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Planting fruit trees is part of hurricane recovery

By **Lolis E Elie**
November 10, 2009, 7:30PM

Listening to Cem Akin, one gets the impression that fruit trees can save the world.

It does seem obvious," he said, shovel in hand, at Our School at Blair Grocery in the Lower 9th Ward. "If you are going to plant a tree, why not plant a tree that is going to provide shade, improve the air, water and soil, provide life-giving nutrition and enrich folks -- and empower activists to take positive action."



Matthew Hinton / The Times-Picayune

Josh Jones, 18, right, a student at Our School at Blair Grocery in the Lower 9th Ward, digs a hole for a satsuma tree with the help of Parkway Partners volunteer Calvin Lopes at the school Friday. Parkway Partners and the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation lead a program to plant fruit trees in community gardens and schools in areas damaged by Hurricane Katrina.

Akin is executive director of the **Fruit Tree Planting Foundation**, a California-based charity that has brought its gospel of resurgence through fruit trees to impoverished areas around the world. Having planted fruit trees in India, Kenya and Brazil, and nearer places like York, Ala., as well as on Indian reservations around the country, the group descended on New Orleans this week.

Much like those other areas, New Orleans is in need of fruit trees and all of the amenities they can provide.

"It's been estimated that we lost 80 percent of our fruit trees during the storm," said Jean Fahr, executive director of **Parkway Partners in New Orleans**, referring to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "We had up to 154

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community gardens at one time. We had about 50 right before the storm."

About 30 of those community gardens have returned.

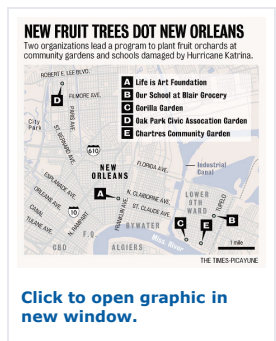
"That means neighbors are no longer sharing with each other, and there's less fruit on the table," she said.

The Fruit Tree Planting Foundation teamed up with Parkway Partners, a nonprofit group, last week to plant a total of 87 fig, persimmon and citrus trees at five sites around the city. Fahr hopes that those trees can help re-establish some of the old community gardens.

"A community garden requires community first, and most of the returning neighborhoods don't have the wherewithal to commit to a community garden," she said. "So we've suggested that they commit to orchards first. It's low maintenance, but it's highly productive."

Thursday, Friday and Saturday, volunteers from Parkway Partners, the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation and various neighborhood groups were planting trees. The Oak Park Civic Association Garden, the Life is Art Foundation on North Villere Street in the 7th Ward, and three locations in the Lower 9th Ward, Our School at Blair Grocery, Gorilla Garden and the Chartres Community Garden, are all recipients of fruit tree largesse.

The school in the grocery store is a particularly appropriate location for these efforts.



Founded by Nat Turner, an education professor who moved to New Orleans from New York in 2006, the school provides an alternative high school education for at-risk students.

In addition to basic courses required for GED preparation, the half dozen or so students also study agriculture, the building trades, history and a course called "food justice" in which they learn about food distribution and production in their community.

The school is housed in an old neighborhood grocery store. Next to the store building is a large garden in which students raise chickens

and grow greens, bell peppers and now, kumquats, figs, grapefruit and satsumas.

With a 10-year lease from the owners of the store, the school is providing food for the community much as the grocery store did in the past.

The school has about a half-dozen students and nearly that many staff members.

"I missed too many days in my other school," said Josh Jones, 18, who enrolled at Our School at Blair Grocery last spring after he was expelled from Rabouin. "They told me about Mr. Turner, and he came the next day and talked to me about his school -- and that's been since April.

"My attendance got a little better because there's so much stuff you can learn," said Jones, who is partial to the Swiss chard from the garden.

Turner has several goals. He is trying to connect his students to real-world experiences that can help them function more effectively as citizens, and he also is providing fresh produce to a community that has few outlets for such sustenance.

Now, neighbors are free to come and pick food from the garden. Mary Thomas, who lives around the corner on Alabo Street, has been doing just that.

She shares the food she prepares with the students and staff at the school. Such is her love for garden fresh produce that neighbors often miss her 9th Ward pedigree.

"I'm not from the country, but most people think I am," said Thomas, 67, who moved back to the city in 2006 after Katrina.

She laments the dearth of places to buy fresh produce.

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"As far as cooking fresh, I wish some stores would open up down here," she said. "The prices at the corner stores are too high."

Turner is one step of ahead of them. Starting on Sunday , the school will operate a market at which it also will sell produce from the **Hollygrove Market and Farm**.

Lolis Eric Elie can be reached at lelie@timespicayune.com or 504.826.3330.

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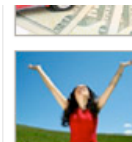
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