



FARMERS ON THE ROOF

Community gardens are producing in the Tenderloin

BY PAUL DUNN

NINE STORIES HIGH on the roof of a Tenderloin building, the sun is by day a micro solar flare hotter, the moon by night a nightingale's breath brighter.

Up here — in the heart of the battered 50-square-block neighborhood — fast, trouble-free food is king and verdant vegetable plants quiver at the warm touch, the sun powering the nourishing produce to resist the Tenderloin's pull toward prepackaged food. When the sun sets and the moon rises, the peaceful garden reclines, awash in soothing silver until morning when it will stretch awake. By day and by night, this is another world.

This is Curran House, a 67-unit community family housing jewel in a tin setting that is the Tenderloin. The residence at 145 Taylor St. — which houses more than 100 low-income and formerly homeless people — is one of more than two dozen buildings owned and managed by the Tenderloin Neighborhood Development Corp.

Its rooftop garden celebrated its first birthday on Sept. 19. Residents, TNDC officials and others gathered there that sunny afternoon to celebrate the one-year anniversary of its progressive green sanctuary.

It isn't the first rooftop plot in the Tenderloin (that distinction belongs to Glide), but Curran is coming of age at a time when gardens are growing in the TL and are playing a variety of roles in spreading the gospel about fresh food.

Janet Chevalier, a Curran resident for six years, helped anchor the event, greeting guests and preaching the benefits of good food. She's done just about everything the garden has asked: watering, plucking crops and now simply "making sure things are up to snuff up there."

'IT TASTES BETTER'

"There's nothing better than getting something fresh right out of the garden," said Chevalier, 56, a retired emergency medical technician. "I eat everything we grow in the garden. It tastes better than the grocery store."

Event emcee Dave Seiler wouldn't argue with that. Though he lives in another TNDC building, the 60-year-old drops by Curran every week to work in the garden. This day — wearing a glittery gold top hat above his luxuriant salt-and-pepper beard — Seiler extolled the rooftop garden's virtues.

"It is extremely helpful to grow your own vegetables," said Seiler, a TNDC board member. "The harvest is sufficient enough to allow people to participate and be productive, and it gives them hands-on experience."

Sergio Flores, who has lived at Curran House for five years, will soon dirty his hands in the garden's soil, too. He hadn't so far, because the rooftop space originally accommodated 25 individual plots awarded to residents by lottery, and his name hadn't surfaced. But in September 2012, organizers converted the garden so that all plots are now shared equally.

"That's great to know," said the 56-year-old, who relishes the garden's atmosphere and has made salads from

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Lorenzo Listana
TNDC COMMUNITY ORGANIZER

crops others harvested. "I go up there and enjoy the garden to reflect. It's a great place to be."

He's looking forward to working the earth. "The benefit is enjoying taking care of the plants," he said. "They are like your little pets or babies, and you take care of them and watch them grow."

On a sparkling morning a few days before the anniversary, Lorenzo Listana was doing just that. The slender, soft-spoken Filipino wielded a garden trowel to pore soil in one of the 25 galvanized metal feeding troughs the garden uses for planters.

The bright silver, 6-foot-long bathtub-shaped planters — which together contain about 9,000 pounds of soil — nurture green beans, corn, kale, squash, mint, rosemary and more. Monthly harvests range from 18 to 40 pounds; in the first year the troughs bore more than 400 pounds of produce.

This particular day, Listana planted Great Lakes lettuce. The erstwhile gardener is an oddity of sorts: He eats the rooftop food he helps cultivate because he has lived at Curran House for seven years, since its opening, and he educates other residents about gardening as a TNDC community organizer. He became acquainted with the TNDC gardens in 2010 as a volunteer at the pioneering People's Tenderloin Garden.

Listana, 52, oversees monthly garden meetings for Curran House residents. "We want our gardens to be tools for us to reach out and organize the residents and for them to lead healthy lives by eating the food."

Though it's the latest to celebrate a birthday, Curran House garden is not only child. It has TNDC-owned siblings on the roofs of Kelly Cullen Community, Polk Senior Apartments and SOMA Studios & Apartments. Like Curran, the three gardens — funded through the TNDC general fund and augmented by grants and donations — are exclusively for residents and produce similar types of vegetables.

According to Ryan Thayer, TNDC community organizer: Food Justice, the aptly named "sodbusters" at the 110-unit Polk residence, demonstrate their gardening skills using six large concrete planter beds. The Polk rooftop garden was established in July 2012 and so far has yielded 250 pounds of vegetables, about 40 pounds per month.

Residents at the 172-unit Kelly Cullen Community plant in a dozen 6-foot troughs like those at Curran House and have produced 30 pounds of food so far. Opened in May, it's the newest garden among TNDC's subsistence farms.

But Cullen Community will soon yield that distinction to 88-unit SoMa Studios, where a garden was planted in late September in the building's second-floor courtyard. Like its neighbor, it will also have a dozen 6-foot trough planters.

The rooftop gardens, though prized examples of high-flying spirit and innovation, are small potatoes compared with TNDC's ground-level Tenderloin People's Garden.

Inaugurated in March 2010 at the corner of Larkin and McAllister streets — a cabbage throw from San Francisco City Hall — the community garden is open to gardeners willing to hoe a row and others who just want greens.

The sumptuous plot produces about 3,000 pounds of vegetables a year and relies on 400 volunteers to maintain it. Vegetables are harvested on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month and distributed to an average of 400 people; the most recent harvest yielded 330 pounds of food, Thayer said.

PUSH FOR 'FOOD JUSTICE'

The people's garden — and subsequent rooftop gardens — were created in response to TNDC's push for "food justice," which helps address the difficulty low-income people have securing healthy food.

