



Will Cities Soon Be Able to Feed Themselves?

By [Emily Wilson](#), [AlterNet](#). Posted [October 2, 2008](#).

A growing interest in urban farming is sprouting all kinds of new ideas -- including growing food in high-rises.

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Skyrocketing food costs, worries about food security and an urge to do things ourselves have led to a huge surge in urban farming -- gardens in backyards, on roofs, in abandoned lots and even, in the dream of a Columbia professor and his students, in high-rise buildings in the middle of cities.

During World Wars I and II, victory gardens were considered a patriotic effort to take the pressure off the food supply and to boost morale by having people see their labor translated into produce.

An urban farmer in Oakland, Esperanza Pallana, doesn't necessarily garden as a patriotic effort, but she does enjoy what her work in the garden gives her.

"There are so many things I like about it, besides just having a food supply, though it is like magic to go out in backyard and get eggs that are fresh and delicious and to have a source of honey," she says. "It's so satisfying when I sit down to a meal and 75 percent is straight out of the backyard."

Pallana didn't start her garden with the thought of growing anything edible -- she merely wanted to fix up her front yard, which was so messy that people routinely threw trash in it. A peach tree in the yard inspired her to plant more food, but she says she just bought things at the nursery and put them in the ground; she had no idea about harvesting the food. After birds ate the broccoli she had planted, she determined to learn what she was doing and started again. Now her garden, along with produce, includes bees, turkeys and chickens.

Pallana's interest in soil and food systems has taken over her life. She now works at Urban Sprouts, a nonprofit school gardens organization, and she says she has seen the interest in urban farming grow in the four years she has been doing it.

"When we built our chicken coop, we had to design it ourselves -- I couldn't find anything about how to do it," she says. "Now there are all these books and designs online. I just see a lot of excitement and enthusiasm about this."

Barbara Finin, the executive director of Oakland's City Slicker Farm, also sees that excitement with the people she works with in the organization's Backyard Garden Program, which helps low-income people start their own gardens.

"They tell us they didn't think it was possible to get this from a dirt patch full of weeds," Finin says. "People feel like they have access

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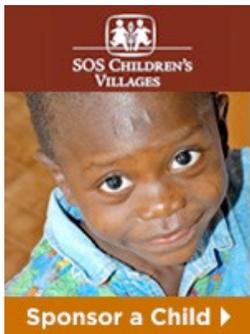
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in their backyard and they can go to pick some lettuce and collards and cook. They are really engaged with, literally, the fruits of their labor."

Having accessible healthy food is particularly important in West Oakland, where City Slicker Farm is located, Finin says. The 21,000 residents have to leave their neighborhood to get to a grocery store, and many of them, she adds, don't have a car. To meet that immediate need for fresh food, City Slicker started in 2001 by setting up a stand and giving away food; now the organization has six lots that produce about 10,000 pounds of produce, which is sold on a sliding scale.

More and more urban agriculture projects are springing up throughout the country. When Taja Sevelle moved to Detroit in 2005 and saw the hunger, vacant lots and health problems associated with lack of fresh food, she decided that growing food on unused land was the answer. Her organization, Urban Farming, now has about 600 community gardens, many of them in Detroit, but throughout the United States and the world as well. Its lofty mission is to "eradicate hunger."

This may seem daunting, but Executive Director Sevelle, who studied to be a botanist before signing a record contract with Prince, thinks this is a reachable goal. She points to the success of the victory gardens and says her organization fed about a quarter of a million people in Detroit last year.

"This is absolutely doable. It needs to be solved and can be solved," she says. "More and more I'm seeing and hearing people making bold statements. Look at the amazing things we've done as humans. If we're able to go to the moon, certainly we can solve the problem of hunger."

Sevelle says a standard size garden of 20 feet by 20 feet will produce a quarter to a third of a ton of food and that food banks define a meal as one pound of food. Savelle sees opportunity to grow that food everywhere: Her organization plants school and rooftop gardens, and works with corporations to do edible landscaping.

But we don't live by produce alone. Kristin Reynolds, from the Small Farm Program at the University of California, applauds people's efforts to grow food for themselves, but she thinks people wouldn't be able to really feed themselves without growing grains.

"I think it would be very difficult to be self-sufficient," she says. "And I question whether that is the best use of space."

