



# Black Farming in LA

The Urban Farm Network

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*“The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops,  
but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.”*  
Masanobu Fukuoka<sup>1</sup> (1913 –2008), Agricultural Scientist, Author

A visit to West 60<sup>th</sup> Street in South Central LA will reveal a world where past and present meet to build a better future. Quiet and tree-lined in the midst of urban sprawl, West 60<sup>th</sup> Street is home to the Urban Farm Network (UFN), a WE CAN Foundation project, dedicated to reviving traditional horticultural and agricultural practices, by encouraging residents to: transform grassy lawns into home gardens; replace ornamental trees and shrubs with edibles; install backyard orchards; raise chickens; and generally reinstitute local food production within their community.

Recognizing that we no longer have the luxury of unending abundance (nor, illusions of domination over Nature), UFN programs develop and support reasonable, sustainable 21<sup>st</sup> century land-use policies in a era wherein climate change, population growth, pollution, drought, and oil depletion require us to re-think, re-create, and re-organize how we relate to the earth. The UFN goal is to create *urban food forest* environments that *transform* and *invigorate* local neighborhoods, one-by-one, by tying them into natural ecosystems that are beneficial and productive for those who live there and the greater society. UFN programs work within the micro, following an “Each one reach one, each one teach one” philosophy and engage people in recreating their environments individually; so that, in turn, each may reach out to family and friends to show them how to transform their environments—furthering a course of re-creating, cultivating and perfecting ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *Fukuoka Masanobu*—a Japanese farmer and philosopher celebrated for his natural farming and re-vegetation of desert lands. He was a proponent of no-till, no-herbicide grain-cultivation methods traditional to many indigenous cultures, from which he created a specific way of farming, commonly referred to as "Natural Farming" or "Do-nothing Farming."

*"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."*

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1726), Physicist, Mathematician, Astronomer, Natural Philosopher, Alchemist, Theologian

On any day, for over sixty years, the tiny hatted figure of Nell Winifred Washington could be seen darting up and down West 60<sup>th</sup> Street, going from home to home planting seeds, sharing flowers, sweeping curbsides, and generally spreading love and fellowship throughout the entire block. Tirelessly involved in education and social issues, Nell Washington was one of the original founders of WE CAN Foundation, and her lifelong commitments to nurturing plants, children and the earth inspired the Urban Farm Network program; upon her shoulders, UFN stands.

WE CAN launched its Urban Farm Network in 2009 to: promote sane, sustainable 21st century land-use policies for inner-city communities; create *urban food forest* environments; and provide *information, resources, and distribution* opportunities to transform local neighborhoods into networks of micro-urban farms. Collateral goals include promotion of conservation and water-shedding tactics to establish beneficial natural ecosystems within urban neighborhoods; and training and education to enable local residents, especially youth, to become involved in urban agriculture and backyard food production.

Today, UFN membership consists of over 150 South Los Angeles households that partake of free distributions of hundreds of potato pots and tubers (red, Irish red, golden, blue, white); thousands of garlic bulbs; herb seeds (sage, thyme, marjoram, cilantro, parsley, basil); vegetable seeds and cuttings; Three-Sisters combination seed packs (corn, tomatoes, squash); banana plants; and hundreds of tulip bulbs and wildflower seed varieties. In partnership with *Tree People of Los Angeles*, UFN's *An Orchard in Every Back Yard* project helped the planting of over 250 fruit trees (lemon, plum, apricot, apple, peach, nectarine, orange) on South Los Angeles home sites. Home gardens are developing (with emphasis on perpetuating heritage seeds and strains) as a result of UFN events that feature free how-to workshops, hand-outs, and crop distributions. UFN promotes "super foods" that are beneficial for human nutritional needs, such as celery, yams, greens, beets, garlic, limes, and berries.

