

TOUCH THE SOIL Syndicate



City Slicker Farms Giving the Nation More Vision



Benjamin Gisin has visited hundreds of farms in his banking, farm consulting and publishing careers. He writes and lectures extensively on the global and domestic food situation, the promise of local food first and grass-roots economic issues.

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Fifty years ago, the community of West Oakland, Calif., was vibrant with community grocery stores, vegetable gardens and fruit trees in people's yards. There were good jobs at the railroad, shipyards and war industries. West Oakland was the hub of African American culture and booming with life and activity. Over the years, as cash flows moved to serve other communities and endeavors, West Oakland turned into a food and economic desert. Today, with some 30,000 residents, there are 53 liquor stores, but no grocery stores.

The nation's food-security consciousness has taken root in West Oakland as nonprofit City Slicker Farms uses local food production to re-invent local economics and access to food.

"Growing affordable fresh organic food for West Oakland is one of our visions," said Barbara Finnin, executive director of City Slicker Farms. "The local people have skills, but there are less jobs to utilize those skills. We are working to create a food and farming economy to make use of those skills."

"We accomplish what we do with interns, local volunteers, businesses that donate materials and non-profit fund-raising efforts" Finnin said.

City Slicker Farms raises food and provides on-the-job training for future local food entrepreneurs. Making the most of five small-plot city farms, fresh produce is collected each week and brought to a neighborhood farm stand for sale at sliding prices ranging from free to making above-cost donations.

City Slicker Farms has constructed over 80 raised-bed backyard gardens at individual homes. Once constructed, interns work with families for three years until they are self-sufficient in raising meaningful portions of their own food.

"It is wonderful how people respond when their plants start producing," Finnin said. "One of our goals is to teach people how to raise food in the city so they can eventually start their own farm stands."

"The outpouring from local businesses to provide building materials for the raised beds and volunteers to put them in has been tremendous," said Finnin.

City Slicker interns stay for one year in exchange for a learning opportunity, a small stipend and housing. Most interns come



Photo - Touch the Soil

Leslie Outhier, an intern at City Slicker Farms utilizes a flat-bed bike to move materials between urban food garden sites. (Inset) Barbara Finnin, executive director of City Slicker Farms, oversees operations helping West Oakland, Calif. overcome its food desert status.

and work because they believe in what they are doing and want to develop their urban farming skills.

City Slicker Farms offers workshops on gardening, herbs, composting and cooking in addition to all of the hands-on volunteer opportunities. Local residents are encouraged to drop off their kitchen scraps, which are combined with spent plant material from the gardens to create compost for the urban farms.

"We raise food vertically whenever possible and use the Bio-intensive method of raising food that was developed by John Jeavons and used in over 130 countries," Finnin said. "This allows us to produce a lot of food in a small space."

Portable raised beds are placed outside the urban farm plots where locals can pick off food as they walk by — it's great advertising.

City Slicker Farms is introducing chickens for eggs and meat to be accompanied with training and ready-to-use chicken coops. The goal is to begin developing urban livestock enterprises to further local food and the local economy.

City Slicker Farms offers an model for inner cities as well as for furthering other concepts like local energy or local home and neighborhood improvement. Despite national energy and financial problems, we all have that self-preservation drive to rise from the ashes — something City Slicker Farms demonstrates well.

"Everyone can make a difference by helping out a little," said Finnin. "Even small donations of \$10 or \$20 dollars can make a difference to City Slicker Farms success or any non-profit of your choice." ■ www.cityslickerfarms.org

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