

Urban Agriculture in Bayview Hunters Point

– Status 2011

How our gardens grow

What we've been talking about lately

- ⇒ 10,000 pounds of food each year.
- ⇒ Gardens serve community building.
- ⇒ More land than gardeners.



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How our gardens grow. What we've been talking about lately

An estimated 10,000 pounds of food is grown in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood each year,¹ a number that is increasing as assessment efforts improve, and as more residents begin raising food. The estimate puts the neighborhood's annual food production at about a day's worth of what is needed to feed the 34,000 people who live here.

That's a good start, but not good enough for a neighborhood often described as a "food desert."

Bayview Hunters Point urban agriculture "status-at-a-glance"

- ✓ Bayview Hunters Point is a neighborhood where ***severe food access problems*** and related health disparities compete with other equally challenging issues for the attention of residents and their allies. Despite the barriers to success, ***community- and backyard-gardens and schools-based gardening projects have proliferated here.***
- ✓ ***Community building programs*** that enter into the food production arena seem to be effective at maintaining resident investment, and achieving a range of welcome wellness, environmental and social goals. Those programs may grow food less efficiently than programs that make food production a primary objective.
- ✓ Counter to citywide statistics, the neighborhood seems to have ***more available gardening land than gardeners*** who step forward to grow food. Some organizers believe this is due to the relative abundance of unused urban land, a need for awareness-raising with regard to food and nutrition, concerns about soil and air toxicity, and perceptions that the streets and community spaces are not safe.
- ✓ ***Distribution of neighborhood gardens' produce is informal and generally effective***, though fruit tree gleaning remains an underutilized opportunity.
- ✓ Those responding to the food shortage in

This report originated as a presentation to the Southeast Food Access working group (SEFA) in January 2011. It has been revised and expanded after review by community leaders, public health and environmental professionals, and urban agriculture organizers.



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¹ The "early" food production numbers cited above are based on well-known gardens in the neighborhood, and estimates derived from the Quesada Gardens Initiative's tracking of food production in its own gardens. The actual number of gardens, especially backyard gardens, is unknown. Therefore, the statistic is conservative.

Bayview Hunters Point are modeling **a collaborative multi-sector approach** that includes an emphasis on community strength and the value of social cohesion.

- ✓ An ongoing dialogue about **a regional approach to “local” food security** that can also serve social improvement goals has been underway amongst some organizers and experts working in Bayview Hunters Point.

A brief history of food in Bayview Hunters Point

[Bayview Hunters Point](#) is a neighborhood where fresh, healthy food is hard to find, but liquor, fast food, and highly processed food and beverages abound. 58% of BVHP residents surveyed say that they frequently buy their groceries outside of the neighborhood, and 94% say they would actively support new food options in their neighborhood.² Retail leakage from the neighborhood, in the food category alone, is \$38 million annually.³

The history of urban agriculture in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood runs deep. It began centuries ago with the hunting and fishing traditions of the [Muwekma-Ohlone](#) tribes of indigenous people.⁴ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Southeast Sector of San Francisco played a critical role in the city's foodshed. Ocean and Bay fishing, slaughter houses, rail lines, "truck farms," pastures for grazing animals and family farms all proliferated here. Struggling immigrant families raised animals, vegetables and fruit as part of the community's daily life.

The neighborhood's more recent agricultural history includes the origins of SLUG ([San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners](#)), [The Garden Project](#) (founded by Catherine Sneed),⁵ Girls2000 (a project of [Hunters Point Family](#)),⁶ the California Plant Nursery (a project of [Literacy for Environmental Justice](#)),⁷ and the gardens network that is emerging from community building work at the [Quesada Gardens Initiative](#).⁸

For decades, the neighborhood has been home to working class and working poor families, immigrants, communities of color, and other traditionally marginalized groups each with unique preferences with regard to food. Many of these groups have complicated connections to food and food production. For instance, the African American population, the neighborhood's dominant political and cultural force with roots in a migration of job-seekers from the South during WWII, contributes a unique cuisine to the larger community's cultural fabric. It also holds historical experience with farming in the South alongside the massive injustice associated with that experience.

