My brother David actually built me a home at one point. In that home in which he sometimes stayed and often ate (and usually did the dishes after he ate), we held political meetings as well as family gatherings. In it, as before and since, I helped him with activist publications, because for almost all our adult life he has been a political organizer who seems to end up volunteering for publications. We've been through three books of his that way, and each of these projects for which I am an informal editor has drawn me deeper into political engagement.

David cares about prisoners and has worked on their behalf many times, most recently Bradley Manning. Sometimes I've joined him. He has often been arrested, spent time in jails from Georgia to Ontario, and is named after our grandfather, who was named after Thomas Davis, the Irish revolutionary and poet. He has provided astute critiques of my writing and ideas, and without him I might have been lost in the clouds, stuck in an ivory tower, or at least less often called into the streets. Though I am the writer, he taught me a word when we were building the home that was mine for a while. The word is sister, which is a verb in the construction industry, as in "to sister a beam." This means to set another plank alongside a beam and fasten the two together to create a stronger structure. It is the most fundamental image of the kind of relationship Thoreau had with his sisters and I with my brother: we reinforce each other.

REVOLUTIONARY PLOTS

On Urban Gardening

The anti-war poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon reports that toward the end of World War I, Winston Churchill told him that war is the normal occupation of man. Challenged, Churchill amended this to "war—and gardening." Are the two opposites? Some agriculture is a form of war, whether clear-cutting rainforest, stealing land from the poor, contaminating the soil, or exploiting farmworkers, and some of our modern pesticides are descended from chemical warfare breakthroughs for the First World War.

But gardening represents a much wider spectrum of human activity than war, and if war is an act of the state, gardening is far, far more ancient than city-states (if not nearly so old as squabbling).

Can it be the antithesis of war, or a cure for social ills, or an act of healing the divisions of the world? When you tend your tomatoes, are you producing more than tomatoes? How much more? Is peace a crop, or justice?

The American Friends Service Committee set up a series of garden plots to be tended by people who'd been on opposite sides of the Yugoslavian wars, but a lot of people hope to overcome the wars of our time more indirectly through their own gardening and farming. We are in an era when gardens are front and center for hopes and dreams of a better world or just a better neighborhood or the fertile space where the two become one.

There are farm advocates and food activists, progressive farmers and gardeners, and maybe most particular to this moment, there's a lot of urban agriculture. These city projects hope to overcome alienation from food, from labor, from embodiment, from land; the conflicts between production and consumption, between pleasure and work; the destructiveness of industrial agriculture; the growing problems of global food scarcity and seedloss. The list of ideals being planted and tended and sometimes har-
vested is endless, but the question is simple. What crops are you
Justice? Gardens represent the idealism of this moment and its principal
pitfall, I think. A garden can be, after all, either the ground you stand on
to take on the world or how you retreat from it, and the difference is not
always obvious.

HOUSING PROJECTS AND CHOKECHERRIES

So many of the projects that end up involving a whole community or
school or generating a nonprofit begin with one person with dirty fingernails
and big dreams. Antonio Roman-Alcalá, for example, was in his very early twenties when he and a cohort of
idealistic young anarchists developed a dream of starting a collective with two bases. One would be urban, the other rural, he told me as we knelt on the slope of
Alemany Farm, the three-acre, city-owned plot next to the Alemany housing projects in southern San Francisco, eating ground cherries (which come inside a husk like tomatillos and burst on your tongue like tangy plums).
They had decided that the ideal life involved being both urban and rural,
not one or the other. The two have often been opposed, their denizens casting each other in hostile stereotypes—the rural hicks and rubes, the corrupt and alienated city people. Of course the country and the city depend on each other like day and night; you might not want to depend
on the carbohydrates grown in Manhattan or on the medical technology available in a farm county. And with peregrines and raccoons in major
metropolises and the Internet in most American farmhouses, if not in migrant farmworker shacks, the distinctions might not be as stark as they once were.

