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A Garden Grows a Community

Laura Lawson

The BYA Community Garden Patch started as a modest idea, a small piece of land where children could grow food for their families and older youth could raise produce for sale. But this half-acre, abandoned railroad right-of-way has become much more — a place that provides physical resources and community services that help a diverse, working-class neighborhood sustain itself.

Berkeley Youth Alternatives (BYA), whose programs serve at-risk youth and their families in West Berkeley, started the Garden Patch in 1993. Teens, their parents, their neighbors, BYA board members and city officials planned the Garden Patch — which includes a children's garden, demonstration garden, outdoor classroom, compost area and entrepreneurial youth garden — in bilingual design workshops.

The site design reflects the interaction of several goals: establishing a productive garden, providing social spaces and educational opportunities, and creating a community open space. A “front yard” of flower and herb beds faces the street, placing these visually attractive and highly marketable crops on public view. A bosque of trees not only offers fruit and shade but also creates an outdoor room. A fountain invites children to touch and celebrate water while serving as an irrigation source.

The various settings and activities bring together people who may not



(Above) Densely planted crop beds alternate with raised wood-sided beds that provide seating for physically impaired people.

(Left) Youth gardeners Kenneth Stuart and Dayon Carradine selling produce at local farmers' market.

(Photos courtesy Laura Lawson)

normally interact. Residents who tend the gardens reflect the neighborhood's diverse social and ethnic groups, each bringing different gardening experiences and traditions. For example, one Chinese-American gardener is encouraging the youth entrepreneurial gardeners to grow medicinal herbs.

An organic farmer (Alison Lingane, employed through Americorps, the national service corps) is helping teenagers develop a garden whose produce they can sell at farmers' markets; more teens will be hired to develop value-added products for specialty markets. BYA also employs 10 teens in park landscape maintenance and trains them at the garden. They have become community liaisons and teachers, working with volunteers, gardeners and, especially, younger children.

At the Garden Patch, people of all ages can not only learn organic gardening and composting techniques but also

improve their diets and supplement their household budgets by growing their own food. In the future, classes will demonstrate gardening techniques to improve health, nutrition and household food resources. Already, a good amount of informal learning and self-realization occur at the garden, leading to healthier and happier living conditions for many of the gardeners.

From the beginning, the Garden Patch has been sustainable and self-regulating in a social sense. Community members attend monthly work days and program different spaces. Employed youth are responsible for the garden's health and assist children and community members in gardening and composting. Everyone involved wears several hats — designer, activist, diplomat, laborer, participant. The garden is a thriving, living entity; it moves forward by recognizing needs of the community and continually adapting.