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Sustainability gains ground

By Chrisanne Beckner

In an effort to make the city ever more "sustainable," Sacramento gardeners have been lobbying since 2004 to allow residents to grow vegetables and fruits in their front yards. Current zoning code only allows for low groundcover or turf. This January, gardeners came one step closer to winning the war against fruits and veggies when the Sacramento Planning Commission voted unanimously to recommend changes to the zoning code that would put no restrictions on front-yard gardens.

Sue Jennings, co-chairperson of Sacramento Citizens for Sustainable Landscapes, noted that Sacramento's gorgeous tree canopy sometimes shades backyards so well that people can't grow sun-starved plants, like tomato vines, except for in their front yards. But there are environmental benefits to front-yard gardens, too. They use less water and fewer toxic pesticides than lawns; they reuse green waste as mulch and, most importantly, they produce food.

"This has a lot to do with food security, let alone people's abilities to have diverse landscapes," Jennings said.

Other supporters focused on the benefits to poor families. "Edible landscaping, like front-yard gardening, creates a renewable source of nutritious affordable food," wrote Melissa Ortiz-Gray, program manager of the Sacramento Hunger Coalition. According to data from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, 22,000 low-income adults experienced episodes of hunger in 2004.

The Planning Commission was won over, but the Sacramento City Council will have the last word. City representative Amy Williams said the council tentatively will take up the issue on March 20.

"When we get to City Council," said Jennings, "we don't feel like this is the end. We want to keep educating the city on the benefits of diverse landscapes. ... This really could become a very big issue. Our weather is changing. Lots of things are changing in our world."



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