



Las Milpitas:

# GROWING VEGGIES AND FRIENDSHIPS

by Lee Allen

A fertile parcel of land on the Santa Cruz River near Tucson does more than grow food; it brings people from all walks of life together with the common goal of working in a garden and producing delicious, healthy food together.

**T**anned by the Arizona sun, Chris Lowen strolls by wearing his wide-brimmed hat and dusty brogans that have kicked a lot of dirt. The dirt in question comes from a community garden on Tucson's southwest side, an urban farm that teaches neophytes how to grow green thumbs—and their own greens.

"We've got 50 families planting 4x20-foot plots today and 80 square feet of garden will feed a pretty good-sized family," says Lowen. "But it's not just about growing food, it's also about the people connection, the camaraderie, as well. A handful of people in a neighborhood that know how to grow their own greens doesn't build community resilience, but if you have a lot of people who are connected with each other by common interests, they share those skills and work together for food production and other things important to a strong community, like dealing with hunger issues."

Despite living in a land of affluence, hunger issues are prevalent for many people. The latest US Department of Agriculture figures show more than 50 million households described as "food insecure," meaning at times during the year, they were uncertain of having or unable to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all their members. One local survey indicated that 70 per cent of those who use the community farm have monthly incomes of \$2,000 or less.



COMMUNITY  
FOOD BANK  
OF SOUTHERN ARIZONA

## LAS MILPITAS DE COTTONWOOD

Las Milpitas de Cottonwood (Spanish for “Small Garden along Cottonwood Lane”) sits on the banks of the Santa Cruz River, an agricultural oasis that dates back about 4,000 years. The Santa Cruz riverbed meanders across the border, from southern Arizona into northern Mexico, and runs for 184 miles. Perhaps the most important section of that traditionally dry riverbed is the six-acre parcel adjacent to the county jail. That fertile parcel is filled with furrows and seedlings.

“We got started in 2011 in partnership with the Community Food Bank, Pima County, and City High School, and operate with a \$200,000 annual budget under a 15-year renewable lease. We serve a couple of hundred gardeners each year, the ones who actually utilize plot space, but we impact closer to a thousand folks if you multiply by family and friends.”

Open to all who want to adopt a plot, the site is a non-profit community resource offering at-cost supplies and support for residents who want to learn how to grow food for themselves. It’s billed as “a space where leaders in desert food cultivation can learn and neighbors can gather, connect, and share in advocating for a resilient, sustainable local food system.”

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Under a broad mission statement of both helping people become independent and self-sustaining, Lowen says, “We look to build a healthier, resilient community, and we do that by providing a place to garden that brings people together. And we’re making a difference. Nearly 90 per cent of our folks have been able to decrease the size of their grocery bills because of the produce they grow, but, for me, it’s not just about the statistics, it’s the look of satisfaction on people’s faces as people from a variety of backgrounds come together for the same reason.”

Garden materials from seeds and seedlings to compost and irrigation tubing is provided free, at reduced cost, or on a pay-what-you-can basis. Seed packets (a variety of six every six months) come at no cost, as does 50 gallons (¼ cubic yard) of compost. Most veggie plant seedlings (up to 25 plants) are priced at \$1 each, and row cover shade cloth and frost cloth (yes, the desert does get that cold in the winter) are moderately priced. Also available are low-cost cookbooks to help people prepare what they’ve grown and T-shirts that inform the world they grew it and where.

## BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER

The project helps a lot of folks, including partners like the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona and City High School students who, more than a decade ago, got involved with food and farming by tending to some of the garden plots and helping out with general farm chores.





Initially, students and staff planted trees, built water harvesting swales, and grew vegetables and herbs as part of the school's City Works gardening class. "Fond memories," says Lowen. "We started with raw desert—dug all the beds, built the armadas, installed irrigation systems. Although a Rototiller did come into play, we dug most of the beds down to a depth of two feet by hand."

Today, as part of a college preparatory curriculum that promotes hands-on learning experience with direct community engagement, students go to the farm weekly to tend plots and help out with general farm chores.

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"Our Farm Crew is part of our after-school program," says Annie Holub, dean of student life. "We have several students who participate every year, and some have actually been employed by the farm through their internship program. We think of the farm as part of our campus and have brought the whole school there for a retreat to get to know the site. And we meet there once a year during part of our Community Day activities. We've also brought in food from the farm to serve at school lunches and on our Family Night get-togethers. Additionally, we incorporate our studies of food and farming into a variety of subjects ranging from local history to culinary arts."

