

Three Food Arenas of Self-Help

Arizona's Needy Food Deserts

By Katherine Crewe

Food Security

In the planning world, much of the discourse about food security explores the dysfunctional nature of current food systems, from globalization and the destructive use of chemicals to crop modification and other issues. Solutions have been somewhat broad and sweeping as well, exploring the benefits of increased walkability and access for deprived parts of cities, organic foods versus conventional foods and zoning changes for urban areas. Yet others have looked at innovations for the future. A proposed food conference in Texas, for instance, calls for sharing the expertise of industry professionals, policymakers and innovators as they explore the re-invention of food systems for urban centers, novel ways of dealing with global markets and technological improvements for food sustainability and nutrition. Key questions for the conference are: “How can technology better account for climate changes, natural disasters and other variables affecting food production?” and “How might technology address water shortage to account for climate changes, natural disasters and other variables affecting food production?”

What is often not acknowledged is the distinctiveness of local urban gardens as they emerge to deal with prevailing stress. Each draws on its own arena of assets and institutions, and each involves people and communities in its own ways. This distinctness, as planners often discuss, is a source of strength.



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Urban Farming in Arizona

Urban farming in Arizona cities has taken diverse forms. As a fast-growing Southwestern city of over four million, Phoenix has sprung from a spirit of pro-growth white (or “Anglo”) boosterism since the early 1900s. The resulting environmental and social inequities have led not only to a range of urban environments over time, but also to a variety of food gardens depending on prevailing needs and tastes. On the one hand, mainstream urban farm systems are to be found throughout the more prosperous parts of the metropolitan areas of Arizona. In Phoenix, the Valley Permaculture Alliance supports tree planting, school gardens and robust Community Supported Agriculture groups working to provide fresh produce for residents. Also, throughout the more affluent metro areas, commercial projects such as Agritopia in Gilbert and The Farm at South Mountain in Phoenix offer fresh organic produce. Farmers markets are held each week; some last throughout the year.

Urban farming in the more impoverished neighborhoods of Phoenix, however, takes a different form. The contaminated mixed-use area of South Phoenix, a zone of industrial and waste sites plus low-income residential and commercial development, has much vacant land available for urban farming—the result of decades of disinvestment.

South Phoenix

One of the most noteworthy farms in South Phoenix is the Tiger Mountain Foundation, a network run by the evangelist Darren Chapman that consists of

seven community gardens. Boasting three liquor stores and seven fast food stores, this mixed-use area along Broadway Road between 7th Street and 32nd Street is considered a food desert according to USDA standards; there are no full-service grocery stores. Four of Chapman's gardens were formerly sites of illegal dumping, with piles of "glass syringes—dare I say—crack pipes?" One is named the "Field of Dreams Garden," another "Dare to Dream."

The seven gardens have several objectives, all targeted at meeting the needs of the community. The primary objective is to provide food for nearby food centers and homeless shelters, which, according to Chapman, "can't take it in fast enough." A second objective is to provide nutritious food for all members, young and old. A third objective is to serve as training centers for foundation members, many of whom have repeated prison sentences, or are indigent or homeless. Through gardening, members can learn skills in irrigation, planting, harvesting and marketing; they can also learn self-reliance and mutual support through the foundation's doctrine of "each one teach one," and they can develop a strong work ethic. Finally, the foundation gardens provide a community setting where all age groups and talents can co-exist, whether through part-time employment in return for a stipend or produce, or through participation in the biweekly concerts and events.

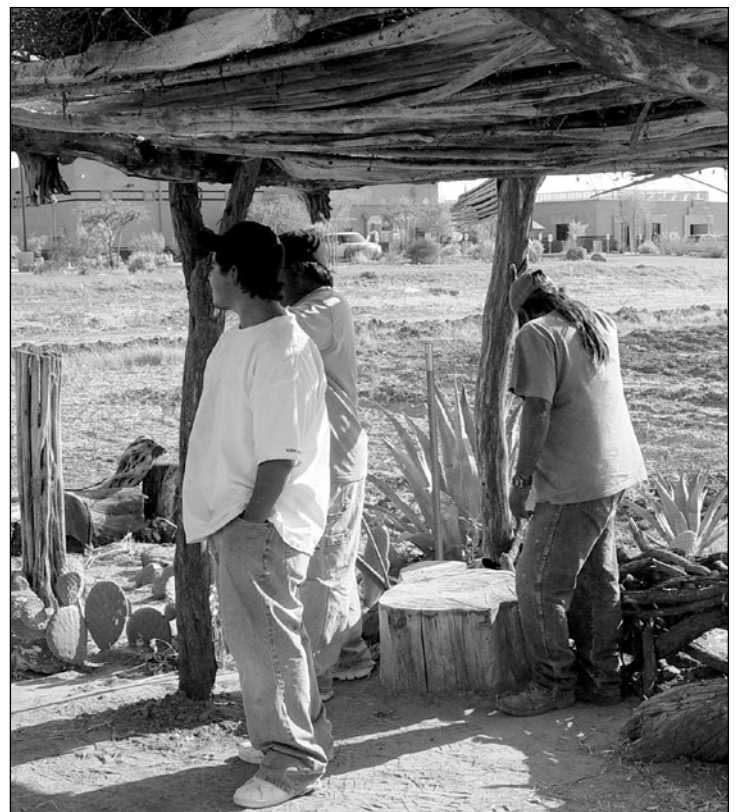
The Tiger Mountain Foundation has support from local and national institutions, including state and county health and education departments. Key assistance has also come from the Asset Based Community Development Institute in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. This alliance considers the value of local assets, particularly the skills of local residents and the power of local institutions, as building blocks for community development.

