



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT Jaime Jennings, 202-232-7933 x44  
EMAIL [jjennings@islandpress.org](mailto:jjennings@islandpress.org)  
WEBSITE [www.islandpress.org/publicproduce](http://www.islandpress.org/publicproduce)

## QUESTION AND ANSWER

### Public Produce

Darrin Nordahl

**Q** What do you mean when you say that food security is an issue of economic and national security?

Not too long ago, our once-great decentralized system of agriculture, which comprised millions of small family farms spread out across the country, proved superior to the Soviet Union's large-scale, centralized system of agriculture. Crop losses in the Soviet Union became a perennial concern, as it only took one anomaly in a particular geographic region to render devastating effects felt across the nation.

Today, our agriculture system is not unlike that of the former Soviet Union's, a highly-industrialized, centralized system controlled by a few agribusinesses in distant parts of the country. Our highly industrialized system of agriculture relies heavily on foreign oil and natural gas for almost every phase of production—from working the land, to the manufacturing of fertilizers, the harvesting of crops, and to the delivery of those crops hundreds—if not thousands—of miles to terminal markets. Such a reliance on fossil fuels means that when we see an increase in oil prices, our food prices increase. And when the day comes that we experience a shortage of oil, we will then experience a shortage of food.

Such a highly centralized system of agriculture is also sickening our population. Incidences of obesity and diabetes have risen dramatically, coinciding with the abundance of processed foods in our diets, foods made from commodity crops such as corn, soybeans, beef and pork. Also, food-borne pathogens like *Salmonella* and *E. coli* are increasingly contaminating our produce. Such contaminations wouldn't be such a dire health threat in a decentralized system of agriculture. But as it stands, a single infection to a peanut processing plant in Georgia, or inside a pepper-packing plant in Texas, has health implications across the country.

Similarly, bioterrorism is much more destructive with a centralized system of agriculture. Even if a single malicious individual armed with a canister of toxins contaminates produce inside just one distribution plant, that distribution plant might deliver produce consumed across the country.

What we are witnessing is that America is experiencing difficulty adequately and reliably feeding its citizens. The increasing price of food due to oil; the alarming rates of diet-related disease; the frequency of infections from food-borne pathogens; the increased risk of bioterrorism; all these recent events illuminate just how tenuous food security is in America. And this nation is just now discovering what third-world nations have known all along: that food security is economic security is national security.

**Q In your book, you describe food choice (or lack thereof) as a crisis in social equity—how did the “food gap” evolve, and how do you propose closing it?**

The food gap in this country emerged shortly after World War II, during the suburban housing boom. As large numbers of urbanites left the city, emigrating to greenfield subdivisions, retail followed. As many people know, department stores left the center cities, following the people (and their money) to the suburbs. What is less well known is that supermarkets and grocery stores followed the same paths as the department stores. Thus, the number of places where people could purchase things in the center city—be it shoes, cars, even food—dwindled. Today, there are many large areas of cities without a single grocery store, creating what many refer to as “food deserts”. Residents of these food deserts are often without adequate public or private transportation to get them to the suburban grocery stores to buy food. The only food outlets that proliferate in these food deserts are fast-food chains, which helps explain the high incidences of obesity and diabetes in economically depressed neighborhoods.

The problem is that grocery stores, like department stores, will always follow the money in a capitalistic society. The task that needs to be undertaken by municipalities is to narrow the food gap in the older central cities by ensuring residents of these neighborhoods have access to cheap, fresh, wholesome food. That is where a system of public produce can help. By raising food on underutilized public space in these distressed neighborhoods, municipalities can begin to offer its citizens food choices, which goes a long way toward establishing food security.

**Q Where has public agriculture proved successful? Are there American examples? And is this something that works better in certain regions, or in larger cities versus smaller towns?**

In many third world countries, public agriculture at the municipal level is imperative for food security. The exemplar city is Havana, Cuba, which had to scramble to ensure food security during the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the tightened US economic embargo. Today, “popular gardens”—small parcels of state-owned land cultivated by the public—dominate the public spaces in Havana.

Foreign countries aside, America has already experienced success with public agriculture. During World War II, this nation was faced with severe food shortages. The best strategy to improve food security at that time? The Victory Garden Campaign, a call for the public to use public lands to grow fresh fruit and vegetables. During that campaign, Victory Gardens supplied 40% of the nation's vegetables, a remarkable achievement given that the larger farms were growing food to nourish our troops and Allies across the Atlantic.

Today, many cities, like Boston and San Francisco, continue to recognize the inherent benefits and stronger food security potential of those former Victory Gardens. Other cities, like Des Moines and Portland, are tackling issues of food security through the installation and management of public gardens on public lands using public staff from their Parks and Recreation Departments. Seattle and Providence, Rhode Island, are incorporating gardens into their comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances. And Chicago has taken up bee-keeping in the city, producing honey for residents of and visitors to the Windy City.

It doesn't matter if you live in a small rural town or a large metropolis. Everyone has to eat, and if there is a certain population of have-nots, public agriculture will be successful.

