Sustainable: Roots for Peace

CASE STUDY: Roots for Peace: Advancing Sustainable Food Growing in Los Angeles

Roots for Peace, an initiative of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)’s Healthy Communities program, works with over 120 youth and community members to promote food justice as a mechanism for advancing peace in communities. At the grassroots level, the program is focused in two Los Angeles neighborhoods: Historic South Central and the Mar Vista Gardens public housing complex. In addition, the program collaborates with partnering organizations and coalitions to address food security issues across the city. Our strategy is to accompany local residents, youth and adults, as they develop their capacity and power to affect the food system and create the living conditions they want to see in their neighborhoods. Through leadership trainings, urban farming, and youth development programming, we work with our members to envision and organize around projects, policies, and activities that will improve the health of their communities while furthering food security and environmental justice in Los Angeles.

Sustainable Food Growing in Public Housing
Roots for Peace believes in the power of sustainable, regenerative food and food sovereignty. They advance these ideals through three primary strategies: building community capacity for composting and seed saving in urban gardens, educational empowerment through critical historical analysis and participatory research practices and defending the right to grow food in impacted communities.

Roots for Peace’s work at Mar Vista Gardens in Culver City is an example of their holistic approach to defending the right to grow food. Mar Vista Gardens is a public housing project operated by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA). It is recognized by the Los Angeles Conservancy as a publicly-owned garden apartment complex, with two-story residential buildings separated by open yard areas, making room for small tenant gardens. The tenants maximize the small open yard space to plant their gardens, with rose bushes brightening up the monotone color of the buildings. In 2016, guidelines were passed around the right to grow food at 17 city of Los Angeles public housing sites, including Mar Vista Gardens, yet there is still no institutional recognition or processes that have been put into place.

South LA Community Farm
In 2017, Roots for Peace received land that would turn into the South LA Community Farm. The land, previously the South LA Farm, had been a vacant lot for over 30 years, but after AB551 was passed, otherwise known as the Urban Agriculture Incentive Zone (UAIZ) Policy, the land was finally able to be redeemed as what it once was. The LA Food Policy Council’s Urban Agriculture Working Group and its members were vital in the passing of the policy. The ribbon cutting on the farm was done in May 2019, and it would not have been possible without the support of the Annenberg Foundation and Metabolic Studio, as well as Roots for Peace’s partners of All People’s Community Center, Meta-Housing Corporation, LA Compost, and LA Food Policy Council.

In 2019, the South LA Community Farm served as a site for food access and food sovereignty practices, regenerative farming trainings, and emergency preparedness trainings, hired a bilingual Community Farm Manager and incorporated Resiliency Hub features throughout the farm. Over the course of the year, they were able to witness the development of a reliable sense of community, leadership development, strong friendships bonds, as well as dependable partners and networks. The impact of community involvement went beyond the consumption of organic fruits and vegetables. Participants have embraced and continue to care for the Community Farm, as a sanctuary in the middle of Historical South-Central Los Angeles.

Since the opening of the farm, Roots for Peace has been able to hold multiple events such as hands-on regenerative urban agriculture trainings that were provided to families and youth with raised garden beds. These training sessions addressed the importance of building healthy soils over time, understanding the various stages of plant growth, incorporating proper crop rotation practices and implementing annual cover cropping. In July of 2019, Roots for Peace’s Farmternship participants organized the first youth-led bilingual and intergenerational event at the South LA Community Farm bringing together over 65 guests across Los Angeles and seven organizations to the farm. Youth facilitated a community panel to highlight the campaign work some of these organizations are doing for environmental and racial justice. Other youth showcased their art project highlighting people and their statements across Los Angeles in support of the #Health4All statewide campaign to bring healthcare to all undocumented people. Lastly, youth shared their published zine and gave out tea batches they prepared themselves to relieve anxiety and stress.