

Eat Fresh, Eat Local: A History of Urban Gardening & Food Education

By Natalie Garza



Monica Pope is an advocate for locally grown foods, which she serves at her restaurant, t'afia.

Photo courtesy of Monica Pope.

There is a movement that places importance on knowing where food comes from for nutritious, environmental, and economic reasons. This trend has taken many forms, such as community gardening, schools gardens, farmers' markets, and even restaurants that support local growers. The UH-Oral History of Houston collects interviews that document this endeavor. Below are excerpts from a few conducted by UH graduate students that provide a glimpse into this growing movement.

Houston Special Gardening Program

In 1976, Arnold Brown became a county extension agent in Harris County under the Houston Special Gardening Program (six cities program) that was created out of Agricultural Extension. The program he ran served an estimated 10,000 families over a twelve year period. Eventually, the six cities program expanded to twenty-two cities. Brown's interview with Leigh Cutler on January 31, 2006, provides an account of Houston urban gardening and farmers' markets that have roots in the 1970s.



Two members sit in the Alabama Community allotment Garden. On the right is Warren Christian, one of the co-founders of the Alabama Garden.

All photos courtesy of Urban Harvest unless otherwise noted.

ARNOLD BROWN [AB]: [There] was a federal program that had been created out of the [1976] Congress by Frederick [W.] Richmond, who was a congressman from New York, and it was to create a community garden program. ... They called it backyard gardening, directed toward urban and minority populations, and there [were] six cities at the time that they made the appropriations to. I was selected to become the director of the project in Houston. ... Houston was the most effective [of the six cities] program ... It was ranked on the basis of change in knowledge and skills and the impact the program had on communities. ...

Gerald Hines, the developer, worked with us on creating a farmers' market in Old Market Square on Fridays ... This was in probably 1988 to 1990. We set up downtown. The agriculture commissioner, John Hightower, set up [weekly] farmers' markets located off of Scott Street just across from the University of Houston, and Cleveland, that allowed not only home gardeners, but producers in the area who grew extra crops and even crops for commercial outlets. It was

set up on Saturday morning from 7:30 to about 11:00. ... That ended because [of the] seasons, and you may have one month of available produce, and then you wouldn't have any.

LEIGH CUTLER [LC]: What was the involvement by government?

AB: [Mickey Leland] was very instrumental in working with the U.S. Congress and ensuring our appropriation was available, ... because some [congressmen] felt like, "Hey, this may be a waste of time, waste of money." ... Mickey Leland and Barbara Jordan [were] very strong advocates, and knew the benefits that it was providing to their constituents.

LC: What about [efforts] of the inner city?

AB: In the Fourth Ward area, ... we set up a large space, and we would design [it so that] everybody would have their own plot in the garden area. I think it's just a sense of pride ... it created a whole new perception of the people's attitude in that community. At that time, the Vietnamese had moved into the complex, and they really understood gardening ... and every unit they lived in, there was a garden in their unit.

LC: Why are people so dedicated to community gardening?

AB: You thought [that] you were just doing a job, [but you're] actually changing the quality of life and it's carrying through generations, and that's a good thing.

Urban Harvest

As urban gardening caught on, it moved from government sponsorship to the formation of local non-profits. Under the Interfaith Ministries Hunger Coalition [formerly Metropolitan Ministries], Dr. Bob Randall assisted with the establishment of community gardens to supply the food pantries. He realized that these early gardens struggled because many people lacked the education of how to grow vegetables, and this idea formed the basis for what would become Urban Harvest. Others involved in founding Urban Harvest included: Suzie Fisher, George McAfee, Jacqueline Batisse, Ellen Mitchell, Mark Cotham, Leonel Castillo, Terry Hershey, and Wendy Kelsey.



Dr. Bob Randall speaks at Alabama Garden with Mark Bowen, current executive director of Urban Harvest (sitting), 2010.

Urban Harvest serves as a resource for community gardens with whatever problems they have, including starting a garden, consulting, education, and support. Leigh Cutler interviewed Bob Randall on December 7, 2005.

BOB RANDALL [BR]: I started working for Urban Harvest the day it was created in May of 1994, [one of the] official founders of the organization. I had been doing similar work at the Interfaith Hunger Coalition, on staff since February of 1988, and I was a volunteer starting the first of March 1987. ...

The main mission of the Interfaith Hunger Coalition was to combat hunger in metro Houston ... It helped start the Houston food bank and the system of food pantries that exist today. In 1986, I think ... the Texas and Houston economy was at its thirty or forty- or fifty-year low, and approximately one million emergency food requests were received in '86 or '87. The efforts [of] food drives [were] falling way short. They had people in need, a lot of children, a lot of elderly. There just simply wasn't enough food.

They went to essentially a desperate measure is what I would call it. They decided they might try to grow food. They knew that ... this was a longer-run strategy of trying to actually produce food for the hungry. But that's only one of several different influences [of gardening in Houston]. A second one is that there was a whole parallel group of people who were concerned about the use of pesticides in synthetic fertilizers, on our habitat and our environment. ... If you go back into the roots of the community gardening movement, they come out of these two different traditions.