Urban farming the way Columbia University professor Dickson Despommier envisions it includes grains. Despommier and his graduate students in a medical ecology class came up with a plan they call vertical farming, which would allow farming in high-rises. It's estimated that by 2050, the population will grow by at least 3 billion and about 80 percent of the world will live in urban centers. That means we need to find a new way to produce more food, Despommier says. And corn, wheat and rice are easy to grow indoors, says the professor of environmental health sciences and microbiology.

RUBEN NAVARRETE

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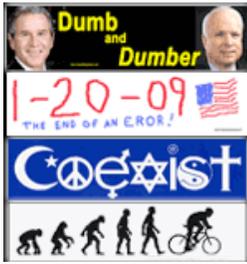
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Emily Wilson is a freelance writer and teaches basic skills at City College of San Francisco.

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Backyards yes; vertical no

Posted by: Jim on Oct 2, 2008 4:13 AM
 Current rating: **5** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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I farm, in the country where there are acres of land available. Backyards and rooftops for produce sounds like a great idea. When people experience the work, they may even be willing to pay us farmers better, who make less than minimum wage (not counting the good food we eat).

But artificial light? Maybe using solar power? It will still take about the same number of acres of solar panels or collectors to get enough energy to get enough light to grow the crops -- most likely more land area due to the losses in converting light to electricity and the losses of transmission.

Well, maybe it will work when we get our basement cold fusion generators working!

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- [» Cold Fusion](#) Posted by: benzene
- [» RE: Cold Fusion](#) Posted by: badkitty
- [» no weather-related disasters, no plant diseases ... NO FLAVOR](#) Posted by: Smackback
- [» RE: How very luddite of you](#) Posted by: rfrancis@godisdead.com

Integrate Vertical Crop Farming with Fish Farming

Posted by: benzene on Oct 2, 2008 4:47 AM
 Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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Because fish poop. The water that the fish are grown in would need to be changed through and filtered to keep it clean enough so they don't die off or anything. Plant roots make pretty good filters. So use the nutrient-rich (fish poop fertilizer!) fish water to grow the plants, and then cycle the water filtered through the plants back to the fish. In this way, theoretically you'd only lose water when it gets shipped out inside the food, thus reducing the inputs.

Net result: urban grown veggies/fruits/grains + urban grown protein.

The details of this weren't mentioned in the article above, but if the Microbiologist's designs for his vertical farm don't let in sunlight readily, then he should be slapped for stupidity a couple of times. Yes, we can efficiently grow stuff with Grow-Lights, but to rely entirely upon them is stupid. What happens to the growing plants if the electrical grid shorts out for a couple of days? Sunlight is indeed free, and by using parabolic mirrors and sealed fiberoptic cables, it could be transported basically anywhere within the

building. Either way, the design would score a lot of Common-Sense Points if it were modular and easily mass-producible.

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These Tough Times

Posted by: motorchickd on Oct 2, 2008 5:26 AM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

These Tough Times are different than the 1930 Tough Times for three big reasons. We import so much, like food for instance. But it does not stop there. In 1930 we grew our own food, we sewed our own clothes, we had manufacturing. Thanks again to CEOs who wanted to boost their bottom line. We lost jobs overseas and now we make nothing except debt. That's the second thing. The third difference between Tough Times now and then is back then we didn't have so many people who drove everywhere and needed so much gas and oil. So that's three big differences. We don't manufacture now like then. Now we are in a lot of debt to other countries unlike then. And we import so much oil unlike then. Depressing huh.

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>> **RE: Welcome to our Third World banana republic** Posted by: Sushi

Vertical Farming Makes Sense if it is Automated

Posted by: rfrancis@godisdead.com on Oct 2, 2008 6:06 AM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

If one can remove the human labor aspect to vertical farming and completely automate the process, I think that might help a lot in overcoming increased electricity usage.

It wouldn't take much, a couple of off the shelf Sony robotic arms that can tie down branches, pick fruits and veggies, change light bulbs.

Envision the towers in the matrix that housed people. Each pod would be a grow chamber. A track would exist so the robotic arm assembly can move vertically or horizontally and get to any grow chamber.

From there using preprogrammed routines the robotic arm assembly would perform all the normal maintenance functions needed through the growing process, then move on to the next chamber.

This could all be housed in the central core of a building, areas that don't make for great rooms for people because of the lack of windows. Sort of a building within a building.

