

Urban farmers in Richmond are helping in the fight against food insecurity

By Cameron Nielsen

Farmers prepare the fields for winter in a lot neighboring the industrial metropolis of Richmond, Calif. They harvest the last of the tomatoes and basil and plant broccoli and brussels sprouts. Demand for food has never been higher, but thanks to groups such as Urban Tilth, people in Richmond are continuing to get fresh produce.

As food insecurity racks Richmond's low-income communities, farmers have become one of the residents' saving grace. [Urban Tilth](#), a Richmond-based farm dedicated to providing fresh produce to the local community has been providing almost six times more food since the pandemic began.

After receiving a grant from the USDA's [Farmers to Families](#) initiative, which supports local farms during Covid-19, Urban Tilth now provides local organic food to 190 Richmond families financially impacted by COVID-19.

Urban Tilth is also doing free farm stands with leftover produce twice a week at Northbridge Gate and once a week at the Richmond Greenway. "There's always a line of folks, especially at the Greenway Farmstand. And we're out of produce within an hour," says Doria Robinson, the director of Urban Tilth.

Robinson says that local agriculture is pivotal in a time of crisis, by providing food directly to communities. Instead of food being transported from the farm to the distributor then to a grocery store, local farms are connected directly to the customer.

When people are connected directly to their food supply, she says, it dodges the bottleneck that is created when disruption happens in the distribution chain in a crisis like COVID-19.

Rebecca Newburn, co-founder and coordinator of [Richmond Grows Seed Lending Library](#), which provides free seeds through the Richmond Public Library, agreed.

"Our seed systems are very vulnerable," she said. "We need to be shepherding and supporting our own seeds."

When the Richmond Public Library had to close because of COVID-19 restrictions, her group partnered with 12 community organizations, giving away more than 20,000 packets of seeds.

Normally, the group would have grown these seeds but because of high demand this year, they had to commercially source those seeds, which she prefers not to do because it is not self-sufficient.

In the future, Newburn hopes to show residents how to save their own seeds through a seed stewardship program.

“If you’re a seed saver, you are automatically abundant,” she says, adding that there is a growing interest in community members saving their own seeds, which is essential for creating self-sufficient gardens.

While not everyone has the space to grow their own food, some Richmond residents have found creative solutions.

Andromeda “Andie” Brooks transformed a 14,000-square-foot vacant lot next to her house into an “edible oasis,” providing herself and the community, which is in a food desert, fresh produce.

Reliance on local agriculture in Richmond is becoming more essential as demand and complicated supply chains stress the food bank system.

“We’re serving about a 65 percent increase at every different type of program that we have,” says Cassidie Bates, the Policy and Advocacy Manager at [Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano](#)

Because of the high demand, the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano has had to call in the National Guard to keep up with the food demand.

Long-term Richmond resident Edward Williams, 79, who goes to the food bank every week, says he’s thankful for the help. “Right now, I’m blessed. Maybe I don’t eat the best food, but I’m able to eat something.”

Urban Tilth has partnered with [Growing the Table](#), which buys from local farmers and subsidizes that produce for those in need. Robinson says that this initiative helps to “get more food out to communities that need it without backing up the food banks.”

In the future, Robinson hopes to work directly with food banks to help food-insecure individuals gain access to healthy sustainably grown food.

Bates, however, says there are challenges. “An issue we run into is that all the models that have been proposed run into pre-existing laws and protocols around California health safety standards.”

In the meantime, Robinson will keep doing everything she can to change the way food gets to people that need it the most. “We have to understand that food insecurity is not because there isn’t enough food, there is plenty of food, it’s just that we have chosen as a society not to distribute it in a way where everyone has access to high-quality food.”