



Chris Krupa, top left, explains to forth grade students from St. Gabriel School that Miner's Lettuce, also known as "rooreh" or "Indian lettuce" was first eaten by the indigenous Chochenyo Ohlone people native to the San Francisco Bay Area.

CITY COLLEGE Roots

How a hill of sand transformed into a flowering oasis

Story and Photos by Emily Huston

Holy canola, it's raining!" volunteer Kate Cragg says, as she brushes off her mud-pocked clothes with a laugh. The drizzle picks up speed but does little to wash away the buzz in the garden.

By the greenhouse, a man washes spinach, rosemary and flowering thyme and a woman ties them into trim bouquets. Past the compost bins, a volunteer pushes a wheelbarrow piled with branches. In the raised beds, the swiss chard plants—pink, yellow and green—quiver in the rising storm.

It's a busy Saturday morning at Garden for the Environment, GFE.

Located at Seventh Avenue and Lawton Street in the Inner Sunset, GFE is not your

average community garden. More specifically, it's San Francisco's teaching garden, dedicated to training the next generation of organic gardeners to use regenerative methods.

"The term 'sustainable' is so over-used these days," says Trina Lopez, the adult programs manager at GFE and an American Cinema professor at City College. Sustainability implies merely maintaining the status quo.

She prefers to brand GFE's organic methods as regenerative, or "making things better than they were when you started." To Lopez, gardening for the environment means reversing climate change by restoring soil health.

Through composting, drought-tolerant

planting, rainwater harvesting and integrating natural pest control, GFE teaches the basics of gardening with an ecological awareness around the process.

Forty-four weeks of the year, there's a Saturday morning workshop at this two-block stretch in the Inner Sunset. The classes range from DIY Drip Irrigation to Growing a Succulents Garden to Urban Chickens.

All workshops are inexpensive or free, with the majority funded by a joint grant from the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and the San Francisco Department of the Environment.

Anyone who wants to learn is invited, even urbanites who simply want to grow a pot of basil on their window sill. More



In a "compost assembly line" volunteer Kate Cragg, left, cuts branches headed for the compost bin, while the adult programs manager, Trina Lopez, right, piles up fresh cuttings from an overgrown shrub. Compost education has been at the heart of Garden for the Environment since it opened in 1990.

serious gardeners can apply to GFE's flagship GetUp! Program, which has taught the fundamentals of gardening and composting since 1996. Elementary and high school students attended 35 field trips last year.

Many visitors come just to take a stroll. "The garden is the teacher for our students, but it's also advocacy," says Hilary Gordon, 66, and GFE's retired Garden Guru. "We want to show people that drought-tolerant plants can be as beautiful or more beautiful than your roses, your camellias and your petunias."

Gordon began her formal training as a gardener at City College's Ornamental Horticulture department in 1984, before it was renamed the Environmental Horticulture department. A self-described hippie, Gordon says, "One of my teachers (at City College) told me if you didn't spray your roses with pesticides, your

client would find someone who would."

Gordon, a professional landscaper, has been the de-facto garden architect at GFE since the early 1990s, back when it was a maze of weeds "as high as an elephant's eye" on a sandy hill.

The grassroots nonprofit San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners—dubbed SLUG—founded GFE. The now-defunct organization was dedicated to maintaining community through gardening and managed over 40 neighborhood plots across the city. When GFE was all but a half-acre of sand, SLUG volunteers planted the now-colossal monterey cypress that anchors the garden still.

"The term 'sustainable' is so overused these days."

- Trina Lopez

SLUG dissolved in July 2003, leaving the future of GFE to the wind. Four SLUG members faced with losing their jobs—Sébastien Bacharach, Stacey Parker, Amy Zavora and Carey Craddock—managed to procure the garden's financial backing directly from the San Francisco Department of the Environment through a fiscal sponsor, the Haight Ashbury Neighborhood Council.

"Everything we did was funded by one 'waste management' grant. That's the only



Hilary Gordon, center right, is the retired garden guru at Garden for the Environment. She's been the resident plant expert there since she started volunteering in the 1990s. Helen Wong, bottom third from right, instructs a new volunteer on how to harvest kale. Living just a few blocks away, Wong has been coming with her family to volunteer at the garden since 2015.