So the anarchist kids had an integrated vision, and then, thanks to Anto
nio, they had a next step. His mother’s house is right on the border of
Alemany Farm, so it was an obvious site—at least to him—to experiment.
As we moved on to graze on early mulberries, he told me that Alemany Farm had been run by SLUG, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardening, until its leadership got embroiled in a corruption scandal and the whole organization that had done so many good things was shut down.

The farm was abandoned and padlocked, though the padlock kept out only
people who traveled the official routes. Children never stopped playing on
this lush hillside that slopes down to what had once been Islais Creek, fl owing east into San Francisco Bay, and is now the branch of Interstate
80 that snakes west from the 101.

Antonio proposed that he and his cohorts try out some guerrilla gardening—unpermitted work on public or government land—to see how they liked farming and working collectively. Only a few of the group came along with him, and the group’s visions were never realized. But then the farm itself became a project and a vision, and for several years Antonio served as co-manager with Jason Mark, the editor of Earth Island Journal, who showed up several months later.

By this time we were eating the sweet fleshy petals of pineapple guava
flowers and admiring the first blooms of pomegranates that, he told me,
don’t do very well in foggy San Francisco. Guerrilla gardening would’ve been the easy route, but the farm became official, and what began as an anarchist project has evolved into, among other things, an exercise in cultivating, weeding, and wringing something fruitful out of a bureaucracy designed to protect the city from lawsuits and govern pleasure-ground parks,
not to oversee a food-producing landscape run by volunteers. Any vision of a purely autonomous zone involving only Antonio’s companions decayed early on, and from that compost grew a project to engage with practically everyone. There is still a fence around Alemany, and a padlock keeps people from actually driving in. It makes the place look closed from the road, but there’s an open gate a few steps away and another gate between the housing project and the farm.

As we desultorily ate some superb strawberries planted here and there on the slope—grids are not one of Alemany Farm’s strong suits—Antonio told me about their complex relationship with the housing project’s denizens, who inhabit a city-run set of bunker-like buildings. The mission statement of Alemany Farm describes it as “a project of the Alemany Resident Management Corporation, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving conditions in the Alemany Community, a 165-unit public housing development beset by high unemployment and recurring violence. The
Alemany Resident Management Corporation believes that we can address the root causes of violence by providing youth with meaningful opportunities for advancement.” In practice, this means an informal relationship, but a relationship nonetheless, involving occasional disagreements, open space for kids to play, as well as “You Pick It” free food on Wednesdays for residents who want to show up and glean. Co-manager Jason Mark tells me the immigrant Chinese residents have been the most enthusiastic harvesters, and the farm now grows Asian vegetables such as long beans as part of the relationship.

A thin brown-skinned young man with bright eyes and shaggy hair, Antonio looks a little like Pan, the god of picnics and panics, and a little like a mild young Che Guevara. The farm is hardly the kind of precise and styled model garden that sometimes gets produced by, say, the Slow Food Festival in front of San Francisco City Hall, or by the architecture firm Work at PSi in Queens, New York, gardens that are inspiring works of art but hardly viable economic models. At Alemany, there are some native plants on the slopes, some mixed grasses, a scattering of willows and mature fruit trees like the mulberry, many more young trees, and ledges of plantings, along with a few beehives, a wetland pond full of cattails, and a windmill that never pumped anything but does say farm pretty well.

Down below in the flatlands there are actual rows of vegetables, rows of garlic with a polite sign to please not poach the plants before the garlic is mature, as well as a little amphitheater for the classes that come. They come in droves. More than fifty school field trips and other groups visit annually. Among the crops the farm produces is education in this second densest major metropolitan area in the United States. The schoolchildren get to do what we were doing—eat food right off the vine or stem or branch, see compost and think about systems from the hyperlocal one producing whatever they’ve just tasted to the big systems producing the food they more routinely see, and sometimes even do a little work. Alemany’s principal crop is connection, though they raise plenty of food too. About 5,000 pounds a year, estimates Jason Mark, but that’s an informal estimate. While the farm may be funky, it is productive in a lot of ways that can be put on a scale to weigh.