Other groups have unique historical stories in the neighborhood, including Chinese shrimpers and shrimp vendors along the waterfront, and European immigrant families that fished the Bay and farmed open land. Most homeowners made gardening and animal husbandry part of daily life, something that

² [SEFA Food Preferences Survey](#), 2007

³ SF Mayor's Office of Workforce Economic Development

⁴ See [www.Muwekma.org](#)

⁵ See [www.GardenProject.org](#)

⁶ See [www.HuntersPointFamily.org](#)

⁷ See [www.LEJYouth.org](#)

⁸ See [www.QuesadaGardens.org](#)

often included home food processing such as canning and winemaking. Mediterranean plum trees are common in Bayview Hunters Point, a remnant of the European immigrant experience here.

Open space and food

A rare abundance of urban open space has long attracted the interest of [urban planners and private developers](#). It also attracts social and environmental policymakers and advocates, some of whom are focused on a food-related agenda.

While contemporary agriculture in Bayview Hunters Point pales in comparison with the neighborhood's foodshed history, renewed interest in food production is undeniable and raises important questions. Should community-based food production be coordinated; and, if so, is governance primarily a neighborhood, city or regional responsibility? What is the appropriate role for residents of an underserved community relative to external governmental and food movement stakeholders?

Some residents and organizers in the neighborhood are part of a broader effort to address policy barriers to community and for-profit agriculture, while others express concern about the unintended consequences of food system development originating outside the community. Organizers are often proud of Bayview Hunters Point's models of food production that demonstrate significant social and educational value. Those models that have emerged from community building and organizing approaches seem able to sustain resident involvement and produce strong social networks.

Some community gardens have been created specifically to operate as informal public forums, with food production as a secondary objective. These gardens often merge food production with art, children's play space, block gathering spaces, and other community-defined uses of the land. Decades-old examples of these sorts of hybrid community spaces still exist, and new ones are being developed.

Policymakers and researchers operating in the neighborhood increasingly include "greening" alongside other community development cornerstones such as small business, faith-based institutions, and community-based service providers. Grassroots political advocacy groups are entering the food production arena at a more rapid pace, hoping to make a practical contribution of food and wellness to their constituencies while also advancing their general agendas.

Common types of gardens in Bayview Hunters Point

Most community gardens in Bayview Hunters Point are free and collectively maintained, as opposed to the traditional community garden model which dedicates individual planting beds to specific gardeners who pay for usage. While gardening projects are in need of funding, no one is charged to use available gardening land given free alternatives and residents' inability to pay relative to those living in more affluent neighborhoods.

[Backyard gardens](#) are more important and popular here all the time, a trend that may parallel the broad economic downturn, the global food movement's progress with reshaping cultural norms about food, the efforts of public health institutions working to decrease health disparities through physical activity

and better nutrition, and new programming from environmental institutions geared toward the reduction of carbon emissions generated by transporting food.

Contributing factors to the trend toward backyard gardening in this and other multicultural urban neighborhoods may include unique definitions and experiences of "community." If more marginalized populations living in high-crime areas have more tenuous connections to public spaces, we would expect many residents of Bayview Hunters Point to consider their own yard to be their primary community space, the place where they feel comfortable and safe congregating with family and friends.

Some residents consider the physical parameters of their "community" to include neighbors and block-level associations. They often do not feel safe and connected to the commercial districts and corridors available to them. This is especially true when residents experience barriers to social connection such as language and cultural difference, country of origin or citizenship status, and the socioeconomic inequity associated with class, race, or gender identity.

Schools-based and after school hour program gardens have proliferated in the neighborhood as "seed to plate" demonstration projects for Bayview Hunters Point schools such as Malcolm X Academy, Willie Brown Jr. Academy, Bret Harte Elementary School, Charles Drew Elementary School, and Willie Mays Boys and Girls Club. These programs, which sometimes fill gaps left by dwindling science and physical education programming, are suffering from eliminated public funding that once had been at a higher level in California than in any other state.

[San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance](#)⁹ and other groups exist to keep these "living classrooms" alive. Recently, youth from the organization known as [POWER](#)¹⁰ contributed to persuading the San Francisco School Board to support the "Schools as Community Assets" proposal which helps contextualize school gardens as sites for community building.

Produce distribution

Distribution of food from community and backyard gardens in the neighborhood is informal, and seems to be working well. Project leaders are usually consulted about harvesting food, and it is tacitly understood that residents who are doing most of the work to grow the food make most of the decisions about who gets it. Poverty and hunger are factored informally, as residents know one another, eliminating embarrassing questions.

