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Black – and Brown – owned Gardens Growing the Green Spaces of LA

In the face of gentrification and climate change, community-owned green spaces insist they are here to stay.

Jireh Deng | July 20, 2023



Kashmir “Kush” Capers (left) talks with Compton resident Isis Brooks about the plants that are growing in the Compton Community Garden. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

Every Saturday morning, devoted volunteers tame wild branches and leafy greens that spill over the El Sereno Community Garden's (ESCG) fenced perimeter, working together to maintain a green space for their community.

Although the 2.5-acre plot looks deceptively small from the street, visitors are enveloped in vegetation as they step foot inside the garden. A canopy of trees and plants muffles the traffic racket from nearby Huntington Drive.

This particular parking lot, which is owned by the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), was converted into a community garden in 2002. In partnership with the Los Angeles Community Garden Council (CGC), ESCG is one of more than 40 gardens that give locals access to public farmable land.

In a car-centric county like Los Angeles, the value of community gardens cannot be understated.

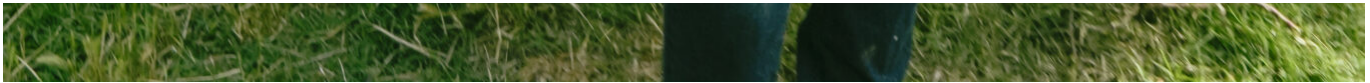
Green Spaces in Los Angeles Face Uncertain Futures

Black and brown communities in Los Angeles have used green spaces as a way to reclaim their neighborhoods. While urban sprawl in Southern California has created air and noise pollution, gardens like ESCG help to combat some of its negative effects by [reducing crime](#), [lowering overall temperatures](#), and [creating communal spaces](#).

Despite these benefits, uncertainty clouds the future of many green spaces in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles Unified School District teacher Richard Ziegelmann remembers finding ESCG while jogging near his former residence. Over the last six years, Ziegelmann has managed the garden with Erika Crenshaw, who serves as CGC's vice president.





Richard Ziegelmann pulls a bin full of cut branches from trimming weeds and plants. He has helped manage the El Sereno Community Garden for the last six years. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

Because the land that ESCG is on is owned by CalTrans, Ziegelmann said there's always been ambiguity surrounding the future of the garden. "We don't own it," Ziegelmann said. "We have to make sure that we show that it's valuable as it is... so [it's kept] in perpetuity."

But as Ziegelmann has learned over half a decade, paying for the water bill and keeping volunteers invested in upkeep is a difficult task. ESCG is only open on Saturdays for that very reason — most folks don't have the capacity to volunteer throughout the week. Some locals pay a yearly membership fee, which is used to pay for gardening tools and water, in order to gain access to a raised bed where they can grow vegetables and other plants.

Sustainability and ownership issues also put the Compton Community Garden (CCG) in an existential crisis earlier this year. When the owner of the lot announced that they would be selling their properties, thousands mobilized on Instagram, loudly declaring a call to action: "Save Compton Community Garden."

The social media campaign was urgent and sympathetic. A low-income Black neighborhood in a food desert needed to save a prized resource in order for its residents to have access to healthy organic eats.

In 24 hours, more than \$100,000 was raised to help CCG outbid competitors and keep the garden in place. With the money that was raised, the garden will now be under the stewardship of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, which has added 13 acres of accessible green spaces to the city over the last 20 years.

Gentrification is Threatening Black- and Brown-Owned Green Spaces

Not all green spaces in Los Angeles have survived the pressures of gentrification.

Around the same time that CCG was experiencing uncertainty around their residency, The Plant Chica, a Black and Brown-owned plant store in Jefferson Park, was also facing similar challenges. The Plant Chica revived an abandoned body shop, transforming it into a greenhouse space that houses exotic and local flora and fauna.

Despite the success of the store and glowing coverage from [the Los Angeles Times](#), the lease is not being renewed by the landlord, making July its last month in Jefferson Park.

While the Plant Chica is still searching for a new location to set up shop in Jefferson Park, the love the store has given to its community has been returned in the thousands. Like CCG, The Plant Chica set up [a GoFundMe page](#), which has raised almost \$50,000 in donations since May of this year.

Sandra Mejia, who founded the plant store with her husband, Bantalem Adis, is a Jefferson Park local who has seen local businesses pushed out by developers seeking to turn higher profits.

By all accounts, The Plant Chica been monetarily sustainable, but its impending closure and search for a new location is a cautionary tale about gentrification impacting small businesses in Los Angeles.

“My goal is to stay in the neighborhood,” Mejia said “Mainly because I’m from the neighborhood, but also because I just don’t want to feel like the

bigger people won.”





