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From Vacant City Lots to Food on the Table

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The first time I went to Richmond, Calif., nine years ago, my friend, who ran a punk music recording studio out of a converted warehouse, told us not to park our car on the street. The day before, vandals had walked the block and smashed several car windows.

At least a few things have started to change in Richmond since then: A berry garden sits beside a bike trail in the Iron Triangle, a neighborhood at the center of the city bordered on three sides by old rail lines. Once a month, Latino and African American families—often people who live just a few blocks from each other but rarely had a chance to meet in the past—gather at the garden and have a barbecue. Tomatoes, chard, and corn grow in raised beds across the street. Muslim families from the local mosque just a few blocks away pluck fresh mint from the garden for making traditional Arabic tea. The garden is the work of Urban Tilth, one of the dozen or so groups at the center of Richmond's urban garden movement. It was built by community members, often young people, and is tended in part by students and teachers from the elementary school next door. And it has become a community gathering space.

Richmond boomed in the mid-20th century and now is like hundreds of other places around the country where industry walked away. The city is isolated from much of the cultural and economic life of the rest of the East Bay region. Young people can't find jobs, and they move

away, or their restlessness is channeled into all the wrong activities—vandalism, gangs, crime.

People rarely get a say in what happens to land when their city falls apart. But in the last five years, some Richmonders have taken matters into their own hands. Often with official permission but sometimes without, they have planted more than two dozen gardens in public lots and school grounds all over the roughest parts of town. Urban Tilth calls them “farms,” and last year grew 6,000 pounds of food, which went to dozens of local families.

Many Richmonders have gardening traditions that go back several generations, brought by families from the rural South who came for shipbuilding jobs during World War II and by more recent immigrants from agricultural regions of Central and South America. But many of Richmond’s young people haven’t been exposed to these traditions.

Now Richmond’s urban gardening movement is yielding a small but radical cultural change. Urban agriculture has become a regular part of the curriculum in two local high schools. Areas in and near the gardens that seemed off-limits or unsafe in years past are becoming gathering places where Richmonders throw picnics, play outside, pick berries, and ride bicycles.

And dozens of young Richmonders have been given the chance to grow something in a community they thought had little future.

The Comeback Kids

The train to Richmond leaves Berkeley and passes miles of strip malls, junkyards, and abandoned warehouses before reaching the Iron Triangle. Doria Robinson, Urban Tilth’s executive director, meets me at the station, wearing sweat pants with a racing stripe and talking nonstop.

The granddaughter of an avid rose gardener and a local minister, she was one of the kids who left Richmond as soon as she could.

“I wanted to get out, like most people. I was like, oh, my God, what a lost cause. Nobody ever said anything positive about Richmond,” she says.

She went to college on the East Coast and lived in San Francisco for several years. She moved back five years ago to take care of her great aunt’s house and started working with Urban Tilth. Now, at 36, she’s focused on bringing young people back into the fabric of the community.

Robinson and her colleague, Adam Boisvert, drive me through the city in a pickup truck, first to the berry garden and then to Richmond High School, one of Urban Tilth’s two school-based farms.

We have to clear a pair of security guards and pass through a temporary metal fence before walking into Richmond High’s paved schoolyard. The school is still reeling since one of its students was gang-raped by a group of teenage boys after a homecoming dance last fall.

Behind the rust-colored trailers that serve as extra classrooms stand 12 vegetable beds and a shed that has been remade into a greenhouse. Beyond them and behind a football field are six long raised rows, nearly 800 square feet of cultivation space. They were built on a Sunday in February by 67 Richmond High students, teachers, administrators, and volunteers from local neighborhoods.

A class of 30 students has planted chard, tomatoes, carrots, peppers, and beans, with help from Urban Tilth staff and a teacher paid by the district. The content of their “Urban Ecology and Food Systems” class is a little subversive. It’s about fairness, nutrition, food deserts, oil, and why some people get left out of the economy.

