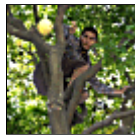


Oakland's fruit doesn't fall far from the tree

Matthew E. Green, Special to The Chronicle

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In the backyard of a house in Oakland's Rockridge neighborhood, seven high school kids balance themselves carefully in the boughs of a robust apple tree, throwing down ripe fruit to a small ground squad.

Once the tree is stripped, the crew weighs the bags and announces the haul: 63 pounds. It's the third and final yard visit of the day, and the group has already gathered more than 150 pounds of ripe apples, oranges and lemons.

In this part of Urban Youth Harvest, a program of the nonprofit People United for a Better Life in Oakland (PUEBLO), teenagers and young adults from neighborhoods in East and West Oakland are hired for the summer to glean fruit from backyard trees, largely in the Dimond, Laurel and Fruitvale neighborhoods, if residents don't have the inclination to do so themselves.

The harvest is donated to low-income senior centers in the neighborhoods in which the youths live. It also goes to local youth and community programs, which sell it at below supermarket cost to residents who often lack access to fresh produce.

In July alone, more than 600 pounds of fruit was gleaned from Oakland yards. Harvests have included grapefruit, limes, apricots, plums, peaches, figs, walnuts, pomegranates and blackberries. Perhaps most striking is that most of the fruit grows year after year with little or no human assistance - and about 99 percent of it is never treated with pesticides.

This year the program hired four youths to pick throughout the summer. On the July day that a reporter tagged along, the crew included members of the West Oakland urban agriculture nonprofit People's Grocery, who help out every few weeks.

"As long as I don't have to touch spiders, I'm cool," says Jennifer Copto, 15, who lives in East Oakland. "I didn't really know that people were growing fruits in Oakland. There are all kinds."

Practice increases

Gleaning, the age-old practice of collecting harvest leftovers, has been adopted by a number of food banks in California and other states feeling the pinch of decreasing donations and growing numbers of hungry people. The Alameda County Community Food Bank provides roughly 250,000 pounds of food to its 300-member agencies throughout the county. It feeds 40,000 people a week and estimates that food requests are up at least 30 percent from last year.

Over the past two years, the food bank has started accepting more donations of fresh local produce, and this year it will distribute roughly seven times the amount it did in 2005, according to its executive director, Suzan Bateson.

Anne Burdett, 24, who coordinates the harvesting program, has spent the summer guiding her crew throughout Oakland while fielding calls from homeowners with more fruit than they know what to do with.

This year, the operation joined Cycles of Change, a local youth bicycle program, and the young harvesters frequently made their rounds on two wheels with attached cargo wagons.

"I had no idea how much fruit there was and how much you can get done with just four or eight kids," Burdett said. "My perspective on food has changed. I didn't realize that one tree could yield 200 pounds of fruit. It gives me a new sense of 'local.' "

Burdett says the biggest challenge can be locating donors, which is mostly done through neighborhood flyers, community events and word of mouth. She hopes there will be enough demand and funding to continue the project throughout the year as an after-school job opportunity.

In collaboration with other Oakland nonprofits, Burdett's small team is surveying residents throughout the city on issues related to healthy food access while also working to create a database of houses that have fruit trees.

The grant-funded project also has plans to collaborate with UC Berkeley students to map out where available produce is located and how much surplus is available each year. A similar undertaking was recently completed in Los Angeles by a group of artists; their maps to publicly accessible fruit trees in the city are available at FallenFruit.org.

From nuisance to nutrition

The map project, which started last year, is the brainchild of PUEBLO Executive Director Rashidah Grinage. Every summer her tree-filled backyard in East Oakland was producing and dropping far more fruit than she could handle, even after she made countless pies, jams and chutneys.

"It's a great service," says Burdett, sampling a just-picked apple. "When you've got hundreds of pounds of fruit falling, it makes a big mess. People call us desperate. ... Residents can't possibly use a lot of it."

Fallen fruit quickly rots, can produce foul smells and attracts insect and animal pests. Some cities have ordinances identifying neglected fruit trees that reach over fences onto the street as a public nuisance.

Grey Kolevzon, co-director of Cycles of Change, was pleasantly surprised by the bounty of the project's summer harvest.

"I'm floored," Kolevzon says. "It makes you think on a citywide scale. ... What can be done in the long-term future to satisfy the needs of Oakland (residents)?"

One of the People's Grocery harvesters, a 17-year-old Oakland resident who goes by the name Virtuous,

says this summer's fruit-picking experience has altered his edible outlook.

"That's what I'm going to tell my kids one day," he says, motioning to the bag of apples. "You hungry? Go pick a piece of fruit from the tree."

To see a video of Urban Youth Harvest in action, go to sfgate.com/homeandgarden.

Local harvests

The success of a harvesting collective on the Peninsula is a good sign for Urban Youth Harvest. Founded in 2001 by a Silicon Valley businesswoman, Village Harvest has more than 200 volunteers who pick 80,000 pounds of fruit each year from the backyards of residents, many of them elderly, in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. Most is donated to soup kitchens.

Another local endeavor, called Forage Oakland: Forage San Francisco, is a blog-based bartering project in which residents exchange backyard produce, posting what's available on the Web.

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