Sandra Mejia (left) and her husband, Bantalem Adis, set out to make the Plant Chica accessible for their local Jefferson Park neighborhood. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

For Mejia, the goal has been clear from the start: introducing her neighbors and community members to gardening and houseplants, especially in a neighborhood where Black and brown communities might not have access to them. To date, The Plant Chica has given more than 2,000 plants away during “Adopt A Plant” days.

However, The Plant Chica wasn’t just a plant store. It also served as an open-air venue where events and community organizations would gather. Mejia and Adis made it a point to keep the space accessible for local organizations.

A community event also raised another \$5,000 for the store. Adis and Mejia were deeply moved by the “More Plant Chica” event, which was organized by friends of the store.



Poet Salvín Chahal performs his poetry for attendees of the “More Plant Chica” event. (Photo: Jireh Deng)

“We feel very hopeful to see like our community come out, and it feels like we have a ton of support,” Mejia said. “Our community wants us to stay and they’re behind us.”

LGBTQ and Brown Entrepreneurs Face Challenges Starting Businesses, Building Community

Similar to The Plant Chica, the Plantiitas in Long Beach is another store that sells plants and makes space for people to gather. Its location on Fourth Street’s Retro Row is only a few feet away from the Long Beach LGBTQ Center. This year, the Plantiitas hosted a Pride Night co-sponsored

by the city's vice mayor, complete with a *lotería* game night and drag queens.

When Kevin Alcaraz and his husband, Anthony Diaz, started the *Plantiitas*, they knew that they wanted to unapologetically center their queerness and Mexican heritage in their store. Near the cash register, one can purchase a sticker that reads “They/Them/Thread,” or greeting cards that read “Plant Papi” or “I’m so gay for you.”



At Plantiitas, a mural shows an Indigenous brown-skinned woman holding a heart of roots with monarchs flying around her, a reference to migration between the US and Mexico. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

The choice to center their identities and create visibility for queer Latino business owners hasn't come without its challenges.

While Alcaraz and Diaz were looking to sign for their first location, a landlord asked them to double the security deposit and pay a higher rent

after seeing their application. Alcaraz said he suspects it may have been because their last names made it more explicit they were not white.

“We don’t get trust from banks,” Alcaraz said of the struggles to get loans. “I feel you have to work double to get spaces.”

The couple decided to use their life savings to get their business off the ground.

While Long Beach is a very LGBTQ-friendly city, the support has also been a mixed bag from their peers, Alcaraz said. “There are other businesses that keep calling us saying ‘You can’t have these events because if you do, we’re gonna call the police,’” he added.





Kevin Alcaraz works the front desk at Plantitas on East Fourth Street in Long Beach. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

Despite all of this, Alcaraz and his husband have been so successful in their three years of operation that they expanded operations to two storefronts in Long Beach. “We always said that our dreams are bigger than our budgets all the time,” he added.

Green Spaces Teach People How to Rethink Waste and Steward the Earth

Another green organization hoping to expand in Los Angeles is the Long Beach Community Compost (LBCC), a free service on Friday and Sunday mornings where people can drop off their organic waste. Started at the local Michelle Obama Library three years ago, the compost service began as a grassroots effort.

Now, Long Beach Sustainability has allowed LBCC to take up residence at Farm Lot 59 and create rows of compost piles. Although some aren't fans of the smell or insects, dedicated volunteers hack at rotting debris and offload it into wheelbarrows to continue feeding the decomposition.





Celeste Sanchez (right) works with a volunteer to cut up organic matter for compost piles. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

Celeste Sanchez is one of the leads who facilitates shifts and organizes volunteers at LBCC. While there there are other compost sites, Sanchez said that LBCC is the only public service in the city where people can drop off their compost without having to pay a membership fee.

As people come bearing buckets of waste, they keep track of the demand by having residents weight their waste and write down their home zipcode in a spiral notebook. “We’re just trying to show the city the prototype of what [decentralized community composting] can be,” Sanchez said.

All of the soil processed at LBCC is used to feed the community and revitalize local grounds like the nearby Willow Springs Park.

Just across the street from Farm Lot 59, one can also see towering rigs pumping and extracting oil from the ground. Sanchez sees the work performed at LBCC as a way of rebuking the fossil fuel industry that is driving climate change.



Volunteers work to compost the waste dropped off by locals at Long Beach Community Compost. Over three months, the compost site collected approximately 15,000 pounds of waste from 1,159 drop-offs and 26 collection days. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

“It’s our resistance working right next to them extracting oil,” Sanchez said. “We’re here to show you how to do the holistic version of maintaining ecological framework and what that looks like.”

For Sanchez, it’s all connected. The people who use their service, the planet, and access to grown food all rely on soil. Composting has taught Sanchez that healing the planet and our communities isn’t a one-person job, and it requires all of us to be invested and in conversation with one another.

