

What's Growing on?

Breaking Through Concrete: Building an Urban Farm Revival

David Hanson and Edwin Marty

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012

200 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 (cloth)

Urban Farms

Sarah C. Rice, photographs by Matthew Benson

New York: Abrams, 2012

224 pp. Illustrations. \$30.00 (cloth)

American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen

Garden and Gardens Across America

Michelle Obama

New York: Crown Publishers, 2012

272 pp. Illustrations. \$30.00 (cloth)

The Essential Urban Farmer

Novella Carpenter and Willow Rosenthal

New York: Penguin Group (USA), 2011

576 pp. Illustrations. \$25.00 (paper)

Remember this date: Thursday, April 5, 2012. That was when, as best as I can figure it, Corporate America co-opted the urban farming movement. On that spring day Williams-Sonoma began offering its “agrarian” collection, a line of tools and equipment for novice backyard homesteaders. With a click of the mouse, you can now buy one of six different models of chicken coops (in red, green, or “rustic” finish) for between \$399 and \$1249. Also on sale, an “exclusive” backyard beehive and starter kit for \$499. For those aspiring agrarians just interested in growing veggies, Williams-Sonoma offers a “raised bed kit.” The three-foot by six-foot cedar box goes for \$199—assembly required, soil not included.

Don't get me wrong—I don't mean to be a hater. If the bourgeois chic are able to catapult over the DIY stage and get straight to backyard farming, all the more power to them. Williams-Sonoma's embrace of urban agriculture is nothing

less than a sign of success. It's part of the natural progression in which a phenomenon goes from underground happening, to cutting-edge trend, to media darling, to marketing opportunity. With the launch of their agrarian collection, the tastemakers at Williams-Sonoma are just doing what they do best: surfing the zeitgeist. In the first part of the twenty-first century, urban farming has become hot.

Book publishers also seem to think so. In 2012 a slew of books landed in bookstores that explore, explain, and assist the urban agriculture renaissance occurring in North America. University of California Press (publisher of this journal) came out with *Breaking Through Concrete* by David Hanson and Edwin Marty, a tour of urban farms and community gardens across the United States. Abrams put out the lushly produced *Urban Farms* by design writer Sarah Rich and photographer Matt Benson. Michelle Obama released her coffee-table-perfect *American Grown* about starting a garden at the White House, while urban farming pioneer Will Allen of Milwaukee's Growing Power wrote *The Good Food Revolution*. A Canadian food journalist, Jennifer Cockrall-King, dug deep with her detailed survey, *Food and the City*. Homesteader Novella Carpenter (author of the hilarious 2010 memoir, *Food City*) and co-author Willow Rosenthal, both from Oakland, California, offer hands-on advice with their how-to book, *The Essential Urban Farmer*.

So we get it: urban ag is hip. But popularity doesn't equal achievement. As the urban farming movement in the United States leaves its salad days and enters a new phase of maturity, this is the perfect time to step back, ask some hard questions, and evaluate the movement's successes, as well as its failures. Each of the new urban farming books does this in some fashion. All of them are asking the question, “Urban agriculture — what is it good for?”

The first answer, obviously, is food production. Urban farming occurs in city neighborhoods (or, in the case of Detroit,

across an entire city) that have suffered from neglect and abandonment. It's the leftover places—the vacant lots, freeway right-of-ways, and unkempt parks—that make the best spots for farms and gardens, spaces where the green has to “muscle through,” as the foreword to *Breaking Through Concrete* puts it. Such locations are usually found in poorer communities where residents have little or no access to fresh produce. The grow-it-yourself drive is first of all about addressing the very real crisis of food insecurity that grips impoverished neighborhoods. “In these so-called food deserts,” Sarah Rich writes in *Urban Farms*, “it is often easier to plant vegetables than to alter the inventory of mini-marts and liquor stores.” (p.14)

At the community garden level, urban agriculture is little more than a nice add-on to people's diets; few people are surviving off their garden plots. But in some places—like Fairview Gardens in Goleta, California, Jones Valley Urban Farm in Birmingham, and Philadelphia's Greensgrow Farms—urban farms are operating on a significant scale, growing tons of high-quality fruits and vegetables that their neighbors otherwise might not be able to find or afford. These sizable city farms also serve as local economic engines by creating good jobs with meaningful work. Cultivate Kansas City, for example, is as committed to growing jobs as it is to growing food on its nine acres of land. The way Cultivate Kansas City's executive director, Katherine Kelly, explains it in *Breaking Through Concrete*, urban agriculture “needs to be something people make a living from in order for it to be taken seriously.” (p.74) At its heart, the urban farming movement is a social justice experiment, a way of using agriculture to address the divisions of race and class.