The only other answer I can see is to just keep bulldozing land, displacing animals from their natural habitats, driving them to extinction.

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A Loaf of Bread was about \$0.53 In 1981-Do the math

Posted by: Purple Girl on Oct 2, 2008 6:09 AM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

So prior to the Huge Corp takeover of Our agricultural Economy, our bread cost about 500% LESS then it does today...Isn't cost of Living considered 4% per year? What the hell kind of math is it when a Product cost goes up about 18.5% every Year!!!! So Our supposed 'Cost of Living' Raises are About 14% behind the ACTUAL COST OF LIVING! So where is the Difference made Up between cost and wages...Credit Cards (Blood thirsty Bankers)!so Tell Me Again How Nobody Saw this Economic meltdown Coming for the last 27 yrs!?! Then Explain to me again WHY We should Bail Out an Industry basically Working as the Middle men Profiteers in this National Scam!

So Who is laso Sucking Off Our National Teat- Big AgriCorps. taking out loans to do What?...Increase the Cost of our food- if cost of living and cost of Products remain even, we'd only be spending about \$1.25 per Loaf of Bread today. So Big agri Business has FAILED at it's very core Claim- it has not made Food more economical. It has also Failed to Assure a Higher Standard of Food Safety. Infact they have not only caused more food borne illnes outbreaks and Deaths, they have increased the Size of those who are at risk for the illness. By Transporting food Items across the Country - or World- which could be produced Locally- they have assured far Higher numbers of types of outbreaks and Scope of Outbreaks and Their Impact on the scoiety as a whole. Add to that the Numerous cases of Animal Abuse at the hands of 9-5 'for the Paycheck Only' Employees of these Mass Facilities. They Know their Job - but they Don't know Animal Husbandry, nor are the Corps apparently Training them, or even care to! Privatization - ei 'Trickle Down' from the Corps droppings Economic Stratedgy has FAILED in All Areas.Reagans Puppet masters Economic Highjacking has Led this Country to the Drain!We ahve been circling for the last 2 decades- We Knew 'Shit Rolls Down Hill' economics was a Scam (TREASON) as soon as He uttered it's Shortend Title! And have screamed evey time it took down one more essential aspect of Our Democratic Free Market!

Frankly I admire the Chinese for One thing... their willingness to hold top officials Legally guilty for their part in Undermining Their Economy...They Lop Off their Heads Within a week!Now Theres a Tradition WE should Embrace!

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Natchmo

Posted by: jejonach on Oct 2, 2008 7:01 AM
 Current rating: **5** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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Ah, urban gardening. Another idea coming around again. Perhaps this time it will find traction. In the late 1970's the US Dept. of HUD tried to develop a program of encouraging neighborhood groups in cities to do both rooftop farming and gleaning and redoing empty lots as community farms. Big effort I recall in LA, parts of Harlem and a few others. The clock has come around. Hopefully, for a LOT of other reasons, there should be more success this time around.

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Too Much Of A Good Thing Turns It Bad

Posted by: Last Chance on Oct 2, 2008 7:24 AM
 Current rating: **3** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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The only reason people think about "vertical farming" is because the number of hungry mouths keeps growing by millions every year. Peacefully reduce the human population and there will be plenty of land and food for everyone.

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I suspect that growing crops indoors will be too energy-intensive

Posted by: Jasonix on Oct 2, 2008 8:12 AM
 Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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It's obvious that the person quoted in this article about growing food vertically is someone who takes alternative energy hype for granted and hasn't really thought about the limitations of these fuel sources. Growing food is a pretty energy-intensive process, and he assumes we'll just switch from fossil fuels to biofuels and solar and keep humming along like before. It won't work that way - energy is going to get much scarcer and more expensive in a post-oil world, no matter how good we get with biofuels and solar.