UFN's *Research, Development and Demonstration Center* (RDDC) on West 60<sup>th</sup> Street, shows residents how to use permaculture principles and practices to convert front and rear yards into *Micro-farms*. The RDDC promotes *vermiculture* with its *Slithering College*, comprised of four worm "campuses" that freely distribute worm castings and tea for healthy soil. Its *City Chicks* project advocates local egg production and preservation of heirloom breeds. During summers, UFN opens a *Read and Seed* program that engages neighborhood youth for free books, reading/discussion circles, chicken care, and planting pizza/salsa/soul gardens, herbs, and vegetable seeds. The *Urban Rangers* program involves youth 7-18 in urban farm horticulture, urban forestry and conservation activities and trains them to serve as advocates for conservation and environmental protection.

The RDDC serves as host and partner to Root Down LA's *Youth Entrepreneurship* program for students from Jefferson and Hawkins High Schools in South Los Angeles. This USDA-sponsored program provides hands-on workshops in good nutrition, healthy eating, super foods, home gardening, and conservation—critical skills required for survival in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Youth participate in a structured four-week program that combines education and training about nutrition, food preparation, and horticulture with real-time experiences with local food production and conservation at the RDDC farm site and throughout the neighborhood. A *Community Service* component provides opportunities for youth to contribute to transformational efforts, by building and maintaining new home gardens, organizing recycling and composting activities, installing *Paradise Parkways*, and participating in produce distribution projects that increase availability of healthy fresh food locally. Most importantly, this program trains youth how to be healthy eating and good nutrition activists, making them change-agents within their homes, schools and neighborhoods—direct application of the "*Each one reach one; each one teach one*" philosophy.

When Nell Washington departed the planet in 2012, after 98 years of teaching, loving and laughing, she left as her legacy a cadre of individuals dedicated to furthering her commitments to

education and social improvement. WE CAN and Urban Farm Network programs continue her work of caring for children, neighbors and community and thus, her spirit lives on.

*“Man did not weave the Web of Life. He is merely a strand in it.  
Whatever he does to the Web, he does to himself.”*  
Chief Seattle (1780-1866), Ecological Activist

WE CAN *Paradise Parkway* projects advance water conservation, by transforming grassy parking strips—a big problem—into drought-tolerant *micro-parks*. In Los Angeles alone, tens of thousands of acres are dedicated to this most imprudent of all land uses. Until recently, and by law, these narrow strips of land located between sidewalks and streets, were limited to grass turf or concrete. Persistent drought and water restrictions left many to deteriorate into barren, dry, ugly brown patches that earned a well-deserved nickname: “hell strips.”

Maintaining parking strips as green grass is unsound ecologically and violates basic sustainability principles that are 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. Located a distance from homes and bordering public sidewalks, parking strips are: outside the mainstream of homeowner routines, difficult to irrigate, and subject to public intrusions of all kinds, both human and animal. Properly maintained, they consume and waste copious amounts of water, offer limited water retention, and typically involve repeated applications of nitrate fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides that subsequently contaminate natural water supplies and the ocean. Also, they require habitual devotions of time and labor—to little or no avail. On a personal level, this adds time to already over-burdened schedules. On a social level, they cause unending expenditures of public funds—state and federal governments, local municipalities, and school districts—to maintain manicured parking strips adjacent to facilities, through constant irrigation, fertilizing, and mowing.

*Paradise Parkway* projects transform these level stretches of grass into multi-storied patches of natural flora and fauna that meld into a series of *micro-parks*. Utilizing drought-tolerant plants and drip irrigation, these micro-parks of herbs, grasses, small shrubs and flowers create micro-climates that: optimize use of

available land space; build valuable enriched soil; clean and cool the air; regulate humidity; provide shelter for birds, bees and helpful insects; preserve biodiversity; quiet urban bustle; offer beautiful and fragrant pathways; and create neighborhood cohesion, by providing opportunities for people to work together to improve and beautify their communities—a plethora of benefits from small pieces of land!