"Food Justice is the notion that access to healthy, fresh and affordable food is an essential right for people," explained Thayer, 28. "TNDC's Resistance Sprouts Gardens empower residents to increase their own access to healthy and fresh food. Through the gardens, we've wanted people to be able to feel, touch and taste the results of their work and realize an immediate benefit."

Thayer is also trying to establish a people's garden in SoMa and recently organized a first meeting with interested parties to discuss the idea.

Lush, edible greenery is sprouting elsewhere in the TL, too.

Project Open Hand, for instance, provides daily meals to seniors and critically ill people in San Francisco and Alameda counties.



Green thumbs Clockwise from top: Communications Director Maria Stokes, left, and Director of Building Operations Steve Hunter inspect one of Project Open Hand's two empty volksgarden hydroponic garden wheels, which they filled with plants in late September. Lorenzo Listana, TNDC community organizer, plants Great Lakes lettuce recently in the Curran House rooftop garden. Emcee Dave Seiler greets guests at the Sept. 19 anniversary celebration of the rooftop garden at Curran House Family Housing. Graze the Roof Project Manager Lindsey Dyer, left, leads a recent Sunday morning tour of the Glide church rooftop garden.

PHOTOS BY PAUL DUNN

In late September, it converted a 285-square-foot food distribution room into an indoor greenhouse, complete with two "high-tech Ferris wheels." Called "volksgardens," — yes, they look like large Volkswagen tires fashioned from molded plastic — the 6-foot-4-inch-tall wheels cradle 80 built-in hydroponic planters that slowly rotate around a 600-watt sodium halide light that mimics sunlight.

Each volksgarden accommodates 660 square feet of plant growth and should yield from 40 to 60 pounds of produce per harvest, according to Steve Hunter, Project Open Hand director of building operations.

Hunter will focus on green, leafy veggies at first — such as basil and lettuce — "because a lot of this will be figuring out what works well with the wheel. Basil will be the star."

Open Hand's Room to Grow campaign was seeded with \$10,000 from PricewaterhouseCoopers and its funding goal reached through Indiegogo, an online crowdfunding tool.

The volksgardens won't do much to offset the cost of providing food to its 8,700 Bay Area clients. "But it will engage the community and volunteers," Stokes stressed. "It's important to have

our own staff and chefs be able to pick their own food. And there's an energy, excitement and engagement factor in doing urban gardening in the middle of the Tenderloin."

That excitement also rings true at Graze the Roof, inaugurated in fall 2008 atop the offices of Glide Memorial Methodist Church on Ellis Street, and at Glide's other rooftop garden sowed in 2010 at Cecil Williams Glide Community House, 333 Taylor.

'EVERYTHING YOU CAN IMAGINE'

Graze the Roof — the Tenderloin's first rooftop garden — features what Graze Project Manager Lindsey Dyer terms "permaculture," a sustainable, self-sufficient gardening system designed to "create abundance with low impact on the environment."

Drip irrigation waters the planters made from earth boxes, 5-gallon plastic buckets and milk crates. Worm composting, beehives and an educational mural add to the site's ambiance.

Graze "grows everything you can imagine," Dyer said. "We are very experimental here, and we even have unknown plants in the garden."

The garden's highlights include culi-

nary herbs, medicinal plants such as mullein, and obscure tubers like the South American yacon, which tastes similar to apple and jicama. Situated throughout the rooftop, fig, apple, peach, plum, almond, lemon and lime fruit trees anchor their green neighbors.

Graze, funded through Glide Foundation donations and grants, works its magic on a \$12,000 annual budget, which is used to purchase garden materials and pay the salaries of Dyer and her husband, co-manager Nikolaus Dyer.

The garden is cultivated exclusively by community volunteers — usually from two to 10 people, Lindsey said — who work from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursdays when Nikolaus is there to supervise.

Weekly harvests range from 5 to 15 pounds, most of it donated to the Glide soup kitchen, which serves about 2,500 meals a day, which is a bit of a reality check on expectations for rooftop gardens.

Children in the Tenderloin from kindergarten through fifth grade visit the garden three times a week to learn about cooking, nutrition, planting, stewardship and ecology, Lindsey said.

Glide's Cecil Williams House rooftop garden sports a miniature greenhouse, rainwater harvesting, worm composting systems and resident-designed mural.

The garden was originally funded through a partnership with the San Francisco Zen Center and augmented by a \$20,000 San Francisco Community Challenge grant awarded in 2010 through the mayor's office. More recently, Twitter has twice helped sustain the garden by donating garden supplies, and it and other of the tax-break tech companies send volunteers regularly.

ABUNDANT CROPS

Though garden organizers can't say how much produce has been harvested at the site, they point to abundant, flourishing crops of lettuce, spinach, collards, tomatoes and berries growing side by side with fig, lemon and lime trees.

For residents, the rewards are just a short vertical jog for the taking.

"If they want greens for their dinner, they go upstairs and harvest a few greens," said Deborah Whittle, Glide Community Housing executive director. "If they need certain herbs, they can

take a pinch of herbs."

Any extra food residents can't eat is shared with the community at the site's weekly farmers market.

"To me, the garden is a really good example of how we live in the community," explained Ari Neulight, Glide Community Housing clinical program director. "It includes working together to solve problems, celebrating together and honoring the whole process."

Some residents still have not warmed to the idea, and it can be a challenge to introduce spinach and tomatoes to people who are less concerned about proper nutrition than they are about surviving. Whittle sees the rooftop garden as a viable starting point to help bridge the gap.

"We kind of backed into this project," she explained. "How could we get the community to be healthy, and how could we introduce them to something that was not a part of their lifestyle and educate them around the broad concept of vegetables? We are trying to get people excited about eating different-

ly." ■