

S.F. firm harvests potential of unused land

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(06-22) 17:20 PDT -- Anne Fisher Vollen used to have a box of organic vegetables delivered to her home every week, and religiously separated her family's food scraps from the trash. Yet the mother of two children and the co-founder of a startup company didn't have the energy to cultivate her own plot of land.

Last month, Vollen, 44, and her husband, Gary Vollen, 45, turned to MyFarm, a new San Francisco business that took the family's local and organic diet to a new level: by designing and planting an organic vegetable garden in their Marina district backyard. The Vollens pay MyFarm a weekly fee to maintain and harvest the vegetables that have just started to mature. They can gaze at their garden and dig into just-picked lettuce without so much as touching dirt.

"I joke that my backyard was the only thing more neglected than my children since I started the business out of my home," said Vollen, co-founder of Green Zebra, a coupon book, guide and Web site focusing on local green businesses.

Plenty of city dwellers already raise vegetables, and even chickens, in tiny outdoor spaces, but MyFarm fits into the larger nationwide urban agriculture movement, in which cities, residents, nonprofit organizations and activists are reclaiming urban spaces for food production. In the past few years, San Francisco has seen several instances of so-called guerrilla gardening, when community organizers transformed abandoned private and public lots into minifarms in the Richmond District and Bernal Heights.

In some ways it's a throwback to the Victory Gardens, a World War II government-sponsored program in which as much as 40 percent of the country's nonmilitary produce was grown in urban and suburban backyards. San Francisco recently resurrected the idea with Victory Gardens 2008+, a project that will involve planting vegetables in backyards and in Civic Center Plaza as part of the Slow Food Nation event taking place over Labor Day weekend.

MyFarm is a for-profit variation that aims to serve many similar goals: to conserve energy by growing produce where people eat it, and to beautify and make use of underutilized land.

Decentralized urban farm

Founder Trevor Paque, 29, envisions what he calls a decentralized urban farm - a network of backyard organic vegetable gardens that will free urbanites from their reliance on food trucked in from the country. Clients who live in the sunny Mission District will grow tomatoes for denizens of the foggy Richmond, where broccoli and other cool-weather vegetables will thrive in customers' backyards. And bicycles, rather than gas-guzzling trucks, will be the main method of transport.

It may sound pie-in-the-sky, but two months after putting up flyers, Paque already has installed 10 gardens and signed up an additional five clients. Having a farm in your backyard tends to soothe fears about salmonella-tainted tomatoes, rising food costs and the melting polar ice caps. Plus, it's an affordable way to get some landscaping done.

Businesses like MyFarm are thriving in other parts of the country. Established in 2006, Your Backyard Farmer is a similar model in the Portland, Ore., area, and co-founder Donna Smith said she has consulted with offshoots in Santa Cruz, Boston and Washington, D.C. The Portland company also offers a program to help customers start and maintain their own gardens, with 57 "farms" total. It is booked through 2008.

Installation, maintenance

MyFarm installation costs \$600 to \$1,000, and maintenance costs \$20 to \$35 per week, depending on the garden's size, and includes weeding, harvesting and composting. Those who opt to have larger gardens installed pay a smaller weekly fee and provide food to customers who, eventually, will be able to order a weekly vegetable delivery collected from MyFarm backyards.

The vegetable-box concept is modeled on the Community Supported Agriculture programs offered by dozens of Northern California farms, in which members receive weekly deliveries of seasonal produce direct from the farm.

Paque previously owned and ran a mortgage brokerage. A year ago, he left the business, deciding he didn't want an office job anymore. He apprenticed at Three Stone Hearth, a Berkeley cooperative that prepares and sells nutrient-rich meals for delivery or pickup. He also volunteered with Christopher Shein, an instructor of permaculture at Merritt College.

Paque helped Shein install permaculture gardens, and he noticed that when they returned months later, the garden floor was often strewn with rotten fruit and many of the plants were going to seed. It was obvious the food wasn't being harvested.