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» **Those who say it can't be done...** Posted by: zizizzi

» **Are there people who are actually doing it?** Posted by: truthlover

» **RE: Are there people who are actually doing it?** Posted by: EJLima

» **RE: Are there people who are actually doing it?** Posted by: EJLima

» **British Columbia's full of 'em ;)** Posted by: hurricane hugo

Urban Farming's New SPIN

Posted by: Roxsen on Oct 2, 2008 9:06 AM
 Current rating: **5** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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What is helping to spur new urban farming industries is a franchise-ready sub-acre farming system called SPIN-Farming. SPIN makes it possible to earn \$50,000+ from a half-acre. SPIN's growing techniques are not, in themselves, breakthrough. What is novel is the way a SPIN farm business is run. SPIN provides everything you'd expect from a good franchise: a business plan, marketing advice, and a detailed day-to-day workflow. In standardizing the system and creating a reproducible process it really isn't any different from McDonalds. By offering a non-technical, easy-to-understand and inexpensive-to-implement farming system, it allows many more people to farm commercially, wherever they live, as long as there are nearby markets to support them. By using backyards and front lawns and neighborhood lots as their land base, SPIN farmers are recasting farming as a small business in a city or town and helping to accelerate the shift back to a more locally-based food system. SPIN is now starting to be practiced throughout the U.S., Canada, UK, Australia, Ireland and the Netherlands, and you can see some of these entrepreneurial farmers in action at www.spinfarming.com

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» **RE: Urban Farming's New SPIN** Posted by: richholland

\$ and Political Will

Posted by: Gravitas on Oct 2, 2008 9:29 AM
 Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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"All that it takes is money and political will"

Yes! Unfortunately, people fail to realize we NEVER had a lack of solutions to any problem we faced. The system is set up for those in power to keep it and continue exploiting the rest of us. That is why things never get done.

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» **RE: To be fair, nothing ever gets done also because people with ideas sit on their ass getting high** Posted by: rfrancis@godisdead.com

Lots of urban land is currently unused

Posted by: truthlover on Oct 2, 2008 10:20 AM
 Current rating: **Not yet rated** [1 = poor; 5 = excellent]

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Wherever you go in a city, you see loads of land that could be put to use growing food -

- the gardens around people's houses
- the strips of land between the sidewalk and the road
- undeveloped lots

I'm not convinced about towerblock farming, but here's a type of vertical farming that I've seen done: growing up the outsides of buildings, freestanding walls and tree trunks, using trellises if necessary. I've even seen it done on a platform just wide enough for the gardener to get access. You can grow beans, peas, tomatoes, anything that climbs or can be tied. I've seen beans grown up fruit trees.

I grew potatoes in a pile of hay lying on top of concrete. They grew to a fair size and tasted fine, and they didn't need scrubbing.

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>> **RE: Lots of urban land is currently unused** Posted by: billwald

Livestock

Posted by: truthlover on Oct 2, 2008 10:26 AM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

Chickens wandering among your vegetables is supposed to be good for the vegetables (free fertilizer) and the chickens find some of their own food.

In the last depression, there were parts of some cities where people even kept cows and goats for milk.

I suppose you could keep a fish tank, too, but don't know how that works out.

However, watch out for the local laws if you are thinking of doing any of this.

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>> **RE: Livestock** Posted by: TheLimit

Greenhouse roofs

Posted by: PaulK on Oct 2, 2008 11:48 AM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

A greenhouse on the roof doesn't have to weigh too much. Build up another 10 feet and put up plastic (ugh!) or glass. Plan for some weight from the dirt. To reduce stress on the building keep plants in pots, use lightweight soil or use hydroponics.

In the low-frost belt, a greenhouse roof will keep the crops perhaps 10 degrees warmer all winter. In Atlanta this means no frost on the lettuce and broccoli. It doesn't quite mean that the tomatoes will ripen in January, but at least the vines won't freeze and the tomato plants will start producing again in February.

If you could afford just a tiny bit of heat to keep the plants from freezing on the coldest nights, that oil expenditure might be worth it. Shipping tomatoes in from Mexico or from South America costs a lot more diesel fuel, and the tomatoes are cardboard.

For an even better greenhouse roof, the building has some kind of active heat storage in the basement and air ducts running up to the greenhouse. Now the greenhouse can take maybe 20 degrees below freezing and still not freeze the crops, or burn extra heating oil or natural gas.

Bonus Most of that actively stored solar heat won't be needed by the greenhouse in October, November, February and March. You might as well use it to heat the building to 72 degrees on a March night, for free! The active solar system will cut your building's heating oil consumption in any month except January. Also, you won't be losing quite as much heat out the roof of the building due to the extra insulating layer of the greenhouse roof.

Do you like what you've read so far? You can do all the above tomorrow. However, do you want to build a better greenhouse roof?

<http://www.klinkmansolar.com>

Sorry. I don't have a primo website, just a simple one. That's who I am.