Tribal Reservations around Phoenix

The urban sociologist Andrew Ross, in his book *Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World's Least Sustainable City*, identifies two grassroots endeavors which he feels promise hope, environmental restoration and social resilience to a blighted city. The first is the urban farm movement

in South Phoenix, where local leaders are using agriculture to strengthen local institutions and encourage mutual cooperation. The second is the restoration of water rights to the Gila River Indian Reservation, which is triggering a resurgence of agriculture and solidarity.

Adjacent to Phoenix, the Gila River Indian Community and the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community have faced challenges for decades: health problems and loss of traditional institutions, language and culture. While they have not been threatened by metropolitan encroachment—their status as trust lands promises that both will likely continue as predominantly farming communities—much of the land is leased out for cultivation by non-tribal entities. Many of the crops being farmed are cash crops such as cotton, alfalfa and turf grass, which use large quantities of toxic pesticides, causing high incidences of lupus and diabetes within tribal communities. And in spite of the predominance of farmland, both communities are food deserts, given the loss of traditional lifestyles and eating habits, together with their location adjacent to highway strips of fast food restaurants on the edge of the metropolitan area.



Vato or shelter of dried mesquite branches, Salt River Elementary

For both communities, the growth of urban farming since early 2000 has meant opportunities to revive cultural traditions and strengthen existing community institutions. The organic farm in Salt River was originally initiated by the USDA through the University of Arizona and Arizona State University. The farm has flourished independently since then, with farm produce circulated to the elementary and high school cafeterias, the senior center and the local food center. In addition to providing revenue, job training and nourishment, the organic farm has spawned a community-wide return to using native seeds. Interest in native seeds along with traditional food preparation and medicine continues to be shared by nearby tribal centers. The farm project has also connected with a distance learning center that has teleconference capabilities and is located on the reservation to host tribal ceremonies.

Dry Land Farming Harvesting

A third farm-related endeavor in Arizona, dry water harvesting, revolves around gardening more generally but includes food production. In response to the area's extreme desert climate, this movement has championed the salvaging of rainwater for cultivation.



Full-service market on Broadway Road, Phoenix

The movement, consisting largely of private residents, environmental activists and a few architects and designers, has sprung up in reaction to the copious irrigation practices in Arizona's cities, drawing either on borrowed water from out of state (in the case of Phoenix) or underground water (in the case of Tucson).

Most examples of water salvaging are to be found in Tucson, perhaps better known for traditions of water conservation than Phoenix. A noteworthy example is the Dunbar Springs neighborhood, where drainage basins, curb cuts and dry wells and tanks collect and store roof and stormwater for cultivation of native plants and crops. Residents of Civano in South Tucson also practice water harvesting in private homes—again for planting vegetables. While dry farming practices in Arizona draw on architectural and engineering innovations, pioneers have also turned to Indian farm practices, particularly through spiral mounts and the planting of arid-adapted corn and gourd species.

Grassroots Solutions

Planners have given much thought to the relevance of grassroots solutions, arguing that research into local communities can yield clues for targeted solutions and potentially encourage communities to act for themselves. In his 2010 book on market places and street vending, Alfonso Morales noted the diverse ways city dwellers (many of them temporary and undocumented) seek out ways to improve their lives through business transactions over food. Morales urged planners to take note of food bartering and food sales as means for providing opportunities to strengthen and secure communities. In Phoenix and other Arizona cities, urban farming has provided a setting for diverse grassroots solutions which both highlight challenges yet provide insight into the future strengths of places like South Phoenix and the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community.

Concerns about food often relate to a host of other seemingly unrelated issues, such as crime, heritage and youth employment. Planners would do well to consider local initiatives that address food deserts in neighborhoods. Local leaders often understand community needs in ways that outsiders cannot anticipate.

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