**Q      How can cities design or re-design public spaces to incorporate food growth?**

The public spaces in our communities--street rights-of-way, parks, downtown plazas and city squares, parking lots, transportation and utility easements, floodplains, and the grounds around our schools, libraries, courthouses, jails, and city halls—all possess, at the very least, a modicum of landscaping. The problem is that these trees, shrubs, and groundcovers are primarily chosen for aesthetic purposes. Understanding the strong connection humans have to plants and nature, and the stronger connection we have to food, it is quite easy to design public spaces so that the landscape provides not only nourishment for our souls, but for our bodies as well. The task facing the astute public space designer is to craft a plant palette that blends aesthetics with sustenance in a low-maintenance package. It doesn't take much room to grow an abundant, diverse supply of food, and many food crops, if chosen appropriately, thrive with no more upkeep than it takes to keep ornamental plants looking good.

I should clarify, the goal of public space agriculture is not to grow crops in the place of fountains, playgrounds, benches, enriched paving, decorative lights, or other accoutrements that people find engaging. Rather, the goal is to attract still more people to public space, by offering something of high public value; namely, food. Cities must critically examine the current landscaping trends of its myriad public spaces, and officials need to ask "How might the plants used in public space provide more value to the public?" Food is an excellent measure of public value.

**Q     If public produce is really free and available for everyone, what stops an individual or group from over-harvesting? How should city officials monitor citizen involvement? What are the rules?**

The beauty—and some might argue the bane—of public produce is that anyone and everyone is entitled to harvest. That is the one and only rule, really. Over-harvesting fresh fruit and vegetables typically does not destroy the overall resource, however, unlike over-harvesting oysters from the estuary. Instead, the problem could be that one individual harvests everything in the neighborhood park, leaving nothing behind for the other residents. A particularly unscrupulous individual could harvest all the peaches from the modest orchard, only to sell those peaches back to the neighborhood at the local farmers' market. Which brings up an important point with regard to over-harvesting fresh produce. Over-harvesting occurs only if there is proven monetary incentive. In other words, people do not usually over-harvest to feed themselves and their families, but do so if they can sell their harvested goods for financial gain.

The surest way to prevent such an unscrupulous individual or group from over-harvesting is to plant an abundant and diverse food supply. If the food supply is readily available, the market demand for those locally grown peaches, for example, lessens, as peaches are plentiful throughout the city.

Education goes a long way, and sometimes people may be over-harvesting without knowing—or meaning—to. A simple sign posted in public space—encouraging folks to harvest the produce but urging them to leave some behind for others, would likely take care of unintended over-harvesting.

Another related concern is the perennial threat of reckless, malicious vandalism. There will always be those individuals who relish destroying what others value. Strategies for this are perhaps most difficult to craft, given the seemingly erratic nature of vandals. Of course, one can secure the food at night, when much of the vandalism occurs in the city (this strategy might also help protect the food from hungry nocturnal critters as well). However, such an enclosure might be an aesthetic affront, not to mention a maintenance burden to ensure the enclosure is opened again every morning to the public. The best strategy may be to simply avoid those public spaces where vandalism (and vermin) are known to frequent, and instead, establish public produce gardens amidst the dense neighborhoods, where public spaces have many eyes on the street, day and night.

**Q     What role does water play? Should water be a concern?**

Water is always a concern, regardless of where we live. Climate change is creating more frequent weather aberrations, inundating some areas of the country with water and leaving others parched. In 2008, California experienced the driest Spring in almost a century, prompting Governor Schwarzenegger to seek federal aid for farmers. Not only did the drought

affect Californians, but because the state supplies the bulk of this nation's fresh fruits and vegetables, all Americans were impacted. At the same time California was waterless, Iowa was water-logged. 2008 produced torrential rains throughout the Midwest, flooding much of the corn and soybean fields. Scientists studying climate change are predicting more erratic rainfall, and even water shortages, in the near future for the Heartland, where the majority of our nation's commodity crops (both plant and animal) are produced. This region has almost always experienced reliably adequate rainfall throughout the growing season. Just one dry season in Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska, however, could spell catastrophe for our country. On the surface, it seems quixotic that a local weather anomaly would have such a profound effect nationally, but such is the Achilles' heel of our centralized system of agriculture.

Creating smaller-scale, more locally abundant sources of food production helps mitigate the devastating impacts a weather aberration in one part of the country has on the entire nation. As we move toward a more localized system of food production, we should also begin implementing—and perfecting—dry-farming techniques. Growing crops indigenous to an area can also help in reducing water demands, especially in the normally dry regions of our country, such as the Southwest. And we will have to rediscover many other food crops so that if such a weather anomaly does destroy the large diversity of produce in California, people around the country will still have a variety of fresh foods to consume.

**Q     Why should public agriculture be under municipal, rather than a county or national, authority?**

Government works best when it is closest to the people, and no form of government understands the unique culture, values, and needs of a city's citizenry better than the local municipality. Our centralized system of agriculture, subsidized by our nation's government, is proving fallible, endangering the health of the environment and the American public. A centralized system of agriculture is also largely homogenous, growing only those crops that lend themselves to the mechanization that is necessary for large-scale farming. Such homogeneity of food does little to support the cultural traditions and cuisines of our incredibly diverse population.

County governments have the strongest impact in unincorporated and non-urbanized areas, places that are often far from reach for a town's or city's citizens. Public agriculture needs to be freely accessible to the public, meaning it should abound very near our residences, workplaces, schools, places of commerce, and recreation. A 40-minute drive to county lands for fresh produce hardly qualifies as publicly accessible. By having food production close to the people, under the authority of the municipality, consumers are also given a significant voice in what, where, and how food is produced.