*“If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.”*  
Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), Political Thinker, Historian

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*, a seminal work that adeptly analyzed and defined the American experience and presented a detailed description of the unique nature of American people. It was de Tocqueville who first identified and coined the term: “individualism,” a word now accepted as representing a core American value. However, de Tocqueville, in his extensive travels throughout the nation, observed and identified another particular trait he considered even more important to the success of the new nation than individualism—American collectivism:

“Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations. . . . not only commercial and manufacturing companies . . . but associations of a thousand other kinds, religious, moral, serious, futile, general or restricted, enormous or diminutive. The Americans make associations to give entertainments, to found seminaries, to build inns, to construct churches, to diffuse books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they found hospitals, prisons, and schools. If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society.”

Through the power of collective action, America has achieved its greatest accomplishments and longest-standing successes. The conflict between individualism and collectivism, so often presented in modern political debates, is, in fact, a false dichotomy. Both are core American

values and both have played and will continue to play important roles in our nation's success. Individualism is an inherent part of the American DNA.

We are descendants of a constantly migrating population that throughout the centuries, voluntarily or involuntarily, separated from family and friends to build new lives in new lands, often alone and forced to depend upon individual strengths and resources. Only those who were good at this survived. Yet, when they got to wherever they were going, they sought like-minded people to accomplish things far greater than that of any one person. Americans intuitively perceive and apply two key universal principals: the power of one and the exponential force of multiplicity. This is the true nature of the American genius that has remained compelling for over two hundred years: *we the people*, plural and singular, combined.

The Urban Agriculture movement spreading across America is another manifestation of this inherent American collectivist nature. On a grassroots level, individuals are determining that current food production and distribution systems are out of balance and unsustainable, and they are making changes in their own lives and backyards to improve the way they eat and live. And, these individuals are reaching out to other like-minded pioneers to form associations that will create a new food paradigm. This is the conceptual spirit that drives UFN work and many other efforts that are springing up throughout Los Angeles and other cities. And, as de Tocqueville observed, as our work of associating together grows, so the equality of our condition will be increased.

*“I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for, I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being. And I saw the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy ... but, anywhere is the center of the world.”*

Black Elk, Oglala Lakota Sioux

The vision of a great American society comes from many sources and many ages. A work in progress, we are ever striving to perfect our philosophies and institutions, constantly challenging traditional precepts to find measures of improvement. The vision of Black Elk is one that seems to express most aptly the purest dream of American democracy—a people in harmony with themselves, with the world, and with the Earth, nurturing and beneficent.

When one enters the world of the American Urban Agriculture movement it seems impossible not to hear the incantations of Black Elk and Chief Seattle in the background and one becomes aware that it is a Rainbow Coalition. You see women and men of every race and age, every economic, educational and social level, all working together towards one common goal. You see respect for Mother Earth and a common philosophy recognizing that everything *is* connected to everything else and that we share a common fate. With acknowledgment of unending connectivity comes an understanding that while current efforts may focus on developing local food production and getting people to eat veggies, there are many greater goals that will be served.

UFN and other urban agriculture projects restore damaged human communities as well damaged ecosystems. The social and economic implications are numerous and the problems and



issues addressed are interrelated. Because we know that everything *is* connected to everything else, it comes as no surprise that a project for getting locally produced, healthy organic foods into inner city communities has many interconnected justifications and ramifications.

***Community Food Security.*** In our modern, oil-sick world, the energy costs of food production are enormous: global food transportation; oil use for petrochemical fertilizers and pesticides; and petroleum use in food processing, preservatives, and packaging all expend massive amounts of precious fossil fuel resources. Industrial agriculture carries serious environmental threats through pollution from chemical runoffs and farm waste, poisonings by pesticides, greenhouse-gas emissions from cropland operations, loss of topsoil and soil deterioration.<sup>2</sup> Salmonella contamination of spinach one week or tomatoes the next, followed by pistachios and peanut butter, as we have seen over past years, leave our population vulnerable to sickness and death. Disease and pollution can occur accidentally or can be induced by terrorist attack with devastating impact across many states simultaneously. Local and regional natural disasters can create problems for food supply.