LC: Is [the issue of food security] different in Houston?

BR: No, the whole country's got this problem. But [in Houston] it's particularly egregious because we have lots of land, and we have a twelve-month growing season. ... I had begun to see this as a school system problem. We needed to build a school system for learning gardening. In a year's time, my view of what we were doing just totally changed. ...



Children hold up their sweet potato harvest at the Sutton Elementary school garden.

We made a number of interesting accomplishments [with Interfaith Hunger Coalition], and we built the program to something over forty gardens in those seven years, ... [but] we found that we needed to start an independent organization in order to grow and develop, by making the key deci-

sions ourselves, rather than burden Interfaith Ministries. ...

[Urban Harvest is] probably the fourth biggest community garden program in North America in terms of numbers of gardens, and we're probably the largest school gardening program in the world. ... I have said a number of times that it's a human right. You should be able to get educated about what you can do with land so that you can be productive, creative, and sustainable. It may not be as important as learning to read a book, but it's darn close to as important. It should be on the U.N. list somewhere in human rights.

Travis Elementary School Garden

Like Bob Randall, Margaret Blackstone felt passionate about school gardening and began her work at Travis Elementary with a federal grant acquired in 1985. Her experience provides a history of efforts and possibilities within school gardening programs before organizations like Urban Harvest picked up the initiative almost ten years later. Travis Elementary eventually became a member of Urban Harvest and Ms. Blackstone taught courses for the organization. Leigh Cutler interviewed her on February 27, 2006.



Travis Elementary school garden, 2004.

LC: Can you tell me how you started the school garden at Travis Elementary?

MARGARET BLACKSTONE [MB]: To the best of my recollection, I applied in the fall of 1985. ... Travis Elementary was a very small school, and we were looking to integrate curriculum with something outside, and so I just applied for the grant, never thinking we'd get it, and we got it.

LC: What did you do with the food that the kids grew?

MB: Each classroom had its own plot, depending on what they needed in the curriculum. In the fall, my teacher partner and I would go from Hispanic culture into Native Americans into a little study of Thanksgiving, so we would always plant New World plants in the garden: peppers and tomatoes and squash and things like that, that had to do with what the Native Americans ate. ... One time one of our teacher's sons got married, and he married a girl whose father was a cotton farmer, so in the spring, late spring, we planted cotton in the whole garden, and it grew over the summer, and in the fall we picked it, and every child in the



Saturday at the Eastside Farmers' Market.

school spun and wove some thread and wove a little bookmark. At the 500th anniversary of Columbus discovering America, we all planted corn and got up there and boiled corn and stuff. People had pizza gardens; in other words, the ingredients for a pizza.

LC: What sparked this idea [of a school garden] originally for you?

MB: I had gardened my whole life. When I came to the school, I lived in the neighborhood ... and it was a fairly run-down neighborhood that was not going anywhere, and the school was very small ... We didn't have any science lab or anything like that. It was just kind of a way to give kids experiences. ...

At one point, when they were reworking the school, they were going to get rid of the garden. ... A man came that they hired to do some work on the Sparks Park [around 1993 or 1994], which was what we were getting, and we were going to have to move one of the temporary buildings into the garden area ... And when he saw the garden, he just went crazy, and there wasn't any way that they were going to get rid of that garden then. ... He [said] that it was a very European idea. It seems like now there's an explosion [of school gardens].

LC: How did the garden change the school and the students?

MB: I think the garden was a part of that [change] because it was such an important thing to the teachers. If it hadn't been important to them, it would not have lasted. They kept finding new ways to use it and incorporate it into what they were doing. ... I think the garden lifted the school, and the school lifted the garden. It was kind of a mutual thing there, yes. But it was because of the personnel at the school.

Eastside Market

From school gardens to local farmers' markets, urban gardening continues to impact the Bayou City. Pamela Walker helped to organize Houston's Bayou City Farmers Market, now the Eastside Market, for Urban Harvest in 2001 and continued in that position for four years. She has a book titled, *Growing Good Things to Eat in Texas*. Andrew Reiser interviewed her on September 30, 2010.

PAMELA WALKER [PW]: My maternal grandparents were sharecroppers. ... We visited many weekends and I spent a lot of time with them in the summers and holidays and vacations. They always had a vegetable garden. ... I discovered not everyone's grandparents lived in the country, and that they didn't get to bathe in a tin tub on the porch and they couldn't walk to the well for water ... It just had a huge impact on my connection to food. I've always known where food comes from. As an adult, I've always had an organic vegetable garden. I've always had a compost pile. I've always cooked. ...

I organized a small market in Schulenburg in 1999 and 2000 ... About 2001, the Schulenburg market kind of peters out and [the board of] Urban Harvest, which I had been a member of, but never actively involved in, made one of its projects organizing a farmers' market. I was asked to participate in that effort. ... I ended up chairing the market organizing committee and overseeing the initial development of the market.

ANDREW REISER [AR]: Was Houston asking for a farmers' market at the time?

