

Growing a Garden City

How Farmers, First Graders, Counselors, Troubled Teens, Foodies,
a Homeless Shelter Chef, Single Mothers, and More Are Transforming
Themselves and Their Neighborhoods Through the Intersection of Local
Agriculture and Community—and How You Can, Too

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Foreword

In January 2010, news came out that one in four American families experienced at least one day in 2009 when they were too short of money to buy the food they needed. That same week, different researchers released data revealing that a third of Americans were not just overweight but obese. It's easy to get discouraged.

But it's also easy, and important, to get encouraged.

This beautiful volume takes one small city, Missoula, Montana, and shows how it is learning to feed itself. Missoula residents are growing food so that even the neediest can eat and, in the process, are teaching their kids to grow the food so they'll have a way of providing for their families in the future.

This kind of urban/suburban farming builds community at least as effectively as soil, and that community is at least as important as the produce. If you've got a troubled teenager on your hands, he or she may well need to talk—but it will be easier to talk if you're stacking pumpkins at the same time, or pulling potatoes, or weeding carrots. If you want to connect one neighbor with another, it turns out that few things work better than starting a garden in the middle of the block. Everyone can do something: compost, water, kibitz.

The stories and pictures here speak for themselves. But it's important to know that the larger positive trends are not confined to Missoula.

After 150 years of decline, the number of farms in the country has started to grow rapidly in recent years. Most are small, producing local food for local people, not corn syrup for enormous processing factories. Young people are beginning to take up farming again in much greater numbers. There are still more prisoners than farmers in America—but the gap has begun to close. Farmers' markets are the fastest-growing part of the national food economy, with sales steadily increasing.

As you read this book, you'll start to see that change has come not just because it's needed, but because we've finally begun to understand that there's something in us that needs to nurture and provide. Sociologists not long ago found that shoppers at farmers' markets had ten times more conversations per visit than shoppers at supermarkets—it's a different world we've begun to build. Or maybe rebuild—because each picture in this book would be familiar to an American of a century ago, even if it seems unlikely to many of us at first glance.

Hooray for the good green thumbs of the Garden City. May their example continue to spread far and wide. We've never needed it more badly, or wanted it as much!

—**Bill McKibben**



HELLO

my name is

The food bank really needed fresh food, and wouldn't it be a better experience for the university students if they knew that the food they were growing and working so hard for actually went to good hands? From there, we just kept casting the net wider and wider.

Josh Slotnick

After the military I went to college and studied philosophy. My partner at the time, Laurie, and I, we dug and planted a huge garden in our backyard in Pennsylvania. We were on an island of about four houses. Beyond that were two highways and a main road and an auto dealer. When we looked out all we saw was industrial craziness: smoke stacks, pavement, and bridges. I started making connections as to where it led.

Greg Price

We moved in about four years ago—Jason and I and my pregnant belly. We needed a bigger place because we were having this child, but we couldn't really afford a house and a yard. So we found this house without a yard, but we had this adjacent weed-infested dirt lot just staring at us in the face. It was forgotten city land.

Gita Saedi Kiely

My dad and I proceeded to have a screaming match in the eating area. Tim saw that we were obviously not getting anywhere because I was just enraged. Then we went for a walk, Tim and I, and he asked me if I wanted to be a part of Youth Harvest program, which would basically be me working up at a farm for a summer. And that's what I wanted. I was ready for my life to change.

Hannah Ellison

Introduction

Josh Slotnick started as an aspiring teacher offered the chance to feed the hungry. Greg Price was a military veteran determined to escape the “industrial craziness” of civilization as he knew it. Gita Saedi Kiely was a new homeowner and future mother staring out her window at a vacant lot. Hannah Ellison was a sixteen-year-old drug addict dragged 500 miles from home by a father desperate to save her life.

The way one local food organization in an unlikely location brought them and others together, what—united—they have been able to accomplish, and how other people all across the United States and around the world can transform themselves and their neighborhoods through the intersection of local agriculture and community are the subjects of this book. Each individual’s story, accompanied by striking color photographs, informs, instructs, and, we hope, inspires. Taken as a whole, they prove it’s possible to eat well locally even if you don’t live on a rural homestead or in an elite urban area, and that volunteer-powered farms and gardens, even in a harsh climate, can provide satisfying food to feed a diverse population.

Even more important, they demonstrate that growing food, the most ancient of occupations, can address very modern social problems, from poverty and addiction to the sense of disconnection that is such a destructive part of contemporary life.

Garden City Harvest is a non-profit collaboration joining several small farms and community gardens in Missoula, Montana, a Rocky Mountain city of 68,000 where one in five residents lives in poverty. The needs are great, as are the challenges. To begin with, Missoula’s frost-free growing season averages fewer than 100 days.

Nevertheless, Garden City Harvest’s seven neighborhood-based farms and community gardens attract a far-ranging mix of area residents who purchase high-quality local organic food, rent a plot and grow their own vegetables, or “volunteer for veggies” by receiving free food in exchange for work. At these sites college students

from the nearby University of Montana pursue graduate and undergraduate coursework in environmental studies; 2,000 area children visit annually on field trips; and, in cooperation with the local youth drug court, troubled teenagers find a positive environment and professional therapy.

But perhaps the most impressive feat is how the organization changes and is changed by its participants.

Elementary school students arriving on field trips delight in meeting the sow and three growing piglets fed by their daily lunch scraps. Teen addicts joining in “farm therapy” not only support one another and fellow farm workers, but also organize and run a special mobile farmers’ market for seniors who could not otherwise enjoy fresh local food. College students learning how to farm discover that they are role models and mentors to those same teens and essential suppliers to the individuals and families served by the area food bank, homeless shelter, and youth homes. Strangers participating in community gardens to grow their own food form unexpected new friendships and enlarge one another’s sense of neighborhood. Moreover, the farms and gardens become a gathering place for cultural and artistic events, from potluck suppers and celebrations to concerts, lectures, and readings.

All these efforts produce tangible results: Each year more than 100,000 pounds of healthy, high-quality food is grown to feed those in need, all while educating the larger public about local, sustainable food systems.

Fifteen years ago, Garden City Harvest, its farms, and all but two of its garden sites did not even exist. Today it represents one of the country’s most far-reaching experiments in community-based agriculture.

Like “hope” or “freedom,” “community” can be a vague word, meaning different things to different people. In its most basic sense, however, community means interdependence. Each member relies, at least in part, on the others. Everyone is necessary. Everyone belongs. Based on this simple but powerful principle, the successful practices of Garden City Harvest can take root anywhere.

What’s special wherever you live, as here, is how you grow.

—Jeremy N. Smith