PRINCIPAL CROPS

The second green revolution is an attempt to undo the destructive aspects of the first one, to make an organic and intimate agriculture that feeds minds and hearts as well as bodies, that measures intangible qualities as well as quantity. By volume, it produces only a small percentage of this country’s food, but of course, its logic isn’t merely volume. The first green revolution may have increased yield in many cases, but it also increased alienation and toxicity, and it was efficient only if you ignored its fossil fuel dependency, carbon output, and other environmental impacts. It was an industrial revolution for agriculture, and what might be happening now is distinctly postindustrial, suspicious of the big and the corporate, interested in the old ways and the alternatives. This is more than a production project; it’s a reconnection project, which is why it is also an urban one: if we should all be connected to food production, food production should happen everywhere—urban and rural and in every topsoil-laden crevice and traffic island in between.

Today, major urban agriculture projects are firmly rooted in Burlington, Philadelphia, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, Oakland, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and dozens of other American cities. Sales of vegetable seeds have skyrocketed across the country. Backyard chickens have become a new norm, and schoolyard gardens have sprung up across the nation and beyond since Alice Waters began Berkeley’s Edible Schoolyard Project almost two decades ago. Organic farms and farmers’ markets have proliferated, and for the first time in many decades the number of farmers is going up instead of down. Though those things can be counted, the transformation of awareness that both produces and is produced by all these things is incalculable.

We think more about food, know more about food, care more about food than we did twenty or thirty years ago. Food has become both an upscale fetish (those menus that overinform you about what farm your heirloom ham or parsnips came from) and a poor people’s radical agenda, a transformation of the most intimate everyday practices that cuts across class—though it has yet to include all of us. In 1969, the Black Panthers ran breakfast programs to feed hungry inner-city children, and those chil-
dren—or rather the children and grandchildren of those children—are still hungry, and the inner city is still a food desert: a place where access to decent food, or even to food, is not a given. But farming has come to the hood. And everywhere else.

Food is now a means by which a lot of people think about economics, scale, justice, pleasure, embodiment, work, health, the future. Gardens can be the territory for staking out the possibility of a better and different way of living, working, eating, and relating to the world, though by gardens we nowadays mostly mean food-producing gardens, gardens that verge on farms, or small farms that verge on gardens. Projects like Fritz Haeg’s Edible Estates anti-lawn campaign and Michelle Obama’s breaking ground for an organic vegetable garden on the White House lawn a couple of years ago make it clear a movement is under way. You can tell that it matters, because the Obama organic garden prompted the executive director of the Mid America CropLife Association to write to its members, “The thought of it being organic made Janet Braun, CropLife Ambassador Coordinator and I shudder. As a result, we sent a letter encouraging them to consider using crop protection products.”

The rise of chickens, bees, and other agrarian phenomena in the city means that cities are now trying to craft ordinances to govern all aspects of food production, from backyard chickens and goats to the slaughter of animals raised for food. In Minneapolis plastic hoop houses—greenhouse-like incubators for vegetables—have come up for consideration, though some think of them as an eyesore, while others consider them useful occupants of vacant lots. Part of what is at stake is redefining the urban environment: do we want to see food produced? There are beautiful gardens; there’s also compost, manure, and other less decorative aspects, including butchery for those who’ve gone for animal husbandry as well as vegetable production.

**UP FROM THE SEVENTIES**

The back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s generated a lot of scary stories about drugged-out communards eating roadkill and going on food stamps and generally failing at alternatives. But the era produced quieter successes, notably the seeds of the food revolution that are still with us—the rise of organic producers, markets, and consumers and the beginning of a new kind of attention to food. Some of it is still going: San Francisco Zen Center acquired the 15 mostly wild acres of Green Gulch Farm in 1972, and it’s still an exemplary several-acre organic farm seventeen miles from the city. Those rows of lettuces and beets and chard supply a lot of the produce for its three Buddhist centers and the Greens Restaurant (itself the first gourmet vegetarian restaurant of note, a key part of the food revolution, and the place where cookbook author Deborah Madison got her start). Some of the excess is sold at farmers’ markets. What might have been innovative about Zen Center then is that it established centers in urban, rural, and wilderness settings, seeing the three as complementary rather than contradictory.

