



## Skid Row Grows Green

Art Project to Remove Urban Blight Touches More Than Street Corners

By Evan George

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After weeks of soaking up sun, water and tender loving care in a garden plot along a desolate stretch of Stanford Street in Skid Row, fruit and flowers had bloomed. Still, one scrappy seedling worried Roland Burris. So, when nothing else worked, the gardener resorted to drastic measures: He sang the struggling plant Elvis hits.

One week later it burst into a fledgling sunflower.

Something else had changed, too. Burris, 52, a longtime Skid Row resident and former gardener, was not only back tilling soil, he was singing again.

"I used to be an Elvis impersonator," said Burris. Then, he said, an anxiety condition related to post traumatic stress disorder halted his performing.

Now, he belts out oldies to the three garden plots he oversees on a daily basis while passersby - including the homeless, mentally ill and recovering residents - stop and marvel at his green thumb.

Many of his neighbors at the Lamp Lodge, a transitional housing complex at 660 Stanford St., also call the garden therapeutic. Residents there have turned to talking about seed varieties, photosynthesis and soil filtration instead of focusing solely on darker subjects like the daily drug deals they see from their front stoop.

"After so many times of seeing things destroyed, it's nice to see things grow," Burris said while watering clumps of peppermint and sweet basil, a forest of squash blossoms and heads of lettuce.

The garden is part of a new and unusual experiment to green Downtown's grittiest streets, fostered by artist Lauren Bon and her Downtown-based organization, Farmlab, the unconventional but well-funded collective that evolved from the Not a Cornfield project.

On June 16, Farmlab distributed 23 portable gardens in the form of industrial-sized planter boxes that they call Skid Row Agbins (short for "agriculture") around the barren, trash-strewn blocks.

A handful of shelters and supportive housing providers, including Lamp, the Midnight Mission, the Rainbow Apartments and the Downtown Women's Center, received free garden bins. Some sit greening concrete courtyards while others, like the three in front of Lamp Lodge, grow exposed to the street.

Farmlab estimates the bins cost as much as \$6,000 each to outfit and move.

Since they were dropped onto Skid Row, seeds have sprouted into flowers and small crops of produce. Still, the biggest growth spurts have occurred in the people tending to the plants, supporters said.

A case manager at Lamp who admitted he was initially afraid that transient passersby would damage the bins said it has instead encouraged Lamp residents to watch guardedly over their block. Burris said some residents have a newfound pride for their neighborhood.

"They'll chew someone out if they see them messing with the plants," he said.

At the Downtown Women's Center, residents care for three bins and harvest their mint to throw tea parties. At the Rainbow Apartments, a permanent supportive housing project run by Skid Row Housing Trust, a gardening club has bloomed around the one bin they watch over.

"The simple provision of a small patch of soil and plants has been a catalyst for strengthening a sense of health and community for our residents," said Mike Alvidrez, executive director of SRHT. "We're hopeful that this partnership can be expanded to more permanent supportive housing developments and other sites throughout the community."

Cross-pollinating social activism with artistic statement, the Agbin project started at Farmlab's own garden. In an outdoor pavilion under the Spring Street Bridge where the group holds workshops and other events, Farmlab members have nurtured an impressive canopy of plants born from seeds salvaged from the bulldozed South Central Farm.

According to a spokesman for Farmlab, the Agbin project began when Bon and other artists questioned how they could help transplant the endangered South Central Farm - its soil, plants and trees - and create public gardens that wouldn't be threatened by future land seizures.

One answer was garden bins on wheels.

A team that included Jaime Lopez Wolters, a lead gardener on the Not a Cornfield project, set to work on designing portable gardens using donated produce containers. They eventually scrapped the idea of wheels and focused on large, insulated planters that could be distributed around city sidewalks. Then Bon suggested they put them in a place that needed living plants the most: Skid Row.

When Farmlab approached members of the community, some jumped at the idea, but others found it farfetched.

"It was completely new terrain, and a gamble in a sense," said Wolters. "When we talked to people about it many of them said, 'They're just going to get trashed.'"

In some cases, that's what happened.

Two bins placed at Crocker and Sixth streets without an agency or individual to care for them were considered an experiment, Wolters said. Within days, all of the seedlings were ripped out of the soil and replaced with trash.

Three other bins outside Lamp Village near Fifth and Crocker streets initially fared well, but were moved inside a courtyard partly to prevent homeless encampments from forming against the side of the planters.

Two blocks down, Burris' garden was threatened when police officers mistook volcanic ash fertilizer for something else.

"They thought it was crack people were stashing," said Burris, adding that since switching fertilizers the LAPD has encouraged the project.

With the help of five volunteer gardeners and the Farmlab team, the Agbin campaign has begun to yield enough success that organizers are considering how to expand the project.

Although he jokingly credits his Elvis serenades for the garden's growth, Burris acknowledged that he and other residents have discovered green thumb tricks through trial and error. To shade smaller plants, for instance, he added tall Ficus trees to the bins.

Encouraged by the building manager and the nonprofit that runs Lamp Lodge, Burris has cultivated a small farm's worth of edible plants and transplanted them from the bins to the side of the complex. Last week he had six Myrtle trees delivered to plant in the adjacent parking lot.

The garden not only gives Burris a reason to wake up before sunrise and get to work, he said, but has inspired a mindset of problem-solving rarely required by the day-to-day activities in transitional housing.

It's a sentiment echoed by Jack Cooley, 42, a member of the new gardening club at the Rainbow Apartments at 643 S. San Pedro St. When bean plants started struggling, the group had to read up on worms and other insects. As tomato plants withered in the heat, the gardeners used umbrellas to shade them from the mid-day sun.

"This has been a really great diversion," Cooley said. "It diverts from what seems to be the primary discussion around here - staying off drugs and getting your act together."

According to Cooley, a formerly homeless veteran who was diagnosed as schizophrenic two years ago, the opportunity for Rainbow residents to focus on something beside their own rehabilitation is priceless.

He did have one concern though.

"We want more bins," Cooley said.