COMMUNITY GARDENS – UNITED WE EAT, DIVIDED WE STARVE?

Author: Vicki Estrada, FASLA

What if we were able to redesign our region from the beginning? What would be the things we would assign the most value to? We would place uses on the land that would protect our unique features and resources, our canyons, our topography. We would put our homes close to where we work, play and go to school. We would make it easy for ALL people, friends and neighbors to connect with each other, physically, spiritually and electronically. These goals and ideas then begin to lead us to the notion of clusters and micro clusters, like it used to be. If we truly are to conserve our precious resources and make our physical environment a healthy, healing and loving place, then we must discuss how these clusters are configured. At the core of each cluster (or neighborhood), would lay the source of our energy, our sustenance, our food. Community gardens could be this source. These gardens must not be placed only in leftover areas, in poor areas, in vacant lots. They must become an integral part of our urban fabric not just in one central area, but reaching out from the neighborhood core like a mothers loving arms. Gardens do provide pedestrian linkages. Imagine a neighborhood park next to a central plaza surrounded on three sides by gardens providing a buffer and linkage between land uses. These gardens would not be limited to the space next to the park but would grow in parkways, in medians, in storm water detention basins. Annual crops could be grown here as well as fruiting trees and shrubs. Now it has been suggested that we should only plant local native plants, plants that require no irrigation and grow only on rainfall. The problem is, there are few edible plants that our society has grown to expect on their dinner table that would grow naturally here. There is nothing wrong with carefully and efficiently using captured or imported water on plants with multiple value such as for food, for energy reduction, for water filtration and for improving our health and well being. If golf courses are going to be watered, why not plant edible plants along the fairways?

I am fully convinced that growing plants together fosters community. Ideas and acceptance also will grow. What else matters? Is this concept only doable if we perform a do-over? Or can we begin to integrate community gardens into our everyday city planning? Is this too socialist an idea? Maybe, but we cannot continue on our current path. True sustainability begins in our own homes, our neighborhoods. What is wrong with planting a garden in your backyard? Nothing, if you are lucky enough to afford a large yard. As densities grow, areas available for planting gardens decrease. Sharing fruits and vegetables rarely happens in an urban environment. I cannot use all of my oranges but yet I cannot grow tomatoes or cilantro well. I could use some of my neighbors left over vegetables and they could use mine. But sometimes this idea of yours and mine prevents this from happening. Every year, I watch the lemon tree across the street drop lemon after lemon on the ground to decay unused. What if my cul-de-sac got together and coordinated what was planted and when? What if our street trees where oranges, apples and pears? Ah, you say, they would drop on the sidewalk and create an unsightly and unhealthy mess and besides, the City would never allow it. Other places do it and do it well. Why can’t we?

As we slowly infill our built environment, we must begin to develop new ways to integrate community gardens not only into our physical space, but into our emotional space as well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vicki Estrada, FASLA, Vicki Estrada is a landscape architect and urban designer and President of Estrada Land Planning in San Diego, California. Vicki is a graduate of Cal Poly SLO and has over 35 years of private practice experience, working for both public and private clients. Her projects have included the Balboa Park Master Plan, the Otay Ranch New Town Plan, the San Ysidro Mobility Study, the Rancho San Diego Specific Plan, and the Downtown San Diego Streetscape Manual. She is currently Chair of the City of San Diego Community Forest Advisory Board, Chair of the San Diego Airport Public Art Advisory Committee, Chair of the San Diego Canyonlands Enhancement Planning Committee, and is a member of the County of San Diego Historic Site Board.