As they do that, urban farms demolish the tired stereotype of who cares about food. The American foodie is supposed to be educated, affluent, and white. These books prove how shallow that image is. Most people, regardless of income or ethnicity, want to feed their families healthy foods. Hanson and Marty are especially good at showing the diversity of the good food movement. At times their prose can become a bit treacly, but the sentimentality seems hard-earned and honest. “We teach the kids about the old ways of our people,” Anna Chavez of Denver Urban Gardens says in *Breaking Through Concrete*. “We've always been agricultural and connected to the land. This isn't new.” (p.61)

A beautiful sentiment, to be sure. But it's worth pointing out that, even if human culture has deep roots in agriculture, urban culture rarely revolves around farming. That's not the purpose of cities, anyway. We have cities to be centers of art and science and commerce—not the foundations of our foodsheds. We aren't going to grow corn on the National Mall

or let sheep loose once again on the Boston Commons. Even were we to reach the food production levels of the World War II victory gardens—when backyard plots and community gardens were producing forty percent of Americans' fruits and vegetables—urban agriculture wouldn't be able to feed our cities.

So food production by urban farms is in a way secondary, a vehicle for pursuing other goals. Among those goals is the improvement of the quality of life in cities and suburbs through the creation of new green space. Growing broccoli isn't all that interesting or deserving of glossy coffee-table books—unless you're doing it amid railroad tracks and parking lots. For many urban farms and gardens, the outlandishness of the whole endeavor is the point. Just look at the rooftop farms in Brooklyn, whose views of staked tomatoes backgrounded by the Manhattan skyline are a constant in these books. Farming in the 'hood is a kind of horticultural performance art. And, like much art, it is meant to shake people out of themselves and encourage them to see things in a fresh light. Nicola Twilley, a New York food blogger, hits this angle perfectly in a smart essay in *Urban Farms*. She writes: “Inserting agriculture into the concrete and asphalt of the modern metropolis has the potential to change our perception of and relationship to the world in which we live.” (p.152)

The reconfiguration of urban space often becomes an important escape for people. The incongruity of the city-farm oasis creates a place away from both home and work, a space for just being with the lemon verbena and the row crops. “It's better than staying inside,” Abukar Maye, a gardener at Denver Urban Gardens, says in *Breaking Through Concrete* (p.52).

But this virtue includes a danger. The risk is that the oasis will become too much of a retreat, a place for people to tend their gardens and withdraw from the world. San Francisco essayist Rebecca Solnit called out this hazard in an article published last summer in the nature magazine *Orion*. In a piece that in part profiled the urban farm I co-manage, Solnit wrote: “At its worst, the new agrarianism is a way to duck the obligation to change the world, a failure to engage with what is worst as well as what is best.”¹ The Gen X and Gen Y back-to-the-landers, it might seem, still want to drop out and go homestead—they just want to do so in places that have good coffee and plenty of nightlife.

One of the key challenges for urban farms is striking a balance between quasi-bucolic escapism (undeniably important for city dwellers) and political engagement. After all, if you only want to grow broccoli, you can do that in the sticks. “If I'm doing this in a city, I want to have that connection to as many people as possible,” Annie Novak of

Brooklyn's Eagle Street Farm says in *Breaking Through Concrete*. "Otherwise, I'd rather just be farming in upstate New York." (p.117)

Urban farms most often find a way to manage the tension between escapism and engagement through their public education programs. Precisely because they are located in the midst of population centers, urban farm oases are well positioned to teach loads of people about ecology, horticulture, and nutrition. *If you can't take the people to the land, then bring the land to the people*, is how I thought of it when I co-founded an urban farm in 2006. The most important crop for urban farms is the lessons they share with their volunteers, customers, and visitors. There's hardly a farm or garden profiled in these books that doesn't boast some kind of educational component—whether for schoolchildren, homeless people, or recent immigrants. "Gardens of service" is how Michelle Obama describes them in her book, *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*.

