

EAST BAY TIMES

Food justice a way of life for Richmond nonprofit Urban Tilth

Group's farm on city's unincorporated north side yields enough produce to feed hundreds of families



Nonprofit group Urban Tilth has transformed what was once a rubble-filled, undeveloped plot of public land in unincorporated North Richmond into this viable, working urban farm, above, and enabled implementation of youth education and job training programs. The North Richmond Farm now supplies hundreds of families with fresh, healthy food.

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Decisions made by people participating in the upcoming recall election will not be the only significant voting taking place on Sept. 14. On that same day the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors will vote on whether to approve the sale of what was once a rubble-filled, undeveloped plot of public land in unincorporated North Richmond to Urban Tilth.

The urban agriculture organization works to build sustainable, equitable and healthy food systems in Richmond and surrounding areas through integrated food, health, education and employment programs and numerous community and national

collaborations. Beginning to plan and develop the North Richmond Farm in 2012, Urban Tilth that year also began working in earnest with Contra Costa County District 1 Supervisor John Gioia and other county officials to secure ownership of the county-owned 3-acre stretch of land at the corner of Fred Jackson Way and Brookside Drive. Leasing the property and clearing it for four years allowed the organization to establish a viable, working urban farm and enabled implementation of youth education and job training programs.



Debora Supinski appears recently at nonprofit group Urban Tilth's North Richmond Farm, which she manages. To counter food and job insecurity that have threatened generations of Richmond's residents, she leads the hands-on charge at the farm on behalf of Urban Tilth, which works to build sustainable, equitable and healthy food systems in the area through integrated food, health, education and employment programs and numerous community and national collaborations. "Richmond's culture is ripe for small-scale urban farming," Supinski says. (photo courtesy of Adam Boisvert)

Broad-based community health initiatives and collaborations led to two robust low-cost community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs that supply hundreds of families with fresh, healthy food. Outreach at seven local schools resulted in valuable expansion and an astonishing array of tangible, edible results: producing enough vegetables and fruits along with Urban Tilth's farm and community gardens even during the pandemic to feed more than 200 families, offer almost 5,000 free produce boxes at pop-up farm stands and more.

Urban Tilth, in addition to the North Richmond Farm, has continued to grow and pursue its mission to support local farms and forge partnerships that serve as

catalysts for combating urban blight, food insecurity, poverty and crime by helping people to be safe, fed and interconnected. Along a 3-mile stretch of the Richmond Greenway are seven community gardens, playgrounds and an orchard with 84 fruit trees. In May, funds from two cycles of a USDA grant allowed Urban Tilth to launch the Farmers to Families Free Box Program, delivering weekly boxes of organic produce to community members including seniors, low-income households and people most vulnerable to food insecurity.

A visit Aug. 19 by U.S. Reps. Mark DeSaulnier, D-Richmond, and Jim McGovern, D-Massachusetts, to brainstorm how application of federal resources could scale up their efforts to achieve greater food justice demonstrates hunger and food inequities are receiving national attention, said Doria Robinson, Urban Tilth's executive director since 2007. Third-generation Richmond resident Robinson began volunteering with Urban Tilth in 2004 while working at the Watershed Project and in 2005 served as co-director of the group's Richmond Greenway Trail all-volunteer initiative to improve long swaths of unused public land bordering the trail with "adoptable" gardens.

"We're creating a local food economy," she said. "For us, everything goes back to economic injustice, poverty and food inequity. The only way to solve the problem of disconnect with the land is to hire and train people to be a part of the answer. They need jobs and to be part of the food economy. People can then actually make choices, not just accept what they're given."

Robinson says food options available to people in underserved communities is deplorable in no small part due to food deserts — low-income urban areas such as unincorporated Richmond that have no large grocery stores and where nationwide, fast food outlets proliferate while restaurants and markets offering fresh, healthy food are rare. She says the dearth of living wage jobs adds an extra burden. Richmond's poverty rate hovers around 18% and child food insecurity ranges from 14 to 20%.

"It's a myth that tells people it's OK for people to earn only \$15 an hour and get their food from a food bank, but it's embedded in how we develop inner city places. There's not meaningful living wage employment as a way to answer the real economic needs of people who most require it," she says.

At Urban Tilth's September planning sessions, teams develop yearly action plans with ambitious purpose.

"I'm never frustrated, but sometimes I have to reel everyone back, remind them about funding, encourage them to self-correct, return to action plans. The struggle is when something emerges that's sudden or outside of our normal work. COVID was there this year, but in Richmond in general operating the community garden is always difficult."



An Urban Tilth worker distributes free food recently to neighbors of the Richmond Greenway, where the nonprofit group along a 3-mile stretch has seven community gardens, playgrounds and an orchard with 84 fruit trees. (photo courtesy of Marco Lemus)

Robinson says illegal haulers dump refuse in the park, such as 29 tires that she says “were clearly not one person’s litter.” Illegal dumping and drug dealing happens especially in low-income places in Richmond because violators won’t get caught, she suggests. Out of three restrooms installed in the gardens, only one remains operable because two that were vandalized and used for drug sales were welded shut by the city.

“There’s no oversight. After 16 years we insisted we needed to hire a community organizer,” Robinson says. “Urban Tilth hired someone because the city isn’t doing what they should to support people in our neighborhoods. They let problems fester, and the park and landscaping department is woefully underfunded.”

North Richmond Farm Manager Debora Supinski leads the hands-on charge at the farm to counter food and job insecurity that have threatened generations of Richmond’s residents. Born in Brazil and having run educational farm programs in Massachusetts before moving to Richmond, she says that “Richmond’s culture is ripe for small-scale urban farming.”

Supinski says kids entering the garden relax, shift from talking about what’s cool on social media to what’s cool about vegetables.

“They ask how to grow them at home, how to get jobs with us. One kid who didn’t like vegetables was eating raw mushrooms by end of summer. What becomes important to them is healthy food, healthy communities.”

Youths at the farm gain invaluable skills that translate to any job: teamwork, time management, budgeting, marketing — Supinski cites recognizing the aesthetics that cause a radish to sell as one marketing example, while Robinson highlights planning how to order 65,000 pounds of food, divide it over 50 weeks and distribute it to more than 400 families a week.

“What are the documents, who keeps the budget, how do you have accountability so the whole thing works smoothly?” Robinson adds.

Supinski says that “Farming is a tool for creating change. You can own your own land, pay for it with your work, create wealth no one can take away from you and your family. It can change systemic issues of poverty and race. Farming is revolutionary in that way.”

These and similar concepts will be in the forefront if the North Richmond Farm property is purchased and the staff moves to complete Phase I of its five-phase capital campaign project. The project will complete an urban food hub that includes the farm, expanded infrastructure (buildings), outdoor classrooms, an amphitheater, community commercial kitchen and cafe and more.

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