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Mega-churches

Posted by: Farmertim on Oct 2, 2008 1:23 PM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

and even those traditional congregations whom have located out of downtown have lawns big enough in most cases to feed themselves as well as a host of others.

Yet we see manicured lawns and signs that offer opportunities to travel to a third world country to help those in need.

Farmertim

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>> **RE: Mega-churches** Posted by: richholland

It'll get done as soon as Big Government butts out and quits RIGGING the market for

Posted by: maxpayne on Oct 2, 2008 2:33 PM

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Corporate America. Get rid of the ban on hemp and bring back the grass feds for starters.

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Half of Detroit is now vacant land

Posted by: hurricane hugo on Oct 2, 2008 3:34 PM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

and this movement's really starting to kick in here.

jdfu!

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CORRECTION on quote on grains and urban agriculture

Posted by: kreyn on Oct 3, 2008 11:36 AM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

I was quoted in this article as being skeptical of the contribution that urban agriculture can have to peoples' livelihoods. Since the quote is out of context, I'll take this chance to complete that context.

My comments about grains were made in response to critiques on urban agriculture and urban farmers/gardeners that refer to urban ag, and particularly Victory Gardening, as idealistic activities. My response to these critiques was that I haven't heard many practitioners talk about complete urban self-sufficiency, especially because growing a large quantity of grains in small spaces would be difficult. However, produce can be grown close to the home and doing so is a good way to bring the 'local' home.

Please see :

www.sfc.ucdavis.edu

AND

www.attra.ncat.org

for additional articles that I've written on the topic.

thank you.

Kristin Reynolds

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Interviews with Despommier - Father of the Vertical Farm

Posted by: Andy at Arcwire on Oct 7, 2008 2:41 PM

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Current rating: **Not yet rated** [[1](#) = poor; [5](#) = excellent]

I'm glad this important topic is getting so much attention. Many people have questions or concerns about the amount of energy and water it would take for vertical farming. What they don't realize is that done right, the farm can treat and water crops from urban wastewater, as well as provide energy using the biomass created from growing crops, and thrown out by restaurants.

The Vertical Farm is a self-contained, city-sized Battery of Life - that takes wastewater and compost and produces clean energy, clean water, and food!

For a detailed description of the Vertical Farm, read my [in-depth article](#) on Arcwire.org. You can also [watch a video interview](#) with Doctor Despommier that I did with Scribe Media.

With more and more of humanity living in cities, urban areas will need to feed themselves more cleanly and efficiently, as well as find better ways to recycle their waste.

Vertical Farming has promising answers for these most urgent concerns!

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I love all of these wonderful

Posted by: paula.c on Oct 7, 2008 4:51 PM

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ideas. It is an incredible joy to grow some of your own food. An urban Victory Garden is great but even a window box can produce edibles. Dig in everyone!

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Vertical Pot? WEhy this is STUPID!

Posted by: hilly7 on Oct 7, 2008 9:05 PM

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So lets see, because someone grew verticle pot, they think all plants grow the same? Exactly how much of the product did they test? Before we all go verticl, lets look at some facts.

1 - The population is already scheduled to decrease. Children today will not live as long as their parents. For that matter, young parents are dieing earlier. Read the obtuaries in your local paper as ages. Spelled out, larger populations is a myth these days.

2 - The worth of a plant is it's minerals. Ever check just how clean the sir is? You can substitue elements, but they all differ, too much or too little areo qualities and the plant either dies or produces nothing.

3- Growing gardens in empty lots, back yards, flower pots, etc, are a great ideal. You will not be able to be 100% self-sufficient, but then again you will not as a farmer either. It will help

4 - Attention: Little House on the Prarie is just a movie, it ain't real folks. When you sell you city dwelling and move to the country, you will accomplish 3 things:

a - Destroy a farm tract that would have created food for you to feed your family and friends.

b - Go broke trying it or be severely injured. Possibly from hunger.

c - Become more dependant on corporate farming.

I see this selling real estate every day.

5 - Make an alliance with local farmers and shop only with those that do (hint) Walmart isn't locally grown, managed, or affiliated with American Grown.

6 - I've been switching over lately to solar, but I still get b ugs, hey, I'm outside and I hope the little buggers will keep polinating my plants.

7 - Turn off the TV before you get any dumber.

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