The First Lady is the ideal personification of this public education mission because, like so many people, she is a newcomer to the garden, someone who is just learning herself. And like many of today's first-time gardeners, Mrs. Obama became interested in growing some of her own food through the most basic of instincts: a desire to ensure that her children were eating well. In the opening pages of *American Grown*, she writes: "I've been one of those mothers, anxiously looking at my watch while waiting in the drive-through lane or popping something into the microwave while finishing up a conference call." (p.16)

The Mom-in-Chief "didn't really even know how to go about planting a garden in the first place." (p.9) Luckily, she's got the expert horticulturalists of the National Park Service to help plan and steward what, by all appearances, is a model kitchen garden—highly productive, easy and interesting for kids, and beautiful. Mrs. Obama's backyard plot might be just a few hundred feet from the White House, but her garden remains, at the beginning and end of the day, just a garden. And like any good garden it eventually casts a spell, as it seems to have done with a woman who showed up for her first day of bed-digging wearing a smart wool dress and designer boots (she has since transitioned to more sensible jeans and watermelon-colored outershell). Over the seasons, the First Lady came to have an emotional connection to her fifteen-hundred-square-foot patch—"I never cease to be amazed by the wonders, big and small, of this garden" (p.107)—while gaining an appreciation for the rhythm of growing—"The bounty of fall taught us how, by investing ourselves... we were able to fulfill the promise of spring." (p.18)²

The White House garden illustrates one of the principal merits of urban farms and gardens: They turn people into good ecologists. "I think about the garden... as a model for being gentle with nature," writes a child, David Martinez, who visited the White House garden with his class. (p.56) True that. Spend a few months taking a broccoli from seed to harvest, and you'll soon have a much deeper appreciation for the natural systems on which we depend. Our connection to the earth becomes gobsmackingly obvious when you watch the crops grow (or fail). The garden produces a harvest of teachable moments about what it means to live in an environment.

Most important, the urban farm or garden creates good citizens. Yes, I'm talking here about the much ballyhooed way in which gardens foster collaboration: the West Wing staffers, the ghetto kids, the new immigrants working together at age-old tasks. The alchemy of solidarity that often occurs over weeding. But deeper than that I mean the way in which even a tiny amount of homegrown crops changes our relationship to food. Spend an afternoon turning the compost for that broccoli bed and you'll be reminded that farming is hard work, demanding of intelligence. That alone (or so I hope) will create a new appreciation for the value of food. A bit of dirt under the fingernails is a good reminder that we pay too little for the food we eat.

Maybe, then, urban agriculture is most valuable for how it forces us to be more conscientious about the people who feed us: the farmworkers, the truck drivers, the processors and the packagers, the prep cooks, all of whom work for next to nothing and have little time themselves to play in the dirt.

If you need a break from the earnestness that can come with urban agriculture, spend some time with Novella Carpenter. A homesteader in the hardscrabble lots of Oakland, Carpenter is the Lenny Bruce of the urban ag scene. She's a bawdy dame with cool-nerd glasses who likes to pepper her garden stories with jokes. I recently heard her tell an audience that she had to get rid of her herd of goats after having her first kid because "you can really only have one lactating mammal around the house at a time."

Carpenter hit it big with her 2010 memoir, *Farm City*, which was equal parts slapstick comedy and self-deprecating foibles. In *The Essential Urban Farmer*—written with her pal Willow Rosenthal, founder of Oakland's City Slicker Farms—she mostly plays it straight. The 576-page heavyweight is a lucid primer on how to cultivate veggies, keep animals, and maintain a backyard orchard. Unvarnished

language (“we prefer using very sharp pruning loppers to remove the chicken’s head”) and no-nonsense diagrams provide the information you’ll need to turn your lawn into a significant source of your family’s diet.

Throughout their how-to, the pair of veteran urban farmers maintain their pioneer spirit. There are tips on dumpster diving for your chickens (something you’re unlikely to find in a Martha Stewart column on best bantams) and ideas for scavenging building materials and growing mediums. The constant encouragement of frugal self-reliance is a world away from buying a \$200 wood box online.

But Carpenter and Rosenthal have no interest in making urban farming look hard. If anything, they want it all to seem perfectly easy — and normal. Scratching out a space for some

vegetables and keeping a small flock of laying hens shouldn’t be a fad or a trend. It should just be a basic part of keeping a home. If they’re right, someday the garden fork will be about as remarkable as your Williams-Sonoma potato masher or whisk: a common tool you have around the house to keep your family fed. ☺

NOTES

1. Rebecca Solnit, “Revolutionary Plots: Urban Agriculture Is Producing a Lot More than Food,” *Orion* [Vol 31/No. 4] (2012): p.23. Since Solnit mentions my farm, this seems as good a place as any to note my various conflicts of interest. I am longtime comrades-in-farms with Novella Carpenter and Willow Rosenthal. I have had the pleasure of eating dinner (rack of lamb, summer salads) at the home of Sarah Rich, and I am close friends with several of the growers profiled in these books. The urban farm movement may be growing, but it remains a tiny pond.
2. Veteran DC journalist Lyric Winik was Mrs. Obama’s able ghostwriter.