

A SEED OF HOPE

The pandemic plunged millions of Americans into food insecurity. Now, a new movement aims to inspire a million households to plant home gardens as a hedge against hunger—and an act of joy.

words | RACHEL B. LEVIN

When the COVID-19 pandemic swept through North America last March, Kimbal Musk and Frank Giustra were both thinking a lot about food. The two business titans-turned-social entrepreneurs didn't know each other yet. But, from different vantage points, each wanted to help families who were struggling to afford groceries gain greater access to healthy meals.

Musk is the co-founder of Big Green, a national nonprofit that since 2011 has built hundreds of learning gardens in underserved schools. As many schools closed to in-person instruction during pandemic shutdowns, those efforts were temporarily halted. Musk began exploring ways to pivot Big Green's resources toward feeding families hard-hit by economic upheaval.

Giustra is the publisher of *Modern Farmer*, an online magazine dedicated to covering how food is grown, produced, and prepared, as well as the political implications of our food system. When people began quarantining at home, traffic to sections of the website that offer gardening tips spiked. A lightbulb went off for Giustra that home gardens could be a low-cost way to help families facing food insecurity* supplement their diets.

By a stroke of serendipity, Musk and Giustra were introduced to one another last summer by a mutual friend. They soon discovered their shared passions for healthy food and philanthropy. "Kimbal and I

are two peas in a pod," says Giustra, using an apt garden analogy.

When Giustra proposed uniting the resources of Big Green and Modern Farmer to inspire people to plant home gardens, Musk enthusiastically agreed. The idea for a new movement was born.

The goal for the Million Gardens Movement, which the pair officially launched March 20 of this year, is as ambitious as the name implies: mobilizing a million new gardeners to grow their own food by the end of 2021. Anyone can join as a gardener or supporter—no green thumb required.

THINKING BIG

Giustra and Musk are both known for developing businesses and initiatives that pack a punch. Musk made millions from the sale of the software start-up he founded with his brother Elon Musk (the CEO of Tesla and Space X) before training as a chef and becoming a Boulder, Colorado-based restaurateur. His many ventures—including Big Green, The Kitchen Restaurant Group, and Square Roots (a fleet of hydroponic farms in shipping containers)—connect people to fresh, locally grown food.

Based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Giustra is a mining financier who founded the film studio Lionsgate Entertainment and the charitable Giustra Foundation,>>

which supports initiatives that address everything from homelessness to global poverty. “What really interests me when I engage in any campaign ... is to focus on something that has huge impact,” says Giustra.

The Million Gardens Movement is no exception. It seeks to break down barriers that discourage people from planting their own edible gardens. Musk points out that many shy away because they think it’s going to be too difficult. To demystify the process, the Million Gardens Movement offers Garden Pathway guides that draw upon the extensive knowledge base that Big Green and *Modern Farmer* have accumulated over the years. When you sign up on the website (milliongardensmovement.org), you can select which crops you’ll be growing and receive personalized



KIMBAL MUSK
PHOTO BY I COURTNEY WALSH

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guidance on how to plant, care for, cook, and harvest your fruits, veggies, and/or herbs.

Another common obstacle to gardening is a lack of space—or, rather, a perceived lack of space. But Giustra notes that no garden is too small to count toward the goal of a million gardens. “You can start on your windowsill or on your fire escape balcony,” he says. “You don’t need a large plot of land to start a garden.”

Taken together, a million small home gardens will add up to major results in terms of feeding families. Long term, those uber-local gardens also promise to reduce the demand for produce grown overseas and transported vast distances, a practice that pumps tons of carbon emissions into the air.

SHARING THE BOUNTY

For those who lack the financial resources to begin gardening, the Million Gardens Movement offers free, beginner-friendly gardening kits called Little Green Gardens. These are compact garden beds (about a foot wide and a foot deep) filled with soil and seedlings that can be placed wherever there is a patch of sunlight—just add water as needed.

They’re currently being distributed in cities where Big Green works with schools, including Los Angeles, Denver, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, and Memphis, but the vision is to expand to more cities throughout North America and beyond.

The beds are reusable, meaning that when one season’s crop has been harvested, the Million Gardens Movement will refill the bed with a new seasonal crop. For example, the beds were planted with potatoes in March and tomatoes in June. In the winter off-season, they’ll be filled with herbs that can be grown indoors.

