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Growing Up in Public

Community gardens teach, provide and spring up in the strangest places

By Clark Wolf



Home grown: Community gardens help people flourish.

Splitting his time between Guerneville and Manhattan, acclaimed consultant Clark Wolf graces these pages with the occasional diatribe of the periodic local.

"Don't wash those strawberries," says Nancy Skall of Middleton Farm on Westside Road. "They haven't been touched by anything but my foreman Sam's hands and the warm Sonoma sunshine."

Wise words in a land of plenty that takes plenty of hard work. Wild fennel by the roadside, raging berry brambles, even some of the grapes are indigenous. We are truly gifted with luscious soil--the upside of winter floods that overflow those banks and blanket the region with freshened, fertile ground. But not every garden is a private jewel of a farm like Nancy's. Some are so life-changingly public that they deserve to be celebrated. Here in western Sonoma County, we have many more than we realize, more than we acknowledge, more to discover and preserve.

Community gardens come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, in surprising nooks and crannies. You may have heard a little something about one long tended in a vacant lot down in L.A., now more valuable and so in developers' cross hairs, that sported a mighty oak bearing strange fruit (OK, Daryl Hannah without makeup). Eventually, the splashy actress had to climb down and wander away. Public-domain debates aside, this was private property on temporary loan to a neighborhood hungry for dirt to dig and fresh wholesome food for its inner city kids.

Right in our own front yard, we're just about to say goodbye to another golden plot, this one in Rohnert Park. The particular couple of acres in question have been ripe with produce and, alas, real estate possibilities since it was first shared in the mid-'80s by the city's school district that owns it. Now budgets require a cash-out, and so buckets of soil, tomato plants and melon vines are on the move, looking for a new home.

Teaching gardens located right on main school grounds may fair better. Out behind the sports field at the Guerneville School, near the Russian River, there's plenty of sweet space, way too far from the road to be an appealing land grab. Some talk of yet more sporting fields gave way --with the aid of donations and a grant--to a truly lovely teaching garden for all of the kids, K through eighth grade. It's right on the crest of wetlands and grasslands, trailing up to redwood groves and glorious forests. What a place to learn where zucchini comes from!

On a smaller scale, the charming little Monte Rio School has a sweet corner garden at the edge of a crescent of redwoods. There's a tended pond and a stone bench for sitting contemplation. The kids harvest their treasures and add it to goods from local farms for their monthly luncheon "salad bar." Like the Guerneville School, this effort is made largely possible by a grant, this one run by an intent, fallen-away school teacher who has preserved her love of kids and gardening. Jane Harris presides over her westward earthly plot; Ruth Roberson commands hers at the Guerneville School.

One of the best and first well-known and highly productive garden spots in the region is just off Main Street in Forestville. For those who don't yet know, Food for Thought is a grass-roots food bank started in 1988 to help feed people with AIDS, way back when it was still a frighteningly taboo topic. Not content to just protest or toss glamorous A-list fundraisers, these folks got down and dirty, and the result was a big bucket of tomatoes and squash. Today they feed some 500 clients and act as inspiration to us all.

One special confluence of efforts is Tierra Vegetables, with its farm stand at the edge of a nearby urban garden, just east of Highway 101 off Airport Boulevard. Planted on Sonoma

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County Open Space District land, it's another sort of community crisscross.

Another beloved teaching idyll is run by the folks at the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center. (It was they who helped plant that Forestville Food for Thought garden in their spare time.) The OAEC's School Garden Program has trained nearly a hundred schools and three times that many individuals all over Sonoma, Alameda, San Francisco and Marin counties and other points NorCal.

This is a group of biologists, artists, activists, educators and horticulturalists. (No wonder I made fun of another erstwhile institution when they anointed a "curator of gardens." Puhleeze, get me a farmer or some other down-to-the-earth type.) Their Mother Garden--now *there's* a title--"has been a resource and inspiration to gardeners, teachers, healers and activists throughout the world," to quote their otherwise generally unassuming materials. Can't help but agree.

Back in Monte Rio, a sweet village I think of as the crossroads of the Russian River resort area, there's a garden we found struggling to peak through the high spring grasses. Our New Year's flood swept much of it away and crushed the rest with dross and sludge. We expected it to be soaked with toxins and made unsafe for at least one full season. Special herbs, flowers and leafy plants known for their ability to draw the poisons from the earth were planned but they turned out to be unnecessary. Even so, it's been an uphill battle to rebuild and replenish.

That's why I admit to getting cranky when I see so-called news photos of adults juggling heirloom apples. Food is fun and sexy and delicious and precious and transcendent and humble and--well, critical to our existence. If we're reduced to juggling it, we're screwed.

Oh, the glories of harvest time on this slice of our weary earth that Luther Burbank was once quoted about saying, "I firmly believe from what I have seen, that this is the chosen place of all the earth, as far as nature is concerned." Now *that's* tasty.

Clark Wolf is the president of the Clark Wolf Company, specializing in food, restaurant and hospitality consulting. He moderates the "NYU Critical Topics Series: Wining and Dining in Las Vegas" panel discussion, book signing and reception on Saturday, Sept. 16, at COPIA, 500 First St., Napa. 2:30pm. \$15-\$25; free to students with ID. 707.259.1600.

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Community Gardens You Can Visit

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Middleton Farm 2651 Westside Rd., Healdsburg, CA. 707.433.4755.
 Food for Thought 6550 Railroad Ave., Forestville, CA. 707.887.1647.
 Tierra Vegetables farm stand Located at Airport Blvd. and Hwy. 101 (between Hwy. 101 & Fulton Rd.), Santa Rosa CA. 707.837.8366.
 Occidental Arts and Ecology Center 15290 Coleman Valley Rd., Occidental, CA. 707.874.1557.

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