Robinson enjoys a certain act-now-apologize-later approach to getting hold of land. At Richmond High, the project started when students wanted to fix up an old garden that had been neglected for a decade. At other schools, Urban Tilth has gotten keys from staff and teachers and persuaded groundskeepers to switch on the water, then asked the administration for permission. Only in the last six months has the

school district itself negotiated a formal land-use agreement with the organization.

I asked a facilities engineer in the school district administration how Urban Tilth started its four school gardens. “They just did it. Nice, huh?” he said, a bit sardonically.

Young energy drives Urban Tilth—20-something activists, recent grads looking for work, students—and not just A-students. Tania Pulido, age 21, joined Urban Tilth last October after years as a self-described “troubled youth.”

“I used to cut school a lot, and I barely graduated,” she says. She now studies new media and film, is a political activist, and leads gardening projects on the bicycle trail and at the schools.

Seven of Urban Tilth’s 11 staff are under 30, and several began as high-school apprentices. Jessie Alberto was among the Richmond High students who brought the school’s garden back to life. Now 20 years old, he trains students to garden at Richmond and Kennedy High Schools. He doesn’t like the words “behavior problem.”

“I want to say we have kids who are really high in energy,” he says. He puts these kids in charge of their peers on labor-intensive projects—weeding, pruning, and digging. “The thinking and the vigorous work calms them down,” he says.

Rights to the Garden

There is a basic question that comes up when you sow seeds on land you don’t own. When parking strips and vacant lots fill with flowers and fruit trees, property values spike, then rents and taxes.

Daryl Hannah and Julia Butterfly Hill brought national attention to South Central Farm, the famous urban garden in Los Angeles that was cultivated by 350 mostly Latino families. But their efforts couldn’t stop the property’s owner from bulldozing it to build a warehouse.

What happens when land becomes more valuable as a condominium development or a mall than a public garden?

My last stop with Robinson and Boisvert is Adams Middle School, which closed last fall as part of the school district's budget cuts. The school is up a winding street in the hills to the east of downtown. Property values rise with elevation in Richmond, and this school is on expensive ground.

There is a level, circular plot behind a row of trees where Urban Tilth has planted tomatoes, an heirloom green called purple tree collards, nopal cactus, carrots, peas, and raspberries. Boisvert and Pulido have sketched out permaculture designs for this land, including a rain garden and a water catchment system.

The school district is using this property for storage. Boisvert and Robinson admit that the land is worth millions. The school district has no plans to sell but concedes that Urban Tilth would likely lose the garden if the land attracted a buyer. Robinson is negotiating with a local land trust to see if they might be willing to purchase the garden and keep it in cultivation.

Meanwhile, the city has hired 26 high-school kids to work with Urban Tilth through a summer youth program. Robinson plans to use their energy to build a new orchard.

Four years ago, Richmond became one of the only major cities in the country to elect a Green Party mayor, Gayle McLaughlin. Under the mayor's progressive food policy, local gardening groups plant flowers and food plants in city parks through a program called "Adopt-a-Park." The city also gives them free logs to border raised beds, salvaged containers, wood chips, soil, and anything else that can be scavenged and repurposed for a garden. The city manager and mayor and local gardening groups are discussing a possible urban food ordinance: Gardening activists hope to make it easier to grow produce in Richmond front yards, gain access to water, and raise animals like bees, chickens, and goats.

I ask Robinson if she worries whether Urban Tilth’s prospects would shift suddenly if the city administration changes hands.

“I don’t,” she says. “What’s really important is the food we grow and the time we spend investing in people. We know people in Richmond are smart people. We have a huge reserve of brain energy here and historic connection to the land. And we just need to draw on that, respect it, and have faith in it.”

There’s more than food and land at stake here. If Urban Tilth can make gardening traditions into longstanding cultural institutions, and use a tomato plant or a raspberry vine to convince a teenager that Richmond is worth saving, their efforts will outlast anything that happens to the gardens themselves.

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