The food bank's involvement is part of its ongoing effort to increase access to healthy produce while training a new generation of urban farmers through its Youth Farm Project Apprenticeship Program. (A similar program is also underway at a nearby 10-acre plot called Marana Heritage Farm).

Michael McDonald is the food bank's CEO and president, and he brings 30 years of non-profit experience and helping others help themselves to the job. And it's a big one, with over 100 full-time employees and a long list of volunteers working to assist families in need over a nearly 24,000-square-mile area. He says the community garden is important on both fronts—community and garden.

"It provides a space for people to connect with food as they grow it and in the process, builds community where individuals and families connect and share," says McDonald. "It's a life-giving way to make real our overall mission of a healthy and hunger-free community."

McDonald generally wears a suit and tie to work, but he's a believer in the project to the point where he says "I took this morning off from managing spreadsheets to spend some time getting my winter garden bed ready, i.e., dirty hands all the way up to the elbow. (Then), I'll meet with a philanthropist who similarly loves to garden and has done so as a volunteer at Las Milpitas who also provides the farm with a generous donation."

Las Milpitas is an equal opportunity farm with no restrictions on gender, age, or financial status. "There will be challenges in any kind of project in a community made up of a bunch of different folks from different backgrounds, but these things quickly work themselves out. It doesn't matter what walk of life you come from, your background, or the language you speak, that's what's great about this place. It doesn't matter because they're commonality and compatibility here," says McDonald.

## GROWERS YOUNG AND OLD

The youngest gardener title goes to several nearly newborn babies-in-arms who showed up on planting day with parents who carried them around while the seeds got planted. Several of the older gardeners are in their late 70s or early 80s. "For those less physically able, we have one raised bed right now and some recently received donor dollars will allow us to install more raised beds along with pavers from the gate to the plots for wheelchair gardeners," adds McDonald.

Panchita Cruz is one of the first-on-scene crew who has been involved from the very beginning. Although it was all new to her when she showed up to plant her first plot, "I now have another garden at my house and I'm helping my daughter start a school garden," she says. As she planted a variety of greenery (cilantro, kale, chard, broccoli, and spinach), she also installed wire mesh fencing to keep out the desert rodents looking for a free meal. "They are not welcome visitors in my garden," she says.

Another of the garden's veterans is Barbara Becerra, raised in a rural area where her father always maintained a garden and enlisted her help. "I was in charge of killing flies and got paid a penny for every two of the pests I dispatched. I keep coming back because it's good physical, mental, and emotional therapy for me. I take my produce home and share it with other low-income friends," she says.

In an adjacent plot, Lee Ann Lane of Sahuarita regularly tends to her garden even though it takes a half hour drive to get there. "My son is a high school special ed student whose classroom has a site here that they visit twice a week, so as a family, I decided to join him with a garden of my own," she says. "I've planted a colorful array, everything from beets and carrots to herbs and red leaf lettuce."

Nearby, two long-time friends, Italians from back east (Anthony Paashaus from New Jersey, Maria Iannone from Long Island) share a space. Maria got enthused when she became involved in the local library's seed saver program. "This is phenomenal, an amazing project," she says. "And I'm planting anything they'll give us to plant." Anthony, the vegetarian, says he needed to start over because his "home garden is mainly there to feed neighborhood critters."

Although Las Milpitas gets a good share of publicity spotlight, it isn't the only community gardening space in the Tucson community. There are more than 40 other urban agricultural endeavors in town, many of which are affiliated with another non-profit, Community Gardens of Tucson, with more than 600 growers on its participant list.

Growing in desert soil presents its own unique set of challenges in comparison to other parts of the country with fertile loam, but all the community garden sponsors agree that if you plant densely, it's possible to grow over 200 pounds of produce in your plot every year, saving several hundreds of dollars off your grocery bill. However, they all caution: "If you plant zucchini, you need to come to the garden frequently during harvest season because that vegetable matures quickly and produces profusely," as one participant says. In fact, one seasoned gardener commented that the only time of year she locked the doors to her house was in zucchini season so that another gardener's surplus didn't end up in her kitchen. **NY**