Theft¹¹ of produce is remarkably minimal. In completely open gardens on the 1700 block of Quesada Avenue (the first in the Quesada Gardens network), it is more likely that a plant will go to seed than that someone will take the produce without asking. An informal produce swap site was recently established on Quesada, and bags of produce often end up on neighbors' doorsteps along with a handwritten note.

⁹ See www.SFGreenSchools.org

¹⁰ See www.PeopleOrganized.org

¹¹ There have been reports of theft and vandalism of garden equipment, including a damaged greenhouse at a garden near a public housing project and theft of copper irrigation fixtures at the Quesada Garden in the heart of the neighborhood.

Fruit harvesting is less consistent, and has generated advocacy for fruit gleaning programs. The neighborhood has many well-established fruit trees, usually in backyards. Some go untended due to the age of the homeowners. A community asset mapping project recently has been undertaken by the Quesada Gardens Initiative, and includes locating and recording fruit trees. A citywide fruit gleaning program is emerging from the [SF Department of the Environment](#), and is linked to the hyper-local effort.

SF Department of the Environment in partnership with Hunters Point Family joined with urban agriculture allies, local food advocates and others to bring a farmers' market to the commercial district of Bayview Hunters Point. After five years, the market had not reached its goal of being financially self-sustaining, and the project was brought to an end. Hunters Point Family, which saw the market as an opportunity to connect its service population and [Double Rock Community Garden](#) with workforce skills, felt the market was a success as a social program.

Commercial urban agriculture and hybrid social ventures¹²

A for-profit restaurant recently partnered with a community development nonprofit and Hunters Point Family to create a pocket garden along the neighborhood's commercial corridor. Radio Africa intends to grow ingredients for a restaurant expected to open nearby. The [SF Housing Development Corporation](#), which purchased the real estate for future development, wanted active usage and maintenance of the area.

In a similar social venture, [Old Skool Café](#), an organization focused on helping at risk youth through food-related job training, partnered with the nonprofit Quesada Gardens Initiative to build a kitchen garden for raising ingredients for Old Skool's programming. Service-learning students at the University of San Francisco played a central role in designing and constructing the hillside garden. Old Skool recently introduced a food product for sale at a profit to raise funds.

A new partnership is emerging that joins restaurateur Michael Mina with Hunters Point Family and others to grow food for Mina's business locally while supporting workforce development needs.

Emerging entrepreneurs, some working with community-based economic development organizations, recognize the profit potential of local food production, and are developing food products more often now than before. Honey, bundled herbs, teas and wine are examples. Business and health codes are often a barrier for these entrepreneurs, as they are in other neighborhoods. Another barrier, more unique to Bayview Hunters Point, is the lack of retail operations where testing and marketing of those products can be done.

Gardens as community communications systems

Gardening projects can serve as effective entry points for external organizations to disseminate their messages, and operate as community *grapevines* for information. Many social change agents in Bayview Hunters Point grapple with a history of residents' disappointment with external institutions and

¹² Important work to study the financial sustainability of raising food in San Francisco's urban neighborhoods is underway. The [San Francisco Urban Agriculture Alliance](#) has taken the lead on research and policy advocacy with regard to commercial urban agriculture (CSA's, value-added products, etc.) and the barriers to these food production approaches. The collaboration has proactively reached out to community groups in Bayview Hunters Point.

movements. Community building project leaders in Bayview Hunters Point are learning how to balance the opportunity for education and movement-building against the risk of undermining multicultural consensus and local resident investment in their projects.

Quantifying Bayview Hunters Point's food production

The Quesada Gardens Initiative's community asset mapping project will be a feature on the Bayview Footprints Network of Community Building Groups' [online resource hub and community portal](#). Participants hope that the project will clarify the neighborhood's food production picture, connect potential gardeners and fruit gleaners with opportunities, and model hyper-local interactive online interfaces that connect to citywide data and mapping systems.¹³

Volunteers are in an early stage of recording community-, school-, and backyard-gardens and fruit trees, open spaces, cultural and social history landmarks, and other places of importance to the wellness of a community. The Food Guardians is partnering to lead the collection of food access data, especially healthy food retailers. Ultimately, all asset map users will be able to enter information from handheld devices so the broader community can maintain and expand the data.