"Most people are too busy to go back in their backyard and water and harvest. So we do that for them," Paque said of his new company, which is available only to San Francisco residents.

MyFarm also helps customers compost their food scraps in their backyard to enrich their own gardens, rather than adding the waste to their green curbside compost bins. Paque points out that normally the food waste - 350 tons a day, according to Mark Westlund of the city's Department of the Environment - has to be trucked to Vacaville to break down into compost. The compost is then hauled to Northern California organic farms, where diesel-burning tractors work it into the soil. The resulting vegetables then have to be driven back to the city.

Paque cites additional benefits of his model compared with large-scale farms, even organic ones. Instead of using tractors, Paque and his farmers do their work by hand and travel by bicycle as much as possible. In addition to organic methods, Paque follows permaculture farming principles, which emphasize reducing stress on the soil.

The gardens end up taking various shapes, but the standard design is for 4-by-4-foot raised beds. Each bed is large enough to produce enough small vegetables for one person; two adults might want to order three to four beds.

With a new client, Paque first does a site analysis, checking for adequate sunlight and taking soil samples to check for contaminants and nutrient levels. If a customer signs up, Paque and employees spend a day or two installing the garden.

They pull out invasive weeds, then put down a layer of recycled cardboard that will act as a weed barrier and eventually turn to compost. They top it with finished compost and organic soil, and install drip irrigation. Later, they plant the soil with young starts and seeds, using straw as mulch.

The vegetables can include carrots, onions, garlic, bush beans, spinach, beets, peas, herbs and native flowers. In the Mission, they add sun-loving peppers, tomatoes and eggplant.

Diets rich in nutrients

A few of Paque's customers found out about MyFarm through the local chapter of the Weston A. Price Foundation, a group dedicated to restoring nutrient-dense foods to people's diets. Judy Bonhiver, 57, recently had MyFarm install a garden in her Noe Valley front yard.

"The price of food is going up, yet I still want to buy local and seasonal produce," Bonhiver said.

Jack and Gay Reineck, 64 and 65, also just had a garden installed behind their Cole Valley home. Although they grow vegetables and blueberries at their weekend house in Sebastopol, the busy graphic designers don't have time to do it in San Francisco, where they have lived for 30 years and normally shop at organic produce stores.

"The broccoli is only half the size of big heads of broccoli in the store. It's way more tender and concentrated even than the vegetables you buy at the natural-food store," Jack Reineck said.

But what people sometimes don't realize is that homegrown food can still be potentially hazardous, said Christine Bruhn, director of the Center for Consumer Research at UC Davis.

"They think if it's from my backyard and it's organic, it can't be a source of harmful bacteria," she said. "Birds fly, bunnies hop, rats and other wild animals can visit the location and leave no sign, yet their droppings can be there in the soil."

Bruhn recommends that all produce get a thorough washing, regardless of its origins.

Urban agriculture resources

Guerrilla gardening. Visit guerrillagardening.org. Click on Community and navigate to San Francisco.

Free Farm Stand. This volunteer-run organization offers produce grown in local backyards free to the public, especially to low-income people. Sundays 1-3 p.m., Parque Niños Unidos at the corner of 23rd Street and Treat Avenue. freefarmstand.org.

MyFarm. For more information, visit www.myfarmsf.com.

People's Grocery. Nonprofit with programs to increase access to healthy food in West Oakland, including urban agriculture. peoplesgrocery.org.

Quesada Gardens Initiative. Community of Bayview residents who tend a vegetable garden on a city median. quesadagardensblog.blogspot.com.

Three Stone Hearth. A Berkeley cooperative that sells nutrient-rich prepared meals for pickup or delivery, following the principles of Weston A. Price. threestonehearth.com or e-mail info@threestonehearth.com.

Victory Gardens 2008+. A San Francisco pilot project to create more vegetable gardens in backyards, parks and rooftops: sfvictorygardens.org.

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