Nowadays, though a surprising number of young idealists take on the grueling work of running an organic farm in the country, there is no longer such a strong sense of separation, and urban agriculture is what might be newest about this new green revolution. (Maybe farmers’ markets helped bridge the divide.) Urban means that it stays small, for the most part, and that it engages with what cities have, both good and bad. That means, among other things, hunger, health issues, race, poverty, and alienation, as well as diverse cultures, lively engagements, and cross-pollinations. Places like the once and possibly future South Central Farm in Los Angeles—at fourteen acres, once the largest of the urban farms—flourish from the skill and energy of immigrants with agrarian backgrounds.

In my region, the San Francisco Bay Area, the new models have proliferated. In 1992 Catherine Sneed and now-retired Sheriff Mike Hennessey started to take prisoners from the San Francisco County Jail outside to work the arable land there. A huge success, both in providing a calm and positive experience for inmates often suffering from trauma and addiction, and in training them for jobs outside, the Garden Project continues twenty years later. I have been to the big greenhouses, which are something any university or model farm would be proud of. The superb produce grown by inmate labor goes to senior centers, needy families, and others in the community. And Berkeley’s Edible Schoolyard Project, founded in 1995 to give kids a hands-on relationship to raising and eating good food, is still going, and has inspired countless spinoffs and emulations around the globe.
In 2001 a young woman who'd grown up in the Bay Area’s agrarian Sonoma County decided that the abundance of vacant lots and the dearth of decent food sources in impoverished, isolated West Oakland had a clear solution. Willow Rosenthal started City Slicker Farms there, a thriving project that is in some ways the opposite of Alemany Farm. The latter started with land and figured out how to work with people. The former started with people. Though they farm several leftover and abandoned parcels of land in the neighborhood, their most impressive achievement is setting up locals to become backyard gardeners. They provide soil testing and the skills and materials to get started, share labor at the outset, and maintain relationships with the backyard gardeners. In theory, the small nonprofit could vanish tomorrow and the food would keep growing.

The public patches of land are where interns and volunteers work, where neighbors come by to chat and check out the chickens or the beets, and some of the land has even been set up to create hangout places. The public sites produced more than 9,000 pounds of food in 2011, but as Executive Director Barbara Finnin pointed out to me, the backyards produced more than 23,000 pounds. It’s not feeding the community—they estimate they’re producing 4 percent of the food—but it’s modeling the ways such a project could scale up to become a major source of food and a transformation of place.

City Slicker’s staff estimates that it would take seventy-seven acres—3 percent of West Oakland—to grow 40 percent of the fruits and vegetables consumed in West Oakland. They’re nowhere near that now, but maybe you can see there from here. I asked Joseph Davis, City Slicker’s farm manager, how he feels about the big goals and big ideas. He was pulling up fava beans they’d planted as a cover crop in a triangular lot, which was also more or less a grand traffic island, and directing an intern on how to plant lettuce seeds. He gestured with a gloved hand and said, “That’s like the sky.” It’s far away, not the terrain he works directly, but omnipresent, he seemed to mean, and he kept on pulling and planting.

Finnin took me onward to see a neighbor’s big chicken paddock and then the corner lot where City Slicker’s own chickens reside. It was once a ground crops farmlet, but the kind neighbor who let them pipe in her water was foreclosed upon, and without a good water source they’ve shifted to a less water-intensive orchard and hen run. Several people, mostly older men, all African American, were sitting on benches that had been built as part of the farm, and they greeted Barbara and me warmly, and she greeted some of them back by name. These odd fragments, corners of leftover and neglected land, are part of what City Slickers Farms has, but the organization also has big dreams and realistic possibilities.

The food is great, the community relations seem to be thriving, and yet the project faces the same problem so many people in the neighborhood do: money. They have to raise it, there’s never enough, and there’s no self-sufficiency in sight for the staff of seven and the public farms, whose food is sold at farm stands on a sliding scale from free to full price. Since they’re farming community and skills and hope as much as lettuce, there’s no way to put a price on what they produce.