- *Centralization is food insecure. Decentralization is food secure.*

***Health.*** UFN projects address the challenge of achieving good health through nutrition and exercise, a universal prescription, but one with very little opportunity to be obtained in low-income, inner-city communities. Good health is at the heart of a triangle whose three sides are *access* to whole genuine food, regular physical exertion/exercise, and genetic pre-disposition. The elements of good food and exercise are a synergy that has been at work on our planet since humans first evolved. As Hippocrates advised famously: “Let your food be your medicine.” Sadly, we have come a long way from those times when we received daily high potency doses of vitamins, minerals, enzymes, amino acids, and anti-oxidants through the foods we consumed.

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<sup>2</sup> Van Jones, *The Green Collar Economy* (2008), p 125-128.

- *UFN works to harness the synergies of good nutrition and exercise on a local re-producible scale.*

***Fighting “Food Deserts.”*** Access to good food depends on many factors. In spite of the exorbitantly high economic and social costs of food production, unconscionable hunger exists in our nation today. As reported by World Hunger Education Service in 2010, 17.2 million households, 14.5 percent of households (approximately one in seven), were food insecure, the highest number ever recorded in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

In many low-income, under-served communities, the most easily obtained “foods” are available at corner liquor stores; alas, avoiding starvation is not the same as eating healthy. Access to good food is about *choice, price and convenience*. “Food deserts,” where access to low-cost, fresh foods is absent perilously, are common phenomena in low-income communities, where inner-city youth have higher incidences of obesity and diabetes, along with infant mortality rates rivaling third world countries. Consequently, medical costs to treat diet-related ailments, like diabetes and heart disease, are running into billions. There are far fewer supermarkets and much less fresh produce in these communities. At the same time, California studies have shown that first-generation Mexican-American communities, with many small markets offering fresh vegetables and a high use of onions, garlic and tomatoes, have markedly lower rates of heart attacks and diabetes, while individuals enjoy increased longevity.

- *Easy access to fresh local food is critical for reviving traditional healthy eating patterns.*

***Rethinking Food as Filler:*** Ignorance of food qualities (such as differentiating “real” from “refined with additives”) once led a past American Vice-President (infamously) to call tomato ketchup a vegetable! In America and Europe, food is eaten as entertainment, while in most other countries food is eaten as a necessity. In poor urban communities, with many teenage parents, food

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<sup>3</sup> World Hunger Education Service, *Hunger in America: 2012 United States Hunger and Poverty Facts*

is eaten “on the fly” as a series of packaged snacks, sugary and salty substitutes that induce attention deficit disorders in children, as well as diabetes and obesity. Centralized food production has led to a disconnection between *consumption* and *function* of food. Too many people don’t know the taste of real food because their taste buds have been corrupted by a constant diet of sugar, salt and fat. This is one of the greatest challenges facing the good food movement: getting people to change their eating habits. An equal challenge is persuading them to invest the extra time and energy required to prepare fresh wholesome food.

- *Easy access to fresh local food is critical for retraining American palates and developing new food habits.*

***Redirecting Genetic Pre-Dispositions.*** The triangle of good health has two sides easily recognized—food and exercise. The third more obscure side, genetic pre-disposition, is affected over the long term on a population by the choices they make collectively. These choices are geopolitical in nature and may take centuries to be fully understood. Take, for example, two degenerative diseases of the last three hundred years: diabetes and gout, which virtually did not exist until the slave trade gained momentum in the 1500s. Humans did not come into contact with sugar on a mass scale until the Golden Triangle of the slave trade allowed even the poorest common man access. In middle age times, and millennia before, peasants used honey for sweetener, which was the only choice, unless you were a nobleman and very wealthy. After the start of the Golden Triangle, sugar became one of the most common and cheapest false foods available *en masse*. Sugar was the first of the many white refined powders that have wreaked havoc on our civilization.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> William Duffy, *Sugar Blues*, (Grand Central Publishing 1993).

