

The New Farming Frontier

It's as close as your own backyard.

On a crisp Sunday afternoon, John Calhoun crouches down to tend rows of kale, carrots and collard greens. He fertilized the soil of his small farm on North Rampart Street with coffee grounds from Cool Brew and manure from the Marigny stables, where the mules that ferry tourists through the French Quarter live.

A few blocks from Xavier University, Macon Fry has a lush, mature farm. Tight rows of green vegetables run from one edge of the chain-link circled lot to the other. He sells the food to friends, to strangers who hear about his edible garden and—when he has extra—to restaurants.

In Gentilly at a site surrounded by FEMA trailers and buzzing with the traffic from I-10, Anne Baker prepares her lot for farming. A crew of volunteers brought in loads of sand. Next, she will haul in manure and build an irrigation system, and by the fall she'll harvest.

"I really wanted to get my fingers dirty again," says Baker, who ran New Orleans' only certified organic farm before the storm. "I'm Cajun and we've always farmed, even though I lived in the city. We went out to grandma's and milked cows."

In the months after Katrina, when grief was relieved by the promise of New Orleans' glorious renaissance, growing food on empty spaces in the city seemed like a solution to our need for healthy food. Two years later, productive plots of land in city's core are still rare. Most urban farmers work property that Parkway Partners, the non-profit group that supports the Department of Parks and Parkways, controlled before the storm.

"I believed a year ago that they were going to start granting green space. I believed all kinds of things were going to happen," says Slow Food activist Poppy Tooker. "I get the sensation that we are so fucked up because of the city government."

Farmers need land, but land can be difficult to get and hold onto in a city. Parkway Partners created a community gardening program in the early 1990s to fight blight by growing on property seized by the city for back taxes. Originally neighbors shared the gardens, but Parkway Partners now allows a single farmer to use a lot and grow enough produce to sell at market or to restaurants.



PHOTO: TODD A. PRICE

These lots, though, can be sold. "There is a lot of money that comes out in farming—buying the equipment, running irrigation, covering the shade house," Anne Baker says. "It just seems a shame that somebody working on a project this large can have it yanked out from underneath them."

Parkway Partners is looking for ways to give growers land that can't be taken away. The New Orleans Food and Farm Network, a group that trains and supports growers, is working with the City Council to create policies that will help farmers lease or purchase vacant lots. Still, because of meager profits generated by urban farms, ownership isn't that attractive if it is also accompanied by property taxes.

Is urban agriculture the best solution to the lack of healthy food in many New Orleans neighborhoods? And how many other New Orleansians will be enticed into starting their own small farm until the goals and limitations of urban agriculture are clearer?

"The city of New Orleans will never feed itself," Wolnik says. "We need regional agriculture." A family of four, she says, could feed itself on a back lot, but only if a family member dedicated themselves nearly full time

to farming. "I think urban agriculture is most about reminding urban people what food is," she says, "which is not bad."

The cadre of urban growers is not necessarily thinking about food policy or how to make a living as a farmer. They're thinking about their crops. "I live in the city," says Philip Soulet, who grows in Central City, "it's not my main source of income, it's really just a hobby that's taken over my life."

OTHER NEWS

Chef Mary Sonnier of the much-missed Gabrielle Restaurant now hosts *The Chef Show* every Friday at 2:30 p.m. and Saturday at 5 p.m. on WRBH 88.3 FM. Tune in April 18 and 20 to hear her chat with celebrity chef Daniel Boulud. ...Uglesich's Restaurant returns for one day when Tony and Gail Uglesich sign copies of the new *Cooking with the Uglesiches* (Pelican) and serve free samples on April 26 from 10 a.m. to noon. ...Whole Foods Market will banish plastic bags from all stores by Earth Day, April 22.

Uglesich's Restaurant: 1238 Baronne St.
Whole Foods Market: 5600 Magazine St.,
899-9119; 3420 Veterans Blvd., Metairie,
888-8225