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## A growing community

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Between the rising prices and the rising incidents of poisoning, food is increasingly causing stomach pains of various kinds for American consumers.



JASON HENRY/ Special To The Sun  
Pavel Gubanikhin pulls weeds and harvests crops at the community garden on NW 31st Avenue on Saturday.

But in several Gainesville neighborhoods, residents with hoes and trowels in hand are taking control over at least some of what they pay for and put in their mouths by growing some of their own groceries.

“We’re hoping to expand the garden because right now we have a waiting list. We don’t have enough plots for everyone who is interested,” said Pavel Gubanikhin of the NE 31st Avenue Organic Community Garden. “We are hoping to get more

kids involved. It’s educational and a lot of fun.”

The 31st Avenue garden is one of five in a program run by the city of Gainesville.

The others are the Grove Street Neighborhood Community Garden on NW 4th Street and 10th Avenue, the McRorie Community Garden at SE 4th Avenue and 6th Terrace, Green Acres in the Sugarfoot neighborhood off Newberry Road and an unnamed garden on Williston Road east of 34th Street.

A few rules exist. For instance, the gardens must be organic and cannot be used to grow anything illegal.

City officials believe the gardens improve public nutrition and the neighborhood environment.

They also increase outdoor recreation, practical education and positive social interaction. Finally, they build community self-reliance and sustainability.

Community gardens are increasingly sprouting throughout the country as food costs rise, contaminated food sickens more people and as food movements gathers steam.

Community gardens are divided into plots that are allocated to gardeners, who typically grow vegetables and herbs.

“The interest really does seem to be growing,” said Vicki Garrett of the American Community Gardening Association. “Community gardening has always been a great resource to people who don’t have fresh food — inner cities and places where grocery stores just

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don't locate. Right now, I think there is a whole lot more economic incentive — groceries are expensive and we have high food prices.”

The consumer price index for all food as of June was 5.3 percent higher than the June 2007 level, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Ann Egan oversees the community gardening program for Gainesville's Nature Operations Division.

She also believes interest is growing, noting that one garden opened recently and that the Porter's neighborhood has requested one.

Gainesville's program was established in the 1990s to bring neighbors together and to provide an area for people to grow food, Egan said.

But Egan added the program could be impacted by the city's budget cuts.

“It is sort of a healthy outdoor recreation as well as community-building,” Egan said. “It is a wonderful program. I hope it continues to grow but based on the fact that we were just slammed with budget cuts — this is not a budgeted program — and we are looking at how we can continue it.”

Maria Huff Edwards said the Grove Street garden opened in 2002.

From the start the gardeners worked with organizations that provide food and services for people in need and hosted numerous activities.

“Our neighborhood is an old neighborhood and it has always fought hard all of these years because it is inner city but kind of on the edge,” Edwards said. “We saw the community garden as a focal point where people could gather and that we could beautify. It was a restoration and resurrection tool for the neighborhood.”

Various food movements have been gaining steam. Community gardeners and others say that the gardens mesh with those efforts.

The slow food movement, for example, encourages eaters to focus on quality, taste and the source of food.

Another is the local food movement, which stresses the nutritional, economic and environmental benefits of eating food produced close to home.

Stefanie Hamblen, editor of Hogtown HomeGrown, said gardeners have begun calling their plots freedom gardens — as in freedom from oil — or have returned to the old World War II moniker of victory gardens.

“It fits in with the local food movement and it is a way for people to take control of their food supply,” Hamblen said. “When you grow your own tomato you don't have to worry about salmonella.”

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