St. Gabriel School fourth graders Ruby Yee, 10, left, and Bella Dulun, 10, right, hold hands while climbing the 28 steps to the Garden for the Environment's eastern ridge with their class.

reason we were able to keep the garden going," says Bacharach, who served as the director until 2005.

The San Francisco Parks Alliance stepped

"If you decide that you're interested in learning how to grow and you're in San Francisco, Garden for the Environment is easily your best option." - Eli Zigas

in as fiscal sponsor in 2012, says Maggie Marks, GFE's current director.

Now a paid staff of four oversees around 760 volunteers a year. Every Wednesday and Saturday, they pull out tenacious oxalis weeds, turn the compost pile, and harvest a produce box for Larkin Street Youth Services' transitional housing residents.

The majority of the garden features drought-tolerant plants designed to thrive in San Francisco's cool, mild climate. In



From left to right, Fiona YanHong Tan, Lauren Wong and Tyler Wong prepare a vegetable bed for a new crop by aerating the soil. Tan is a 2018 GetUp! graduate Lauren Wong and Tyler Wong are siblings who have been regular volunteers for the past four years.

the water-wise demonstration garden, each drooping chandelier on the flowering currant holds dozens of tiny pink blossoms, attractive bait for three hives of resident honeybees. Gordon designed this section so that something is always in bloom, no matter the season.

A smaller portion of GFE is devoted to backyard-friendly, albeit water-intensive, vegetable production. Twenty vegetable beds produce 500 pounds of organic produce each year.

In the same space of a lawn, a small



Theresa Timtiman, left, and Noah Goldstein, right, explore worm castings, which are like black gold to the gardening community. Worm composting is a way for apartment dwellers to turn fruit and vegetable scraps into organic fertilizer.

vegetable plot can grow a row of beets, enough to feed a family. It's the future of gardening that Gordon would like to see replace "every untended little corner of dirty sand, covered with cigarette butts" in San Francisco.

A wooden crossroads sign sits in the center of the garden hinting at GFE's larger influence in the Bay Area urban agriculture scene, with arrows pointing to Full Belly Farm, Urban Sprouts, and Education Outside, among other eco-organizations.

GFE's GetUp! program, which graduates organic gardening and composting instructors after a three month training program, has alumni seeded across the city. 2002 GetUp! graduate Eli Zigas went on to become the Food and Agriculture Policy Director at the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association, SPUR.

"If you decide that you're interested in learning how to grow and you're in San Francisco, Garden for the Environment is easily your best option," Zigas says.

2015 GetUp! graduate Sam Wilder went on to become the program manager at the Garden at the newly renamed baseball stadium Oracle Park, a living classroom that features garden beds alongside aeroponic herb towers.

"It's really special to me that I can take the lessons learned from GFE and now teach those to 1,000 kids a year," says Wilder, who

now hosts youth field trips as well as adult tours of The Garden at Oracle Park.

It's the first sunny GFE volunteer day in weeks and Angelo Figone, 70, has come to plant his spring dahlias.

"They're kind enough to give me this," he says, pointing to a small plot scattered with 6-inch holes freshly dug with his bare fingers. Each hole contains a wooden stake

and what looks like a shriveled potato.

Crouching on his knees, he points to pink "eyes" the size of a pinprick on the tubers, each of which will grow into a flower the size of a dinner plate when planted.

"GFE is a great community of educators and people trying to create the next generation of gardeners, planting the seeds for more green." - Sam Wilder

Figone has saved these dahlia tubers over the winter in his garage, waiting to plant them in the spring. One particularly gnarled specimen, the "Large Yellow Orange" saved from his dahlia-loving German grandfather, dates back to 1956—making it over 60 years old.

GFE has deep roots in the city, which reach far beyond the two square blocks of its home in the Inner Sunset. Every day there's something new blooming, depending on whose hands are in the soil.

GetUp! program alumnus Wilder says, "GFE is a great community of educators and people trying to create the next generation of gardeners, planting the seeds for more green."



Grace Kahle, 10, explores a worm bin. Crawling on her gloved hand is an *eisenia fetida*, commonly known as a red wiggler. Worms are an important part of composting. "They're like mini snakes and snakes are adorable," Kahle says.