REVISED & EXPANDED

PUBLIC

Cultivating Our Parks,

Plazas, and Streets

for Healthier Cities

PRODUCT

Food security • Edible schoolyards
• Guerilla gardeners • Serendipitous
sustenance • **Affordable local food** •
Urban agriculture | "This book is at
the cutting edge of today's food
revolution." —Marion Nestle, author
of *What to Eat* | Public foraging •
Tomatoes at City Hall • Peach trees
in the median • **Food literacy** • Wild
edibles • Hazelnuts in the park •
Healthy eating • Rooftop agriculture

Darrin Nordahl

PUBLIC PRODUCE

Public Produce

Cultivating Our Parks, Plazas,
and Streets for Healthier Cities

Darrin Nordahl

Washington | Covelo | London

Copyright © 2014 Darrin Nordahl

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher: Island Press, 2000 M St NW, Suite 650, Washington DC 20036

Island Press is a trademark of The Center for Resource Economics.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nordahl, Darrin.

Public produce : cultivating our parks, plazas, and streets for healthier cities /
Darrin Nordahl.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-61091-549-6 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 1-61091-549-6 (pbk. :
alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-61091-550-2 (ebook) — ISBN 1-61091-550-X
(ebook) 1. Urban agriculture. 2. Urban gardening. 3. City planning—Health
aspects. 4. Streetscapes (Urban design) I. Title.

S441.N76 2014

635.09173'2—dc23

2014008745

♻️ Printed on recycled, acid-free paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Keywords: Beacon Food Forest, Berkeley, Calgary, Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture, Chicago, community garden, community-supported agriculture, Detroit, Edible Schoolyard, farmers' market, food desert, food justice, food literacy, food safety, food security, forage, Kamloops, local food, Los Angeles, Michael Pollan, New York City, obesity, Portland, Provo, public health, public policy, public space, Ron Finley, San Francisco, Seattle, slow food, social equity, transitional gardens, urban agriculture, urban design, urban farming, Worthington, victory garden

*For Lara, Noe, Nate, and Mia
and for Tom Flaherty*

Contents

Flashback: Notes on the Updated Edition	xi
Introduction: A Guerilla on Strawberry Street	1
Chapter 1: Food Security	17
Chapter 2: The Cost of Healthy Calories	43
Chapter 3: Public Space, Public Officials, Public Policy	55
Chapter 4: To Glean and Forage in the City	81
Chapter 5: Maintenance and Aesthetics	107
Chapter 6: Food Literacy	145
Conclusion: Community Health and Prosperity	171
Acknowledgments	185
Notes	189
Selected Bibliography	201

Flashback: Notes on the Updated Edition

It's 2009. America's economic crisis that tipped two years ago has triggered a global recession. Every month, hundreds of thousands of American workers find themselves out of a job and the unemployment rate climbs above 10 percent. Home prices continue to freefall while gasoline prices creep higher. Food banks across the country report record numbers of folks seeking hunger relief. America's economy is the shakiest it has been since the Great Depression, coercing Congress to pass the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: an 800-billion-dollar tourniquet to stem the financial bleeding.

An idea emerges from the economic wallows of 2009. *Public Produce* is published, a timely response to the legions of Americans who suddenly have to choose between eating or paying rent. Turning public space into a community horn of plenty could be an effective stimulus package in its own right. But it is only an idea, a nascent strategy to bolster the health and wealth of a society reeling from the Great Recession.

Flash forward five years. Communities are digging out of the financial rubble and public produce is blossoming. Vegetable gardens welcome citizens to city halls from Bainbridge Island to Baltimore. Seattleites are cultivating street medians and Portlanders are gleaning thousands of pounds of apples, plums, and cherries from neighborhood trees. But these civic fruits and vegetables aren't confined to the United States. Across the 49th parallel, Calgary is planting fruit orchards in community parks, and an empty lot in downtown Kamloops, British Columbia, is transformed into a veritable alfresco produce aisle.

What a difference a half decade makes.

When I wrote *Public Produce* in 2009, I was focusing a vision. Someone planted an apple tree in a public park in Berkeley, California, while a homeowner a few blocks over planted a fig tree along the sidewalk. A public official in one Iowa town talked about creating an edible oasis from a decrepit parking lot, while another in Iowa's capital sought to revitalize several blocks of a distressed neighborhood by planting fruit and nut trees. The initiatives were inspiring, and the potential to weave these smaller, isolated efforts into something larger and more cohesive compelled me to write the book. I thought if more civic leaders took up similar food-based initiatives, and implemented them on a larger, more integrated network of urban space, then public produce could help bolster food security and community prosperity amid troubled economic times. The idea was burgeoning in 2009, but there were few concrete examples of action.

Today, things are different. Public produce is no longer just a "Gosh, wouldn't it be nice if we could grow fruits and vegetables for the public to harvest?" idea. Municipalities across the United States and Canada are doing it. And they have been doing it for the last five years. This revised edition profiles those communities and community officials that are rethinking the role of public space in cities, and how our parks, plazas, squares, and streets can sustain health and happiness through fresh produce.

But my focus has also changed. In the first edition of *Public Produce*, I looked at how public space and public policy could work together to reduce food insecurity, primarily for the destitute and perennially hungry. Indeed, when even the middle class began to wonder where their next meal would come from, I felt it was our societal obligation to provide healthy, low-cost food options to those down on their luck.

In the course of five years, I discovered that regardless of our particular economic station, we all benefit from better access to

fresh fruits and vegetables. Most people desire to eat healthier and have an innate passion for good food. Most also have an innate passion for nature. We love witnessing plants transform into ripe produce, reminding us food does not originate from the supermarket, but from the soil. And we revel in the wonderment in children's eyes when they pluck an apple off a tree or a carrot from the ground. In other words, offering the opportunity to pick a meal from the park or street median has value to more folks than just the impoverished.

Besides, the food headlines of 2009 have hardly changed five years later. Yes, our pocketbooks are getting fatter; but so are we. Obesity rates continue to balloon in this country, and the epidemic is the focus of many a news story. Pathogen outbreaks, the rising cost of food, and the growing demand for local food options continue to make the front page as well. We as a nation are becoming increasingly concerned with where our food comes from and how it is produced. These frequent exposés have alerted civic leaders to the inextricable bonds between food, community, and our quality of life.

I was also concerned that by focusing heavily on the poor, this concept of growing fruits and vegetables in public space for anyone to harvest would only be embraced by liberals (and even then, only those on the Left Coast). But I needn't have worried. I've learned in the last five years that public produce appeases both party platforms. It is a form of social equity and food justice, and reconnects us to our agrarian past. Seeing fruits and vegetables in the public spaces we pass by daily also teaches us about food, where it comes from, and how to grow it. Many of the public produce programs are rooted in education, teaching us how to be more self-reliant. Public produce is not a government handout, but a life skill to help us get by.

If you haven't read the first edition of *Public Produce*, this new, completely revised version is all you'll need to be inspired by and learn from the pioneering public officials who have implemented

fruit and vegetable gardens to correct what many think are intractable problems: food insecurity and our declining health and wealth.

If you *have* read the first edition, first let me say thank you. But let me also say that you will find this update to *Public Produce* even more appetizing. Every chapter has been extensively revised. This is a livelier publication, and the examples I have included in this edition are even more relevant and provocative. The chapter on maintenance and aesthetics (chapter 5) is particularly useful. It has been completely updated, now packed with insights from public officials who have managed public produce gardens for the last five years. I have learned much in the last half decade from these innovative souls, and you will, too.