The Golden Triangle brought economic prosperity to both America and Europe *and* the propensity for diseases like diabetes and gout, both results of nutritional damage to inner organs that control insulin (pancreas, liver and complications of the thyroid gland). Hormone imbalances and other degenerative diseases are direct results of improper diets, rich in high fructose corn syrup calories, with no vegetables to act as natural body cleansers. As the famous case against the murderer of San Francisco's Harvey Milk demonstrated with his "Twinkie" defense, sugar treats and candy bars can create a dangerous combination of temporarily elevated blood sugar highs leading to irritable, unstable blood sugar lows. Foods high in added sugar and/or salt content, such as fast food, refined foods and "invented" food, do not support nutrition, health or even proper brain functioning. Even worse, they are highly addictive in nature, with recent studies showing that fat sugar and salt follow the same neurological pathways to the brain as do hard narcotics.<sup>5</sup> In marketing strategies, the American food industry even refers to the public not as *customers* but rather as *heavy users*.<sup>6</sup> What kind of cancers and other human diseases are we creating with the food our children eat today—rampant with un-natural processing, full of genetic engineering, GMOs, preservatives, additives, growth hormones, pesticides, fertilizers, sewer-sludge, and how many other unknown horrors—all supplied in conjunction with rampant loss of basic human knowledge of planting and growing?

- *Decentralized local production provides meaningful alternatives to the ravages of genetic misdirection.*

***Conservation. Conservation. Conservation.*** When you live in a desert, along with nine million other people, in a time of global warming, the fact that your water source relies upon a thin

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat, How the Food Giants Hooked Us* (Random House 2013).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

ribbon of concrete traveling hundreds of miles from a distant point in the north, should be an issue of major concern for all. Every effort to provide conversions to drip and low-water irrigation systems should be embraced and replicated as quickly as possible. Water-guzzling ornamental landscapes must be replaced with functional food forestry environments that help fight drought conditions. Garden and kitchen refuse should be composted into valuable, life-generating soil, reducing waste and disposal costs. Hard, non-porous concrete should be replaced with mounds of earth and cisterns. The countless miles of green parking strips that stand in front of urban homes waste millions of gallons of water each year: a dull and monochromatic answer to the landscaping challenges of our environment, one that is far different from the rainy, verdant English countryside that spawned the concept of grass lawns on the great estates of wealthy, landed gentry (demonstrating that their wealth precluded a need to till their lands). In Los Angeles, we need to wake up—we live on a dry alluvial plain.

- *New solutions are required for landscaping master plans to conserve water and minimize consumption.*

***Local Economic Development.*** In this age of monetary stress and tribulation, alternative economic modalities is a subject on everyone's mind; paramount in most households is finding new ways to make money from what is available. With an ever-expanding loss of traditional jobs and industries, we must find new ways to expand the economic bases of inner-city communities. We must be creative, innovative, and understanding that we cannot live in the twenty-first century by using twentieth century skill sets, expectations, and standards. There are imperatives before us: reorganize on smaller neighborhood scales; involve people who live closest to the problem; and enjoin all community members to develop new viable human habitats that do not

rely upon human exploitation for functionality, either as worker/producers or consumers.

- *Decentralized local food production is good business sense.*

*“Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of Grace, a Soul generated by Love.”*

*Excerpted from “The Drum Major Instinct”*

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968), Clergyman, Activist

Americans have always marched to their own unique drumbeat—a constantly changing cadence, modulated through the ages to reflect the dreams and aspirations of the current generation. The most enduring of these beats always begin at the grassroots level with a compelling throb of conscience and ideas that resonate to the very core of the American soul, demanding movement. The urban agriculture beat that is rising today is a syncopated rhythm echoing natural harmonies; a clear and undeniable call to restore balance and sustainability, and revive traditional food systems to better serve individuals, families, and communities. WE CAN's Urban Farm Network is part of the response to this call for change. Our service is to inform and inspire others to hear this new beat and join in the progression to a greener and healthier future.