PW: It was my own passion for farmers' markets and local farming and food communities. I think some people in Houston were onto it. But no, it was not like the whole city was clamoring for a farmers' market. I wanted one here because I knew from my travels just how wonderful they were elsewhere. I often thought if only I could have a farmers' market like the Santa Fe farmers' market or the Union Square Green Market. Why can't we have that here?

AR: Where did the book come in?

PW: When we go out of the way to buy from farmers, the kind of stewardship portrayed in my book is what we are supporting. Just to reveal how high the stakes are, what is involved, that if we want real farming and real food to survive in this country, we need to buy from local farmers and help create more of a market or all of our food will come from China, Chile, Argentina, New Zealand, Australia or Monsanto. Those were my main motivations to show pro-

spective growers that yes this is done and to reveal to people who care about what they eat and care about the survival of farming and good stewardship in our area or whatever area it is we live in that is supporting local farmers is really an obligation in my view.

AR: What is next?

PW: We need to work on, how do we get the food of the farmers we have into more varied local markets? Not just farmers' markets, but chefs, restaurants, schools, institutions. ... We need to develop local farm and food communities. We need to go beyond farmers' markets. Dear as they are to my heart.

Monica Pope and t'afia

Monica Pope took on the task set out by Pamela Walker, as a local chef and restaurant owner. The Midtown Farmers' Market ran out of her restaurant t'afia for a number of years. Pope appeared in Bravo's season two of *Top Chef Masters*, and through her role in the foundation, *Recipe for Success*, she participated in the launch of Michelle Obama's initiative to fight childhood obesity called, "Chef's move to schools" at the White House. Both through the farmers' market and her use of locally grown products in her restaurant, Monica Pope has worked to support local growers. Matthew Campbell interviewed her on November 2, 2010.



MATTHEW CAMPBELL [MC]: What is your earliest memory of food?

MONICA POPE [MP]: What I write about is this box that my grandmother would send us — my mother's birthday was in October, we would get maybe something in October, something for the holidays. My grandmother would make kolaches and shishki and that kind of stuff. ... For us being in Houston, it was kind of special ... In some ways, a lot of what I still do around here has some connection to where I came from.

MC: Was [the Midtown Farmers' market] a creation out of the restaurant?

MP: I started in '92 with my first restaurant, the Quilted Toque, and had some idea in my head when I was a teenager that I'm going to come back to Houston and open a restaurant and change the way Houston eats. ... I didn't ever really know what that meant ... "what does it mean for me personally, what does it mean for me professionally, what does it mean to my community?" ...

There was a pivotal moment when Urban Harvest asked

if I would host this thing in my restaurant [Boulevard Bistrot] on a Monday [in 1994 or 1995]. It turned out the first time farmers and growers got together with chefs and then got together with regular people. Literally, the first time this has ever happened in the history of Houston, Texas. That's how they look back on it — "Do you remember that day, Monica?" Well I do, but I didn't realize how significant it was to them, and then to me. I started putting [local growers] on the blackboard and what not. ...

Later I had a farmer come to me and say, "Monica, you know, why can't y'all do the farmers' market inside of t'afia?" ... I'll be darned she got us the certification, and a week after t'afia opened, the Midtown Farmers' Market thing happened. ... I do this local market tasting menu. I was the first person in the city to ever do something like that where you don't just have a chef's tasting menu, you have a local market tasting menu. All this stuff is from the local farmers' market.


MC: Could you define the idea of food sustainability and how you fit in?

MP: In my own sort of bastardized way, every single decision that I've made essentially since I came to t'afia [is about sustainability] ... We filter water ... We recycle everything ourselves and have been for years. Our biodiesels, fryer oil becomes biodiesel. The list goes on, and on, and on. Living wages, this sort of schedule that we have, five nights, you know we do two weeks paid vacation every year, you know we all shut down. That's a big deal. It's a paradigm shift of what is really important. It's important that we come in and worked the best shifts that we can work, we go home, and we have our families. We don't work double, triple jobs. ...

In terms of the plate ... we took a third of the plate off and said, "let's make it more sustainable. Let's do a sustainable portion of six ounces." The biggest portion I have is a bison rib eye that's ten to twelve, by the time it's cooked it's a ten ounce portion. That's not standard out there. I have other chefs go, "well Monica, my customers won't take less than eight ounces, nine, ten ..." and guess what happens — it gets thrown away. ...

I mean it's just a slew of things, but the main thing is just at every juncture you're asking yourself, "is it sustainable?" Because you still have to be a viable company, you have to make money, and be able to stay in business. But every relationship you have, does it work to finish a cycle of waste? Or something that you are producing — does it come back, somehow in a good way?

MC: What are your future plans, for the farmers' market and for t'afia?

MP: To remind people that food should taste really good, it should be really good for us, and it shouldn't be devastating on our environment, it shouldn't be. We should have this beautiful relationship with it ... 

t'afia is located at 3701 Travis St. For more information, menus, and hours, visit www.tafia.com or call 713-524-6922.

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