



INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE WALLS

CAL POLY TEAM CULTIVATES AFFORDABLE FRESH PRODUCE FOR CONGESTED URBAN AREAS

BY MARY MCNALLY

OVER THE SUMMER, Cal Poly joined forces with Urban Farming to create an ongoing, sustainable resource that helps inner city residents produce locally grown, wholesome fare for their own consumption and the community around them.

More than 4,000 plants – including cucumbers, tomatoes, spinach, peppers, strawberries, herbs and even edible nasturtiums – were cultivated at Cal Poly for installation at four inner city locations, including L.A.'s infamous Skid Row.

There was one problem – the inner city of Los Angeles is a veritable concrete vortex with little unused land. Undaunted, the growers decided to go vertical.

It all started with Urban Farming, a grassroots nonprofit that teaches local volunteers to cultivate vegetable and fruit gardens on unused land in urban areas. Kathy Kelly of the Winery Music Festival connected Cal Poly to the company and the effort took root.

Alums **James Rickert (AGB '93)** of Western Agricultural Services and **Paul Hertel (AG '82)** of Greenheart Farms were critical to the venture, donating thousands of seedling plants. San Luis Obispo's Farm Supply and Green Acres Lavender Farms soon followed suit with their own seedling donations. The Cal Poly team was led by Hunter Francis of the Sustainable Agriculture Resource Consortium. Horticulture and crop

science students Efran Wong and Jennifer Webster assisted Francis with the effort.

The effort grew legs when Green Living Technologies donated 180 self-irrigating, lattice-like panels of recycled aluminum. The panels allow plants to grow up the walls of big city skyscrapers, literally adding life to soulless concrete surroundings.

But when vertically mounted on walls, the plants have to be more mature than previous garden installations – and that's where Cal Poly came in. The fledging plants were cultivated on campus for months before being transported by Meyer Trucking down to their destination in Skid Row.

The project with Cal Poly is one of many for Urban Farming. In 2005 the group began with three gardens in Detroit. By 2007 that number mushroomed to 160 gardens in the United States and abroad, providing fresh produce to an estimated 50,000 people, with a percentage of the harvest donated to homeless shelters and food banks.

In addition to benefits of the leafy green variety, the collective farming efforts help cut down on crime and build relationships between gardeners of various racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Now that is sowing the seeds of change. □

Urban Farming: www.urbanfarming.org • Sustainable Agricultural Resource Consortium: www.sarc.calpoly.edu