. We're not judgmental; we try not to preach, but we have criteria as to how a recipe gets into our cookbook. Every recipe should use local food, each serving must cost no more than \$1.10, the finished product has to taste good, and it has to take thirty minutes or less. We try to be very aware of people's lives and make sure that what we're promoting is going to work. We also provide a grocery bag of food for folks that they can take home and practice the recipes. To gauge how much they have bought into the course, at the end we offer the cookbook for sale for \$15, which is quite a bit of money for low-income people, and they will pay for the cookbook."

Equity and Sustainability

Because the Sustainable Food Center's central mission is to address food security issues from a sustainable food systems perspective, the organization provides some insights into the general problem of balancing equity and sustainability goals at a local level. There are two main low-income groups served by the work of the center: low-income urban residents and small farmers. The community and youth gardening program and The Happy Kitchen are aimed mainly at the low-income residents, whereas the farmers' market and farm-to-cafeteria projects assist mainly small farmers. In the process, middle-class residents may also benefit from the programs, such as by purchasing food at the farmers' market or having children benefit from school-based youth gardens.

The community and youth gardening program has an addition component that is connected directly with local hunger issues. The program "Spread the Harvest" has the gardeners report on how they share their harvest with other low-income people, such as their family, a homeless shelter, and low-income residents in the neighborhood. As Marrkand added, "The city and county are interested in the program for two reasons: one, because it can provide food to poor people; and two, because it builds skills among Spread the Harvest gardeners. We are trying to develop not only technical skills but also better life management skills." Likewise, The Happy Kitchen is aimed largely at low-income residents, many of whom are at risk for obesity and diet-related diseases such as diabetes.

The farm stands and pocket markets represent a synthesis of the goals of helping small farmers and low-income urban residents. According to Marrkand, "The farm stands run from June to September, which is when the U.S. Department of Agriculture's

farmers' market nutrition vouchers are available here in Texas. The majority of the transactions that take occur at the farm stands are through the vouchers, whereas the vast majority of the transactions at the Austin Farmers' Market are cash. Next year we hope to launch electronic benefits transfer, so that people on food stamps could go to any of our locations."

Policy Issues and Recommendations

The city of Austin has not developed a community gardening program similar to that of other cities, so there are no model programs to discuss on this issue. However, the Sustainable Food Center has received good support from the City of Austin for the development of the farmers' market, and in general Austin is a supportive environment for the kind of work that the organization is doing.

Marrkand noted that one central problem that small farmers face in Austin, as in other cities across the country, is that state and federal policies are not set up to encourage the preservation of small farms. As a result, the farmers' market can serve a dual function as both an economic resource for small farmers and an educational resource for the community as a whole: "In terms of working with farmers, the climate and rules in this country are not friendly to the small farmer. The subsidies go to agribusiness. The farmers' market is a way to educate the community not only about the plight of the small farmer but also about what that farmer means to the community, from an economic, environmental, and community point of view. It's important to get more and more of the community educated about the value of the small farmer. When this organization decided to establish a public market in 2003, we thought the market could be successful financially for the vendors and also be a place where food systems education could take place."

A second major lesson and recommendation that emerges from the experience of the Sustainable Food Center is the self-replicating educational model that the organization has developed in The Happy Kitchen. The idea of shifting the educational role from the center to the residents has been very successful, and it allows the small organization to have a replicative or multiplier effect. As Marrkand explained, "The model that we've hit upon and that we increasingly want to use in our community and youth gardening programs is that we train people from the community who want to become facilitators. So people who attend these classes see people from their own neighborhoods doing the training. Our staff is now spending its time training the trainers in three-day, intensive workshops. The most recent one trained another eight to ten people to do the course. They're paid a \$250 stipend for running six, two-hour sessions once a week for six weeks. The facilitators are motivated partly by the stipend, but also by the desire to do something good for their community. I also hope that they see it as good for their careers. I hope that we can develop a partnership with one of the community colleges to accredit or certify them in a formal way."

A similar strategy is at work in the farm marketing programs, and it can be applied to community gardens. By serving as the mediator in farm stands and farm-to-cafeteria programs, the organization can maximize the impact of its resources. Staff do not need to be devoted to running farm stands or providing delivery of food from farms to cafeteria; instead, the staff can be used to set up and coordinate the programs that can run on their own. Likewise, the success of The Happy Kitchen's replicational model may

have general implications for organizations and city government programs that support community gardens. As Marrkand explained, “Unless there is a large flow of revenue from several multiyear grants, I would say that the lesson is to develop a model that can be replicated. We have succeeded with our nutrition program, The Happy Kitchen, so we know that it can be done. That’s what makes me optimistic about our gardening program. What we should be doing is providing them with intensive training at the outset, quite literally signing a contract with them that says what we will provide and what they will provide. It’s a partnership; we’re not doing everything. As one small nonprofit, we don’t have the wherewithal to carry the garden. They have to know that in order to succeed the onus will be on them. We need to develop a technical assistance, train-the-trainer model that we’ve seen work so well with The Happy Kitchen program. We need to provide lots of training at the outset and be a resource for them, such as set up a database or web site to exchange information and ideas. In the long term the model of us as the actual managers of the gardens is not going to work, nor is it going to allow us to start and strengthen more gardens.”

The use of a small nonprofit organization to leverage the growth of other sustainable, local, food organizations is an interesting innovation that the Sustainable Food Center is exploring, not only for educational programs, but also for farm marketing and community gardens. If building a sustainable, local food system is largely a work of education, the Sustainable Food Center is developing models of how to educate the educators.

Based on an interview with David Hess, May 31, 2005, and site visits by Hess to the Austin Farmers’ Market and community gardens in April, 2005.

Web site:

<http://www.sustainablefoodcenter.org>

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