



Gardens of Hope Sprout in Lima, Peru

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In 1989, the breakup of the Soviet Union sparked a revolution in Cuba. The sudden disappearance of Soviet aid meant that thousands of tons of chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides could no longer be imported for industrialized farming and food production declined to precarious levels.

But Cuba turned crisis into opportunity, responding with a vigorous “urban agriculture movement.” Thousands of poorly utilized areas in and around cities were converted to intensive urban vegetable gardens, providing plenty of food and reducing the need for transportation, refrigeration and scarce resources.

The plan succeeded beyond anyone’s dreams. By 1998, there were over 8,000 urban farms and community gardens run by over 30,000 people in and around Havana. The use of chemical pesticides in agriculture within city limits was outlawed and today, food from the urban farms is grown almost entirely by organic methods. The fresh produce provides a consistent source of fresh and affordable food and has played a critical role in steering the Cuban diet in a healthier direction.

When I first learned of Cuba’s urban gardens, it struck me as an idea we could replicate here in Lima. After studying all the available resources and creating a plan, we began to work with people in our area.

Some were able to use corners of their lots or areas behind their homes for gardens, but others had no room because their houses occupied the entire lot. To solve this problem, we developed a process for growing a garden in a box that can be placed on the



roof or in some other area of the home that has plenty of sun.

Our project has three components:

1. Educational course work that includes reflections on nature, basic organic gardening skills and nutritional information;
2. Practical application of the course work in a demonstration plot; and
3. Finally, application in the home gardens.



Another important aspect of the project is that the participants become “promoters” after completing the program. That is, they themselves invite others to join in, and teach the course work themselves using the demonstration plot. This way, we are able to increase the number of people who can take part in the project, while conserving the resources of Catholic Charities.

How well is this working? So far, 16 organic gardens have been created and families are experimenting with “sausage sacks” that hang on the walls, producing leafy vegetables. An obvious outcome is that fresh produce has become more accessible; this in turn has improved the health of both children and adults. Families have become more resilient due to food self-reliance.



We’ve also had unexpected results. Gardeners have been able to sell vegetables from the demonstration plot and extra food from their gardens at very good prices since everything is organic. Compost and worm humus from the demonstration plot is also being sold. In some cases, other plants and trees

are also being produced for sale. All of this makes the process more financially viable and sustainable.



But for those of us who began this project, its most rewarding outcome has been the impact on our promoters. Sharing what they have learned with others has dramatically deepened their self-esteem. Now they experience themselves as leaders in their community, as agents of good news. For neighbors, they have become people to emulate, symbols of hope and possibility for their community's future!

