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Growing urban agriculture

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Paul Lamison/staff

Piet Vanderhorst volunteers his time at the Seminole Heights community garden at 406 W. Violet St.

The word "farm" may bring to mind images of rolling acres of wheat and corn fields. But in the Tampa Bay area, and in places all over the world, farming is moving back to the city.

Urban agriculture is the practice of growing fresh food in otherwise unproductive downtown spaces. Today, there is a greater need than ever to find ways to feed growing urban populations. Currently, about 50 percent of the world's 7 billion people lives in cities, and, according to the United Nations, 65 percent of the world's people will live in cities by 2050. In Tampa-St. Petersburg, more than 580,000 people live in the city limits, but in excess of 4 million people are counted in the greater Tampa Bay area.

Cultivating fresh produce in empty lots helps nourish urban communities and strengthen local food systems. Gateway Organic Farm in Clearwater, for example, has been harvesting seasonal produce since 2007. The farm is sandwiched between U.S. 19 and the Bayside Bridge, little more than 3 acres in size. But its location gives it prime access to the urban community.

Hank and Pamela Sindlinger offer shares in their farm and its produce to Tampa Bay area residents through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Community members buy into the farm like stock in a company, with dividends distributed in the form of fresh, locally-grown herbs and vegetables.

This is becoming an increasingly popular way for neighborhoods to reconnect with their food and those who grow it. Local Harvest, a Web directory of farmers markets and community farms, lists more than 4,000 CSAs across the country, seven of which are in the Tampa Bay area.

Another local urban agriculture initiative is Seminole Heights Community Gardens, which offers annual garden memberships. The original plot is located on Violet Street, but Community Gardens organizers hope to expand to other locations throughout the neighborhood. Members are granted space in the garden, where they are free to plant and harvest their own vegetables, herbs, and flowers. Members work together to maintain the plots without artificial fertilizers and pesticides, and they also host regular community events that give children the opportunity to reconnect with the land.

While these initiatives are working to give Tampa-St. Petersburg residents access to fresh, nutritious food, innovative city-dwellers are also making use of urban agriculture halfway around the world.

In Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, Kenya, more than 1,000 farmers, most of them women, have started growing vegetables out of soil-filled sacks. This "vertical farming" practice allows women in Kibera to feed their families and improve their income.

When a 2008 political crisis in Nairobi cut off food supplies coming into the city, people in Kibera did not go hungry because they had their own source of food. These vertical gardens in Kibera are one example of successful sustainable agriculture innovations highlighted in Worldwatch Institute's "State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet" report.

Innovations in sustainable agriculture, particularly urban farming, are becoming even more important as we must find a way to feed a global population that is expected to reach 9 billion by 2050. Worldwide, about 800 million people are engaged in urban agriculture, providing 15 percent to 20 percent of the world's food.

In Tampa-St. Petersburg, urban agriculture already has a strong presence, with dozens of community gardens and Community Supported Agriculture programs spread throughout the area. These gardens not only provide a fresh, local food source for city residents, but they also help strengthen and vitalize communities.

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