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Urban farms sprouting in cities across South Florida

Some municipalities are changing laws to allow farming on underutilized lots, other small pieces of land

By Maria Herrera, Sun Sentinel

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Something green is surprisingly growing amid the auto body shops and the marble wholesalers.

There's arugula, tomatoes, strawberries and lettuce.

It's an unusual place for a farm — an industrial stretch in the 1700 block of Powerline Road also home to construction material retailers and wholesalers, auto repair businesses, and even an exotic dance club.

Appropriately named The Urban Farmer, Jessica Padron will participate in a community agriculture program, offer workshops for children and adults and have a farm stand for the extras.

"If I won't feed it to my daughter, I won't sell it to you," Padron said.

Padron's is one of dozens of farms sprouting in urban settings and inner cities across South Florida. There's Earth N' Us and Roots in the City in Miami; Marando Farms in Fort Lauderdale; and the Girls U-Pick Strawberry Farm in [Delray Beach](#). There are also smaller community gardens taking root behind backyard fences, church gardens and abandoned lots.

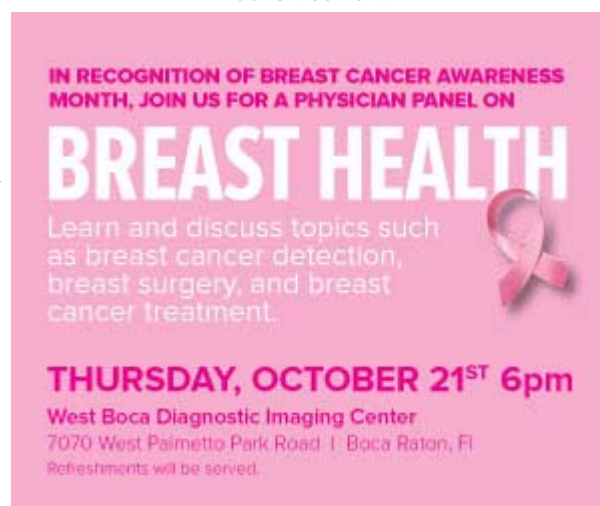
As cabbage and chickens move closer to office buildings and neighborhoods, municipalities across the country are trying to figure out how and where to fit the urban farm.

"It is true that city politicians are not used to dealing with this sort of thing," said Alfonso Morales, assistant professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Wisconsin. "[But] in some places they're not [only] used to it but they seek it aggressively. They all have different models for trying to establish community agriculture."

The trend is slowly catching on here. In West Palm Beach, a group of residents is working with the city to create an urban farm ordinance. In [Delray Beach](#) and Fort Lauderdale, residents are asking city officials to allow backyard chickens.

Padron is on the board of the newly formed South Florida Food Policy Council — the kind of

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organization that would advise cities and counties on the best urban farming practices. It's scheduled to have its first organizational meeting on Thursday.

The board is made up of South Florida residents, local food movement advocates and farmers. They hope to lobby elected officials to enact ordinances that would allow sustainable practices such as urban farming, seek grants for educational programs and create an interest in the local food movement.

"The idea is to be very supportive of changes that would support urban agriculture," said Mario Yanez, founder of Earth Learning, a Miami-based organization that advocates for a transition toward a life-sustaining culture. "We need to address the building and zoning codes. It is up to political leaders to respond and do it in an organized way."

Pompano Beach allowed Padron to establish her hydroponic farm in an area zoned for industry.

"I went through a rigorous process with them, but I fit under the code perfectly," Padron said.

Pompano Beach senior planner Jennifer Gomez said a nursery or hydroponic garden is allowed under the industrial zoning, but that the city is revising its zoning code. The new code may include language on community gardens and urban farms.

"One of the objectives is including sustainable practices," Gomez said.

Padron said the 1.25-acre farm is expected to house 8,000 to 10,000 plants grown in a vertical hydroponic system designed for high-density production and space saving.

In Fort Lauderdale, Marando Farms owner Chelsea Marando said her small farmer's market and garden did not need a zoning change.

"Right now we're considered more of a demonstration garden than an actual farm," said Marando, who is wedged between the railroad tracks and Andrews Avenue just south of Davie Boulevard. "Our animals are considered pets."

Morales said urban farming is not a new concept, but something that started during World War II. When the federal government rationed food because of labor and transportation shortages, it asked citizens to plant "victory gardens" for people to produce their own fruits and vegetables.

"It just sort of went away in the past 50 years with the mass production and industrialization of foods," Morales said. "In some cities the ordinances were sort of there but no one was acting on them."

Meanwhile Dina Bell, of the Lake Worth-based Advocacy, is working with the West Palm Beach City Commission to get an ordinance passed that would allow several pilot projects in the city.

Bell is hoping that once the ordinance is passed, the Urban Growers Community Farm, which is planned for the 1400 block of Henrietta Avenue in the Coleman Park District, can open.

"The reason I brought it to West Palm Beach is because it is a larger municipality and if we can get it passed there, we can get it passed in other cities," said Bell, whose business aims at being a resource for groups and municipalities that want to consider urban farming laws.

With a defined action plan for sustainability, West Palm Beach Mayor Louis Frankel said she's been watching the city's urban agriculture subcommittee work on the ordinance.

"It's really the citizens who have been championing this effort," Frankel said. "Myself and the commissioners are supportive of trying to move forward with at least some pilot projects."

That's exactly the kind of advice Morales gives municipalities seeking his expertise.

"I tell them let there be some experimentation," Morales said. "Come back and review the experiment after three years."

Morales said cities can grant variances or conditional uses. They can also form task forces or committees that can study the results and the implications of these zoning experiments.

Padron said that will be part of the work of the food policy council, recommending best practices and using success stories to usher in a new era in food production and consumption.

"Hopefully we can get these places to be accepted wherever there is land," Padron said.

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