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# SIERRA

## Produce to the People

Community gardens and farmers' markets challenge  
convenience stores and fast-food joints

by **Constance Matthiessen** and **Anne Hamersky**

November/December 2006

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GREEN CUISINE



Xai Vang tends a community garden in Fresno, California.

**THE UNITED STATES MAY BE THE LAND OF PLENTY**, but in many parts of the country--particularly the low-income neighborhoods--fresh fruits and vegetables are hard-to-find luxury items. Grocery chains resist opening stores where sales of high-markup gourmet products can't be guaranteed, and they often close existing supermarkets in poor areas. For residents of these neighborhoods, the choice comes down to traveling long distances to buy groceries or shopping at expensive corner stores that sell high-fat, high-sugar convenience food and little or no fresh produce. The consequences are the wages of poverty: diabetes, obesity, and heart disease.

A quiet but powerful movement is tackling the problem by building "food security"--the ability to obtain safe, nutritious, high-quality food--in some of the poorest corners of the country. Inner-city kids get hands-on experiences of nature by turning trash-strewn vacant lots into bountiful community gardens. Parents campaign to get junk food out of public schools, and local farmers are invited to sell their produce directly to eager

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customers. Communities are determining for themselves how best to meet their food needs and, in doing so, are reaping benefits that go beyond the health effects of greens and fresh fruit. Here's how the food-security movement has blossomed in four California communities.



Edie Jessup, in blue, coordinates Fresno Metro Ministry's food projects. The agency provides the plots where immigrant gardeners grow Hmong cucumbers and beans (at left and right)-- and reap much more.

**FRESNO, CALIFORNIA**, is in the middle of one of the world's most abundant agricultural regions, the great Central Valley, which provides a quarter of the U.S. food supply. Still, many residents worry about their next meal. A 2005 report by the Brookings Institution found that Fresno has the highest concentration of poverty of any large city in the nation, and more than 85 percent of the children in its school system qualify for subsidized lunches. Food insecurity shows itself not in the lack of calories so much as in the overabundance of poor food choices: In Fresno County, 46 percent of ninth-graders and nearly two-thirds of adults are overweight.

Fresno Metro Ministry, an interfaith social-justice organization, is trying to reverse these trends by providing low-income people access to healthy food. "It's pretty basic," says Edie Jessup, FMM's Hunger and Nutrition Project coordinator. "Food, housing, healthcare--so many have to struggle to fulfill these basic needs. If they aren't met, people can't learn and grow and contribute."

Jessup and FMM recently worked with the local school district to adopt a "wellness policy" that promotes healthier school meals, bans soda from campuses, teaches nutrition, and encourages physical education. The group also helped expand the district's free-lunch program to the summer months. And after learning that weekly flea



markets are a major source of produce for many of Fresno's poorest residents, FMM wrangled permission for them to use food stamps to buy directly from area farmers.

Cultivating health: Fresno's 33,000 Hmong immigrants suffer 20 times as much heart disease as Hmong in northern Thailand. Fresh produce can help.

The centerpiece of FMM's efforts has been establishing community gardens throughout Fresno. These are particularly prized by the city's large population of Hmong refugees, rural people from the Laos area who sided with the United States in the Vietnam War and migrated here afterward. In Fresno, many Hmong live crowded into small apartments, barely scraping by on public assistance. Depression and other psychological problems are common, and childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes (often associated with poor diets) are on the rise.

But just give these former farmers access to some land. In small patches of ground tucked behind churches and strip malls, Fresno is blooming with lush, immaculate gardens of not only corn and beans but also lemongrass, ginger, and medicinal plants. The gardens allow Hmong families to exercise, work beside friends, and reconnect to the land, something many have missed since leaving their native country.



Still, waiting lists are long, and the gardens are impermanent. One was paved over by a local church to build, yes, a parking lot. "Where will my grandmother grow her food?" Jessup overheard one Hmong child ask. "And where will the butterflies go?"

Farell Williams shows off his monster cabbage to Kate Casale, director of the Alameda Point Collaborative's youth program.

**THIRTY-FOUR ACRES** of the former naval air base in Alameda, California, have made the transition from swords to plowshares and now provide a refuge for formerly homeless families. The architecture on the sprawling base on San Francisco Bay is serviceable, though military drab, and few trees interrupt the flat, wind-scoured landscape. But on a sunny spring day, the corner maintained by the Alameda Point Collaborative (APC) is idyllic. At one end of a street of scrubbed and neat cookie-cutter houses, a color-splashed flower bed flourishes; at the other, a community garden.



Formerly homeless teens in Alameda, California, work in a community garden and interview neighbors about their food needs.

