

# Bike tour finds gardens blossoming in city lots

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Gardening solves problems.

It's good for the environment. It brings people together. Gardening means more local food – which means less food shipped in from far away.

Gardening is peaceful, fulfilling, healthy, educational, inexpensive, only occasionally frustrating and almost always awe-inspiring. It encourages sharing. Some say it's a solution to poverty, obesity, even crime.

And gardening inspires hope, which is what happened Saturday when more than 50 people got involved in the What's Growing On CYCLEbration, the first of what's likely to be an annual event.

Sponsored by the Sacramento Hunger Coalition, the 15-mile bike tour stopped at all kinds of gardens in a variety of Sacramento neighborhoods.

With bountiful summer harvests only weeks away, people were talking about tomatoes and cucumbers and cantaloupes, but also about how gardening can play a role in communities, in addressing issues, in helping the less fortunate.

What to do with the eyesore of a vacant lot? How about a community garden?

Concerned about unhealthy eating habits? Why not teach people how to grow nutritious food? Gas prices got you down? Buy local and/or grow your own food.

"In a way, we're creating a network of local food sustainability," said Omar Sahak, a Hunger Coalition member. "As a community, we should be aware of our local food system and how we get our food.

"We want people to feel empowered to create positive change in their community by getting the education they might need to start a garden in their front yard or backyard."

The tour stopped at several community gardens and – the latest craze in town – front yard gardens. Last year, amid pressure from gardeners and following an appearance at City Hall by a talking carrot, the City Council revised an ordinance to allow more vegetable gardening in front yards.

Meanwhile, the push for more community gardens continues, inspired by the heavy demand. The city oversees five such gardens but has a lengthy waiting list, according to Bill Maynard, the city's community garden coordinator.

He noted that Seattle has one community garden for every 2,500 residents. Sacramento has one for every 100,000.

Many parks with expanses of watered and mown grass could make room for gardens, said Dawn Dunlap, chairwoman of the Sacramento Hunger Coalition.

"We're watering grass in these parks," she said, eyeing the vast lawn at Southside Park, where the bike tour ended with a lunch. "Why not use it to water fruits and vegetables?"

In addition to the politics of food and water, the CYCLEbration emphasized a healthful lifestyle. The lunch featured salad, fresh fruit and a raw veggie burger, all prepared by the Synergy Chef Collaborative.

Sahak, who lives with his parents in Elk Grove, has been enjoying the family's nectarines and peaches and is looking forward to cherries at the farmers market. Soon, he will move to Oak Park to live in cooperative housing and will grow food there.

That's a neighborhood battling to overcome its reputation for crime and blight, where there's already a cooperative spirit taking root.

Jaclyn Hopkins moved to Oak Park partly because of its lower housing prices. What she found was a tightknit community. This year, 20 gardeners in the neighborhood created a "crop swap" – growing food and then sharing it each Sunday at 3 p.m. in McClatchy Park.

Those with extra space in their yards also have offered garden plots to apartment dwellers.

The crop swappers have met to coordinate who is growing what, held educational workshops and agreed to employ organic gardening methods.

"It's completely grass-roots," said Hopkins, program director at the Environmental Council of Sacramento, better known as ECOS.

She called the bike tour Saturday "inspiring," noting that she had picked up ideas on how to better maximize the space in her garden.

### **About the writer:**

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