Some projects have been ephemeral, such as Futurefarmers’ San Francisco Victory Gardens project, which supports “the transition of backyard, front yard, window boxes, rooftops, and unused land into food production areas.” But the revival of the memory of World War II’s extensive agrarian achievement alone—Futurefarmers’ website points out that by 1945, 20 million victory gardens were producing 8 million tons of food—matters. Then there are the small and fly-by-night projects, like the San Francisco Guerrilla Grafter, who graft fruit-bearing branches onto the ornamental pears, plums, and cherries on city streets. This is just a sampling of the plethora of community and school gardens and other manifestations of the new urban agriculture in one region.

The achievements of the 1970s food revolution are still present in many ways, including a hugely increased array of produce and such supermarket items as tofu, granola, and organic anything and everything, multiplied by the rise of cage-free eggs and organic milk in the 1990s and the migration of integrated pest-management techniques from organic to other farms. San Francisco destroyed its old downtown produce district (the key site in the great noir movie Thieves’ Highway) to make room for high-rise office and residence towers—but kept its big farmers’ market (founded in 1943) on Alemany Boulevard, a short walk from Alemany Farm. Since the 1980s,
farmers’ markets have proliferated here, as elsewhere, and there are now two other large ones in San Francisco and dozens of smaller ones.

You might say that the Bay Area has so many of these things because it’s the Bay Area, and it’s true that the area is exceptionally affluent, good at innovation, and obsessed with food, but that very affluence makes access to land in and near urban areas difficult. Places like Philadelphia and, most famously, Detroit have the opposite situation: a fairly dire economy but lots of available land to cultivate. In 2006, when I went to look at Detroit’s post-ruin landscape of agriculture and weedy nature, I was amazed that the city even then had forty square miles of abandoned open space—places where the concrete or asphalt was mostly gone, along with the buildings. That hole was being filled in a little with community gardens, small farms, and abundant volunteer plants in the empty quarters. The place was in some profound sense post-urban. It had the space to do what West Oakland’s farmers dream of: grow a lot of its own food.

Detroit without money and jobs looks like the future that may well eventually arrive for the rest of us, and its experiments in urban agriculture were not the pleasure gardens, elegant laboratories, or educational centers that many urban gardens are now, but attempts to figure out how to survive. Much of the gardening that is now often educational or idealistic may soon come to meet practical needs in the United States, and given the rising levels of hunger in this country, it’s necessary now. In Detroit, a significant number of people get meaningful amounts of their annual diet from gardens. Clearly there is room to increase this informal do-it-yourself food supply. And as our economy continues to produce unemployed young people, nonwage economies and nonwage productivity will become important new arenas for growth.

The victory gardens model suggests how prolific backyard and urban gardeners can be and how, scaled up, they can become major contributors to feeding a country and to food security. A recent study by Shanabir Grewal and Parwinder Grewal of Ohio State University envisioned what it would look like for Cleveland—another Rust Belt city with lots of potential green space and lots of hungry people—to feed itself. In the most modest scenario, using 80 percent of every vacant lot generated 24 to 48 percent of the city’s fruits and vegetables, along with 25 percent of its poultry and eggs and 100 percent of its honey. The most ambitious proposal also included 62 percent of every commercial and industrial roof and 9 percent of every occupied residential lot: it could provide up to 100 percent of the city’s fresh produce, along with 94 percent of its poultry and eggs (and 100 percent of its honey again). It would keep up to $113 million in food dollars in the city, a huge boon to a depressed region. It would also improve health, both through diet and through exercise.

Clearly what might work in Detroit or Cleveland or Oakland is not so viable in superheated Phoenix or subarctic Anchorage. And then climate change can upset these enterprises as much as it can any agriculture: last year the Intervale Community Farm in Burlington, Vermont, at 120 acres the biggest urban agriculture project in the country, was devastated by torrential rain that washed out soil as well as plants. Spring deluges interfered with planting; Hurricane Irene did in many of the fall crops. The organization’s newsletter emphasizes that the summer season still produced a bounty of tomatoes, melons, and salad greens.

