

LOCAL

With food security 'worse than ever,' these Austin urban farms strive to solve inequities

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Rows of cauliflower, squash and other vegetables grow in the middle of a busy East Austin neighborhood that has been transformed into a tiny-home village — and right at the center sits Green Gate Farms, a community-based certified organic farm.

Once 10 acres of land just off Decker Lane established by Skip Connett and Erin Flynn in 2006, the farm today sits on only about an acre of land. It's one of a handful of farms still operating in the city.

Flynn, who owns the farm with her husband, pointed to a limited supply of land not only with access to quality water but also affordable. As the city grows, the need for more housing, grocery stores and other services slowly chip away at what available land is left in Austin.

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“The truth is that I think a lot of people want to farm, but people can’t afford the land, or what’s left of the land that is available,” Flynn said.

That creates a domino effect that leads to food insecurity and barriers to an affordable and accessible local food system, she said.

Earlier this year, the city of Austin’s Office of Sustainability released its 2022 State of the Food System report that included data on food insecurity in the area while outlining key barriers and opportunities.

Edwin Marty, food policy manager for Austin, said the September report brought to light some of the key challenges facing Austin while offering pathways toward solving those issues.

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Food access and security in Austin

Even though the Austin area has a robust and growing demand for local food, less than 1% of food consumed in Travis County is produced locally.

Access to high-quality, healthy food is Austin's biggest challenge, Marty said. With about 14% of the population in Travis County considered food insecure, the community has to figure out a way to improve that, according to the city's food report.

"We get a lot of good food through Austin," Marty said. "So, the challenge is making sure people have good food, nutritionally and culturally, and then how do we talk about this and how do we address systemic inequities in our communities."

Green Gate Farms aims to be a community farm resource through programs such as its on-site farm stand. Because the farm sits in the middle of a tiny-home community and is close to other East Austin neighborhoods, it has become a food hub for fresh vegetables and farming classes.

South Austin couple Amanda Longtain and Matthew Shepherd have tried to do something similar with their farm-to-food bank program, Training Kitchen, that operates on 1.5 acres near Menchaca Road and William Cannon Drive. The location is close to two local food banks.

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With the help of local organizations, the couple learned that many families in the area live on fixed incomes or live at or near poverty level. Their needs included food security, adult education and child care for families, Longtain said.

Hoping to improve access to healthy food, the couple began growing various vegetables like okra, onions, bell peppers and peas, and raising chickens on their property for fresh eggs. The produce and eggs are then used to create prepared family meals of gumbo, which are donated to local food banks.

The meals and farm fresh eggs are also available for sale to the wider public. All proceeds benefit the organization's food bank program.

On their way to helping with adult education classes, the couple said they have started to offer classes that teach families about growing, preparing and preserving food.

Once a month, the property also hosts a market where local entrepreneurs can sell their goods and improve access to healthy food.

Eventually, the husband-and-wife team hopes to create their own food hub in South Austin that distributes locally grown produce. They have slowly renovated their property to turn include a commercial kitchen and small food store.

“This is just the beginning,” Longtain said. “Once we get the kitchen built out and expand that, we are going to be able to fuel as much good as we can master.”

Loss of land affects Austin farms

Growing food locally means having available farmland, which the county struggles to maintain, Marty said. Nearly 17 acres of farmland are lost every day in Travis County, according to the Austin food report.

“We need to develop land in many ways, like grocery stores and affordable housing,” Marty said. “But what we hope to do with this food-planning process is if there is not land appropriated for affordable housing or grocery stores and can be agriculture, we are trying to figure out how we can preserve it.”

Flynn said Green Gate Farms is addressing this challenge through Bastrop Intervale, a program that provides portions of land to would-be farmers, and teaches them not only how to farm but also how to preserve farmland.

Flynn said the goal is to preserve 1,500 acres in Bastrop County on Wilbarger Bend, just a few miles west of Bastrop, and then grow farmland across Central Texas.

“When we talk with farmers, we often hear they want to farm but they cannot afford the land,” Flynn said. “Food security is worse than ever and if farmers are ready we can give them access to land with access to good-quality water.”

Longtain said purchasing and trying to change the zoning on their South Austin plot for the Training Kitchen has been long and expensive, and could be deterring others from establishing their own farm in the area.

Access to capital also remains a major barrier for new and smaller food businesses — and that can be particularly challenging for people of color, the Austin food report states.

“There are so many barriers in Austin in particular,” Longtain said. “It is difficult to navigate the city processes if you don’t have a full time staff or attorney, and it makes it tricky and hard to push initiatives like this forward.”

Creating a food plan

The future of Austin’s food system will be guided by the moves the community makes today, Marty said, adding that the report tries to provide a starting point for solutions. But it's up to the community to figure out how to use the limited resources available to address the issue, he said.

Several nonprofits are working to solve the problem of food insecurity and empowerment with several grants, including from the city of Austin’s Food Justice Mini Grant Program, which supports community-driven solutions.

“Through this effort, our vision is to ensure the right to food for all,” Marty said. “Together, we can imagine and build a food system that meets the needs of everyone in our community.”