Not far away, APC's community center buzzes with activity as some of the 500 residents (half of them children) gather for the monthly group dinner, prepared in part from produce grown in the garden. The center offers classes in parenting, cooking, and gardening, as well as job training and childcare. Teens gather in front, talking excitedly. Dressed in T-shirts, sweatshirts, and baggy pants, they would fit in on any urban street corner--except, perhaps, for the topic of their conversation. Farell Williams, a tall 16-year-old with a cherubic face, is showing the others a tremendous cabbage he just picked from the garden, explaining how he's going to cut it up for a stir-fry. Williams wants to be a chef and plans to take cooking classes over the summer.

Williams's dreams are due in large part to Kate Casale, who directs APC's Growing Youth Project and clearly loves her job. She supervises the teens with respect, affection, and occasional exasperation. They are adolescents, after all, many of whom grew up in the Bay Area's toughest neighborhoods. Their families lived on the streets and in shelters, and some kids were victims of domestic violence.

Casale is impressed by how hard the teens work--and how much they've learned. "Half of what we teach them is about turning in a time sheet, being on time, showing up," she says. "It's been amazing to watch how much they've grown."

Seventeen-year-old Dawn Caraway was homeless for four years before she and her mother moved to Alameda. "I was never able to let go or let my guard down before I came here," she says. "I always lived in cities before; I had no experience of nature. Now I found out I like growing things, working in the garden. To me, this is heaven on Earth."

**NEELAM SHARMA GOT INVOLVED** in food security over lunch--her son's, to be precise. Ten years ago, Sharma and her family moved from England to South Central Los Angeles. Even though her son, Lawrence, qualified for the

free-lunch program at his middle school, she noticed that he was always hungry after school. The meals were awful, he told her, so awful that he couldn't eat them.

Sharma, who is small and intense and speaks with an elegant British accent, went to Lawrence's school to see for herself. "The food was all heavily processed and unpleasant-looking," she recalls. "Kids were taking one or two bites and throwing the rest away. The only fresh fruit were these tasteless apples, all mangly and waxy-skinned."



From left, activist Neelam Sharma (in hat) and youth trainees install an orchard at a Los Angeles elementary school. Preschoolers gather at an urban mini farm and experience the miracle of a growing radish.

Working with several other parents, Sharma started the Healthy School Food Coalition to improve the district's nutrition programs. It was clear to Sharma that the problem of food quality in South Central extended beyond the schools. "I had to leave my community to find quality, affordable produce," she says. "Few grocery stores choose to locate here, so it's no wonder people in South Central are disproportionately plagued with diet-related diseases--diseases that are striking at younger and younger ages."

Today Sharma works with an organization called Community Services Unlimited, overseeing its food-security program. CSU has built gardens at two South Central schools and runs five more mini urban farms, plus a produce market.

CSU found that two-thirds of the merchants who own corner stores in the neighborhood would be willing to sell fresh produce if the group handled the logistics. So CSU purchased an old school bus, converted it to run on biodiesel, and plans to use it to deliver produce later this year.

Even though her program struggles financially--Sharma gives most of her small salary to the youth she's hired--she isn't discouraged. "From the kindergartner who beams when she sees that her radish seed has germinated

to the adult who jumps up and down when his bean seeds sprout--every reconnection to the earth makes it all worthwhile."

**ON A SUNNY SPRING DAY IN OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA**, food security has the sound, taste, and smell of a really great party. The Mo' Better farmers' market is small, with just a dozen vendors, but vibrant: Old-school soul music competes with the latest rap, and the air is scented by barbecue and grilled vegetables. Making sure everything runs smoothly is teacher and community activist David Roach, who helped establish the market in 1998 through the Mo' Better Food program.

"Black farmers are losing land at five times the rate of other farmers," Roach says. "Part of the problem is that there are so few markets for their food in black communities." Roach and Mo' Better are trying to change that by running this farmers' market, distributing fresh produce to corner shops, and establishing two local grocery stores.

When he was a kid, Roach says, Oakland's black community had more of a connection to the land. Many people had gardens, and friends who stopped by for a visit seldom left without a bag of greens or plums from the backyard tree.

"If you lose something," Roach says, "you want to get it back." As activists work to bring fresh, nutritious produce to neighborhoods around the country, they are creating not just food security but stronger, healthier communities as well.

Constance Matthiessen is a San Francisco writer and journalist. Anne Hamersky's last feature for Sierra was "Who Grows Your Food? (And Why It Matters)" (November/December 2004).

### **VEGGIES IN THE HOOD**

The Community Food Security Coalition, based in Venice, California, is the umbrella organization for food-security efforts across the country. The coalition has 325 member groups in the United States and Canada, including social-justice, religious, environmental, labor, and antipoverty organizations. It provides education and training and holds an annual conference. For more information, visit [foodsecurity.org](http://foodsecurity.org).



Will Scott, left, and daughter Michelle travel 150 miles from their Fresno farm to sell zucchini, tomatoes, and other fresh produce at the farmers' market in West Oakland, which is organized by David Roach, center.

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"Green Cuisine" logo by Greg Mably, photos by Anne Hamersky

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