Policy and practice implications

Bayview Hunters Point is a neighborhood challenged by severe environmental, health, social and economic issues. It is also home for a populace that represents the best in diversity and community spirit. As in other urban centers across the country, population density and ethnic diversity are increasing, while class diversity is decreasing in the wake of a rising cost of living and weakening social safety net.

Efforts that serve a diverse population may retain low to moderate income families, and responses to the food crisis may be emerging at the interface of urban agriculture and community building. For instance, SEFA ([Southeast Food Access](#)) is Bayview Hunters Point's coalition of governmental, business, and community allies focused on improving access to healthy food in the neighborhood.¹⁴ Its mission includes supporting urban agriculture, healthy food retail, and nutrition education. Community building and the importance of social cohesion to the collaboration's objectives has become a common topic.

A public health community workers or "promotoras" project called "Food Guardians"¹⁵ emerged from SEFA to bolster nutrition awareness and food access advocacy in the neighborhood. Allied groups have hosted the Food Guardians at their projects. [Bayview Footprints Local News](#), a project of the Quesada

¹³ As a policy and practice matter, the Quesada Gardens Initiative advocates for prioritizing the most local online tools available, building the capacity and brand awareness of those tools within the local user community, and using underlying technology that can be synced with online mapping and data systems intended to serve a wider audience so that those centralized systems benefit from the locally collected data.

¹⁴ SEFA is a working group of the San Francisco Mayor's public health program [Shape Up San Francisco](#) to improve physical activity and nutrition throughout the city. It is staffed by the SF Department of Public Health, fiscally-sponsored by the [BVHP Foundation for Community Improvement](#), funded in part by the SF Department of the Environment, and co-chaired by Michael Janis/SF Wholesale Product Market and Jacob Moody/BVHP Foundation. Many community groups and residents are active participants.

¹⁵ Food Guardians is coordinated by the SF Department of Public Health which supplies majority funding.

Gardens Initiative and similar community building groups, is promoting [Food Guardians](#) with space in its news vehicle for updates about the *status of food access*.

Other innovations and new work associated with food production in Bayview Hunters Point include the testing of [community building approaches](#) that hold developing social cohesion as the primary goal, and improving systems (from food to energy) as a secondary goal. Community building incorporates principles of grassroots community development, asset-based processes, consensus decision-making, resident leadership and other components of "bottom-up" social change.

Regional food production and urban soil toxicity concerns

Some organizers in Bayview Hunters Point believe that a new systemic approach to regional food production and distribution could alleviate urban land use competition, work to the advantage of many programs in the neighborhood, and reduce food safety risks associated with urban food production. Larger tracts of land outside San Francisco's borders can accommodate farming equipment, offer other economies of scale, and open a door for more sweeping social programming than is possible with the many tenuously connected hyper-local projects that make up the inner-city urban agriculture system.

Whether or not it is more efficient, food production in a metropolitan foodshed's extremities may be safer than growing food in soil that has been exposed to a city's toxins.¹⁶ The Garden Project moved its food production to the San Bruno Prison, just outside of San Francisco, where incarcerated youth are trained in farming. The move emerged from project leadership's concerns that health issues they experienced were associated with environmental toxicity, both airborne and soil-based, at their previous site in Bayview.

Until recently, soil testing in Bayview Hunters Point gardens had been limited to tests for nutrients and the presence of lead, except for one more extensive test for petroleum-based and other pollutants. Those tests indicate the soil is safe. Nonetheless, raised beds, new soil, consistent mulching, and soil toxicity remediation methods are becoming more common in the neighborhood. Early findings from a new study¹⁷ of Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood soil, a study that tested for sixteen metals including lead, suggests that soil is safer than many people believe. That report is being finalized.

Concerns persist with regard to food grown in urban settings such as Bayview Hunters Point and, as one local expert pointed out, at the White House.¹⁸ Those concerns are especially dramatic given that Bayview Hunters Point is a neighborhood famous for environmental injustice and related health

¹⁶ The validity of concerns about soil toxicity in urban spaces relative to suburban or rural land is not established. Some local experts argue that food grown in rural areas could be subject to toxins urban "farms" are relatively free from; and one local researcher points out that polluting industries moved to rural areas when environmental laws came into effect, and continue to dump into the ground without much, if any oversight.

