

Urban Agriculture in Colorado

By Danielle Nierenberg and Isaac Hopkins, 26 November, 2011

The word “farm” may bring to mind images of rolling acres of wheat and corn fields. But here in Fort Collins, and in cities all over the world, farming is moving back to the city. Urban agriculture is the practice of growing fresh food in otherwise unproductive urban spaces. Today there is a greater need than ever before 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.

Cultivating fresh produce in city lots helps nourish communities and strengthen local food systems. In 1974, CSU students and residents of Fort Collins teamed up to start the Fort Collins Food Co-operative. In the last forty years, the co-operative has evolved into a full service grocery stocked with local produce, meats, dairy, and more. By connecting consumers directly with farmers, they help to strengthen the community *and* the economy.

Some of Fort Collins Food Co-op’s supplies come from urban community gardens, where youth and adults alike can come together to get their hands dirty and learn about the benefits of growing their own food. The Gardens on Spring Creek is an 18-acre public botanical garden in the heart of Fort Collins, where volunteers and staff grow everything from trees and flowers to cherries and cabbage. One of these plots, The Garden of Eatin’, is a three-quarter acre garden of locally grown produce that supplies the Food Bank for Larimer County with up to 10,000 pounds of food annually, for its Food Share and Kids' Cafe programs. The Garden of Eatin’ is also equipped with an Outdoor Teaching Kitchen, which provides a full “seed to table experience.”

Another local urban agriculture initiative is Mulberry Community Gardens, which hosts groups of young kids growing up in the city and teaches them the basics of gardening. In addition to a shared gardening space, Mulberry Community Gardens is home to a chicken coop and compost system. Once a year, they host a “Goat to Coat” event, where guests can watch “shearers, weavers, spinners, and all kinds of fun people” demonstrate the processes of fiber arts.

While initiatives like the Fort Collins Food Co-operative and Mulberry Community Gardens are working to give Fort Collins residents access to fresh, nutritious food, halfway around the world innovative city-dwellers are also making use of urban agriculture. 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 15-20 percent of the world’s food. Here in Fort Collins, 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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