In an increasingly uncertain time, what is certain is that agriculture has invaded cities the way that cities have been invading agriculture for the past many millennia, that the reasons for this are as manifold as the results, and that the peculiar postwar affluence is over for most of us, and everything is going to become a little more precarious and a little less abundant. Given these circumstances, urban agriculture has a big future. Of several big futures, depending on the soil and the needs. Another lesson from the victory gardens is that with seeds and sweat equity, a lot can happen quickly: if the need to grow food arises, as it did during the Second World War, the gardens will come.

ATTACKS AND RETREATS
You can argue that vegetable seeds are the seeds of the new revolution. But the garden is an uneasy entity for our time, a way both to address the biggest questions and to duck them. “Some gardens are described as retreats, when they are really attacks,” famously said the gardener, artist, and provocateur Ian Hamilton Finlay. A garden as a retreat means a refuge, a
place to withdraw from the world. A garden as an attack means an intervention in the world, a political statement, a way in which the small space of the garden can participate in the larger space that is society, politics, and ideas. Every garden negotiates its own relationship between retreat and attack, and in so doing illuminates—or maybe we should say engages—the political questions of our time.

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 best. In the ambiguously cynical end of Voltaire’s novel *Candide*, he concludes, “Il faut cultiver notre jardin” (we must cultivate our garden), which suggests that the garden can be a small piece of the world we can manage and order after giving up on the larger world. Certainly neoliberalism has been about destroying the public, privatizing the common, and taking care of yourself.

But you can’t have a revolution where everyone just abandons the existing system—it’ll just be left to the opportunists and the uncritical. Tending your own garden does not, for example, confront the problem of Monsanto. The corporation that developed genetically modified organisms as a way to promote its pesticides and is trying to control seed stock worldwide is a scourge. Planting heirloom seeds is great, but someone has to try to stop Monsanto, and that involves political organizing, sticking your neck out, and confrontation. It involves leaving your garden. Which farmers have done—some years back, the wheat farmers of North Dakota defeated Monsanto’s plans to introduce GMO wheat worldwide. But they didn’t do it by planting heirloom organic wheat or talking to schoolkids about what constitutes beautiful bread or by baking. They did it by organizing, by collective power, and by political engagement. The biggest problem of our time requires big cooperative international transformations that cannot be reached one rutabaga patch at a time.

The fact that gardens have become the revolution of the young is good news and bad news. Baby boomers of the Sixties revolutionary variety had their hectoring bombastic arrogant self-righteous flaws, but they were fearless about engagement. The young I often meet today have so distanced themselves from the flaws of the baby boomers that they’ve gone too far in the opposite direction of mildness, modesty, disengagement, and non-confrontation. (At a recent conference on the Occupy movement, two youngish people in the audience suggested that the slogan “We are the 99%” might hurt the feelings of the 1%; they wanted a polite revolution that wasn’t exactly against anything and offended no one, which is a nice way to be totally ineffectual.) The garden suits them perfectly because it is a realm of quiet idealism—but that too readily slides over into disengagement or the belief that your activism can stop with the demonstration of your own purity and lack of culpability.

Feeding the hungry is noble work, but figuring out the causes of that hunger and confronting them and transforming them directly needs to be done too. And while urban agriculture seems like a flexible, local way to adapt to the hungry, chaotic world that climate change is bringing, we all need to address the root causes directly. Maybe there’s something in the fact that the word *radical* comes from the Latin for “root”; the revolutionary gardener will get at the root causes of our situation, not just cultivate the surface.

Churchill cast gardening and war as opposites because he saw gardening as a retreat into a peaceful private realm. Our age demands engagement. Gardens like Alemany Farm and City Slicker Farms produce it as one of their crops, while other gardens and food fetishism generally can be a retreat into privilege, safety, and pleasure away from the world and its problems. But gardening and all its subsidiary tasks are sturdy metaphors. You can imagine the whole world as a garden, in which case you might want to weed out corporations, compost old divides, and plant hope, subversion, and fierce commitments among the heirloom tomatoes and the thistle. The main questions will always be: What are your principal crops? And who do they feed?