“With this type of stuff to be successful, you need a lot of material and you need people,” Sanchez said. “And you don’t need an environmental science background to start getting involved. You just have to have the courage and the passion to care about Earth.”

Green Spaces Inspire Other Food Movements

With capacity to feed dozens of families with fresh produce each week, Los Angeles-based green spaces are inspiring a food sovereignty movement. Alongside open gardening spaces, El Sereno Community Garden (ESCG) also operates a food pantry that distributes free food to local community members. From fresh potatoes to fish filets and cara cara oranges, residents can pick up items without having to provide identification or proof of income.

Over the last four years, Erika Crenshaw and her wife, Patricia Torres, have created a business plan rooted in the values they learned while helping manage ESCG. Their latest endeavor, El Sereno Green Grocer, opened in June.





Erika Crenshaw and Patrica Torres stand in front of their store, El Sereno Green Grocer, with their dog Pumpkin. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

Although the queer, Xicana-owned storefront is modest in size, it is a powerhouse of produce made by east Los Angeles locals, including cage-free fresh eggs from their local supplier, “Egg Sereno.”

“Erika and I [realized] that a lot of our community organizing and healing experiences have been rooted in food, rooted in the cultural dimension of storytelling through food, or being sad about the disconnection to what our ancestors ate,” Torres said. “It made sense to have a shop that is very much a love letter to the corner shops that we grew up with.”

In a world where structural barriers and capitalistic constraints loom heavily on the minds of Black and brown entrepreneurs, it can be easy to develop a nihilist perspective that little can be done. Still, Crenshaw is convinced that the largest changes start on the smallest of levels — looking around your neighborhood and asking what can be done.

“When you’re a queer couple of color, you’re not traditional anything. You’re not A+ rating with the bankers,” Crenshaw said. “Everybody’s like, ‘Oh, that’s too risky.’ Foo! Walking outside is risky! We can’t be immobilized by [fear].”



Friends from the garden and neighborhood gather to hang out at El Sereno Green Grocer before it's grand opening in June. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

A phrase that Crenshaw and Torres constantly repeat is “reciprocity.” In the days leading up to the official opening of their store, friends were dropping by to just say hello or drop off light bites. It’s clear that their community showing up is all the couple needs.

Gardens Do Not Only Transform Land. They Change People

Green spaces aren’t just growing food and plants; they’re growing people. Nobody knows this better than Dr. Sheridan Ross, former neurosurgeon and the godfather of Los Angeles community gardens, who founded CCG and nearly 60 other similar green spaces throughout the city. He currently

leads seasonal workshops for locals to learn more about best practices for seasonal gardening.



Dr. Sheridan Ross (left) answers questions after his Saturday morning plant workshop. (Photo: Jireh Deng | Knock LA)

Since he began this work in 1972, Ross has seen the transformative power of green spaces on the people who tend to them, especially Black and brown youth. He said there is nothing he enjoys more than surprising kids and pushing them out of their comfort zone by trying new foods.

“We had a Korean squash. None of the kids had ever eaten it before,” Ross recalls. “I said, ‘Eat it.’ And they said, ‘I’m not going to eat that. I’ve never seen that before.’ ‘Try it at least try it,’ I told them. They were like, ‘Oh, this is really good.’”

In the summer, Ross puts local kids to work. The mobile red shed CCG uses to transport goods to the local farmers' market was built by high schoolers. Ross points out that having access to green spaces allows creativity, entrepreneurship, and passion to flourish. Rather than playing video games or being stuck inside, local kids are now working with their hands, learning, and investing in themselves and their community.

Xinyu Lin, who helps manage LBCC, believes in this too. The goal of the open-air compost center has never been to provide a service where people just drop off their waste and leave.



WELCOME TO LB COMMUNITY COMPOST

WE ACCEPT



- FRUITS
- VEGGIES
- COFFEE GROUNDS
- SPENT FLOWERS
- SPENT PLANTS
- LEAVES
- SAWDUST
- UNDYED PAPER

WE DON'T ACCEPT



- MEAT + FISH
- PROCESSED FOOD
- COOKED FOOD
- BREAD
- RICE + GRAINS
- TORTILLAS
- PET WASTE
- DAIRY
- SICK PLANTS

IG: @lbcommunitycompost

COMPOST



A sign depicts the items accepted and not accepted at the Long Beach Community Compost. (Photo: Jireh Deng)

Lin sees composting and other green spaces as a conduit for people to become invested in what’s happening around, as well as reconnecting with neighbors and nature. “We’re all interconnected in the way that we show up in the world, and the way that we consume things and get rid of things,” Lin said. “It all affects one another.”

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