SUNNIER DISPOSITIONS

Growing a garden with children may brighten their outlook. Studies show that working with plants and soil helps manage stress and can improve kids’ emotional resilience.

Donations from individuals as well as corporate and community partners fund the Little Green Gardens program. A \$15 donation provides a garden kit for one family. Recurring monthly donations go toward the cost of seasonal refills.

These petite gardens won’t in themselves wipe out food insecurity. But Giustra, who grew up in a family of humble means, knows from personal experience that they’re an important step in the right direction. He says his parents’ home garden was vital in helping his family stretch their food dollars.

FEEDING YOUNG MINDS

Another aim that Giustra and Musk have for the Million Gardens Movement is to introduce people, especially children, to the wonders of the growing process. “We are letting them understand what real food is, how good it tastes, and how joyful it is to grow your own food,” says Musk.

Tapping into that joy is part of what attracted singer/songwriter Aloe Blacc—who’s best known for hits with positive social messages like “I Need a Dollar” and “The Man”—to the Million Gardens Movement. He’s one of the many celebrity gardening enthusiasts (including Salma Hayek, Harrison Ford, and Zooey Deschanel, among others) who have joined up.

“Growing food is magical,” says Blacc. The father of two grows mangos, avocados, and more with his family at their home in Glendale, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. He says his kids are amazed at how the seeds that come from the fruits they eat transform into trees that bear their own fruit.

Blacc’s parents are immigrants from Panama, and on his travels there, he’s noticed that home gardens are >>



FRANK GIUSTRA
PHOTO BY I JEFF VINNICK

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plentiful. “There’s always a tree within arm’s reach with something you can pick and eat,” he says. Those “food oases” stand in stark contrast to so-called “food deserts” in the U.S., which are low-income neighborhoods where people lack access to healthy food, either because healthy food establishments like grocery stores are unaffordable or located too far away. As many as

THE FACTS ABOUT FOOD INSECURITY

The USDA defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of American families experiencing it had been declining. But last year, as the pandemic wreaked havoc on the economy, the number of families facing food insecurity in the U.S. nearly doubled—and among families with children, it more than tripled. Approximately one in four households, including close to 14 million children, didn’t have consistent access to adequate nutritious food. Black and Hispanic households were affected more than other groups.

While eradicating food insecurity depends on addressing the underlying economic factors involved, home gardens can be a bulwark against hunger because they provide a reliable source of fresh fruits and vegetables. They also save families \$677 a year in grocery costs, on average.

53 million Americans live in low-income areas where their distance from a supermarket limits their access to healthy food.

For a number of years, Blacc has been involved in efforts to transform food deserts in the largely Black and Latinx neighborhoods of South Los Angeles, where liquor stores outnumber grocery stores. He points out that at liquor stores, the majority of food available is highly processed and packaged, contributing to higher rates of obesity in South L.A. than in wealthier parts of the city.

Blacc believes the Million Gardens Movement can be part of the solution to promote healthier food choices in such communities. He’s hopeful that the movement will ignite kids’ fascination with food in its natural state. Research shows that when children are exposed to gardening and understand where their food comes from, they eat more vegetables and reach for more nutritious snacks and drinks.

Sampling what they harvest gives children “an opportunity to expand their palate and recognize [that] what nature is providing is sufficient,” says Blacc. “Turning the lightbulb on in youth’s heads—that will really create a dramatic shift.”

BECOMING A FOOT SOLDIER

The best way to get involved in the Million Gardens Movement is to grow a garden or donate a garden (or both!). In the coming year, volunteer opportunities may be available for those interested in building Little Green Gardens and distributing them in low-income communities.

Participants are also encouraged to post photos of their gardens on social media using the hashtag #MillionGardens to inspire friends and family to get involved, too. Those community connections will not only expand the movement, but also tie back to Musk and Giustra’s motivation for starting it.

Both of the founders love to gather with friends and family to cook the food they’ve grown in their home gardens. Growing food locally nurtures “this wonderful ecosystem that creates happiness in a community,” says Musk. “It’s celebrating life.” ■

RL

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ALOE BLACC
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