¹⁷ Jennifer Gorospe, Graduate Student & Assistant to the Director of Sustainability at San Jose State University. <https://sites.google.com/site/healthygardeners/>

¹⁸ <http://motherjones.com/blue-marble/2009/06/did-sludge-lace-obamas-veggie-garden-lead>

disparities.¹⁹ One thing it seems most neighborhood residents and experts agree about is that ongoing and rigorous soil-testing is critical so that more plentiful healthy foods become available without adding unnecessary health risks to an already burdened population.

Others believe that it is more realistic to create urban agriculture policy changes at the city level given that there is clearer process pathway, and that the city is home to responsive governmental players and food activists. Some city officials see the social networks and physical assets associated with food production in neighborhoods as a disaster preparedness opportunity, and that city government should have some agency over it all. They point out that, in an emergency, hyper-local food and water sources as well as the ability to communicate informally would become critical.

Those envisioning a more regional approach see the proliferation of green workforce development, prisoner rehabilitation and reentry and other programming within the larger metropolitan foodshed, while hyper-local projects play the critical role of food distribution within vulnerable communities. They suggest that that approach would alleviate competition for smaller noncontiguous pieces of urban land that have potential for alternative socially and environmentally beneficial uses.

Just the beginning

Urban agriculture in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood is nascent at best, but shows indicators of growth and potential. There is reason to be hopeful that much more food can be produced here, and that food can be produced in a way that supports the community's interest in defining itself, protecting its diversity, and putting its stakeholders in leadership.

The urban agriculture experience in the neighborhood and the collective wisdom emerging from it are as unique as the neighborhood itself. It is already contributing to food security and justice in the neighborhood, and may serve policy and practice developments beyond Bayview Hunters Point's borders.

Acknowledgements

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Listing of Community- and Backyard-Gardens

BVHP community- and backyard-gardens are in various states of development. Some are more productive than others. Many other gardens, especially backyard gardens, are not yet listed. This list is of gardens known to the Quesada Gardens Initiative, and part of a community asset map project. Corrections and additional listings are very much invited. (info@quesadagardens.org)

¹⁹ The neighborhood is home to a federally-designated "Super Fund" site where radioactive waste from the Navy's shipbuilding at Hunters Point Shipyard remains buried.

Project Name	Location	Leader	Affiliated Organization
Adam Rogers	Oakdale/Ingalls	Simmons	HPF
All Hallows Church	Palou/Newhall	Carter	AHC
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Keith	Apostol	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	de Vera	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	Ross	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Third	Betcher	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Third	Pettus	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	Jordan	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	Aisenfeld	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	Bliss	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	Dumlao	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	Galante-Tarket	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Third	Harrison	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Quesada/Newhall	New residents	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Palou	Smith	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Latona	Carter	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Latona	Walls	QGI
Baybloom Backyard Garden	Palou/Phelps	Shu	QGI
Bayview Mission	Jerrold	Pickerrell	BM
Bret Harte	Gilman/Hawes		SFUSD
Candlestick Point	Carroll/Fitch	Molina	
Charles Drew Elementary School	Thornton/Pomona	Brown	SFUSD
Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church	Third/Paul	Cody/Warren	QGI
Double Rock/Alice Griffith	Griffith/Fitzgerald	Ms. Jackie	HPF
Hunters Point Head Start		Helwig	SFCC
India Basin	Earl/Innes	Hamman	IBNA
Malcolm X Academy		Blanton	SFUSD
Northridge Housing Community Garden	Northridge Dr.	Lee	POWER
Old Skool Café Kitchen Garden	Key	Woods	QGI
QGI/Bridgeview	Bridgeview/Newhall	McClure	QGI
QGI/Key-Old Skool	Key at park entrance	Goines	QGI
QGI/Krispy Korner	Crisp/Schafter/Palou	Footeran	QGI
QGI/Latona	Latona/Thornton	Collins	QGI
QGI/Palou	Palou/Phelps	Waddling	QGI
QGI/Quesada	1700 Quesada	Betcher	QGI
QGI/Williams	Williams/Diana	Perry	QGI
Roots Garden	Third/Palou/Mendell		SFHDC/HPF
Whitney Young Garden	Whitney Young Circle		CDC
Willie Mays Boys & Girls	Kiska	Looper	KidsClub