

HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT

A city named for trees hasn't had money to plant them. A local group is here to help

Rooted in Temescal, Sidewalk Trees and Gardens is expanding its community gardens and green spaces in Oakland.



by **Callie Rhoades**

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Rob Selna (left), John Lancaster (middle), and Jenny Kauffman (right) stand at the 43rd and 44th Street Community Garden. Credit: Callie Rhoades

Off the bustling business corridor in the Temescal neighborhood, there is a small community garden tucked into the pocket of a freshly tree-lined street. What's now a lush scene of plants in wooden boxes, hand-painted signs, and a small yet productive beehive was once the site of an illegal dumping ground.

When Jenny Kauffman moved to the area in 2013, she saw that there was no place for the local kids to play. She started talking to her neighbors, including Rob Selna, a local attorney, about how they could transform the trash-strewn area into something useful for the community. They started by asking their neighbors. Maybe it could be a basketball court? Or a green park space?

“The kids wanted a swimming pool,” said Kauffman. “I remember that.”

While the strip of land tucked downslope from the I-880 freeway wasn't quite big enough for a swimming pool, it was big enough for a community garden. So that's what they landed on. Years of more talking, permitting, and planning went by before they ever broke ground, in 2015, but nearly a decade later, the garden and the group, [Sidewalk Trees and Gardens](#), are thriving, and there are big plans for the next year. In a city awash in red ink, efforts like this will be needed to help keep Oakland green.

Selna formerly served on the Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission, on which he was a part of the tree committee. Long an environmental advocate, he had bonded with fellow tree lover John Lancaster after being introduced through their partners. For Selna, trees and Oakland just go hand-in-hand. It's right there in our city's name.

“I grew up celebrating Arbor Day in Oakland as an elementary school kid,” Selna said. “It was a big deal. It was sort of part of the city's culture and heritage.”

But it's no secret that, over the years, this part of Oakland's culture and heritage has gotten lost in the struggle to maintain adequate resources. Recently, the city has been working to take stock of its current trees and make a plan for the future. These efforts led to the Tree Canopy and Landcover Assessment, Street and Park Tree Inventory and the creation of the Urban Forest Plan. [The plan was adopted](#) on Dec. 16 at a special City Council meeting.

The city was also [awarded \\$8 million](#) last year through the Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program to collaborate with local partners to plant trees in the areas needing them most. However, according to city officials, recent hiccups in bureaucratic processes have slowed down the distribution of the funds.

The money and the forest plan come at a vital time after years of hardship for the city's tree maintenance program. In a press release about the certification of the forest plan, Josh Rowan, OakDOT director and interim director of the Department of Public Works, said that the tree maintenance program never recovered after the 2008 recession.

“Most of our park and street trees haven't been pruned in 15 years,” he stated. “My goal is to see this plan fully funded and implemented so that our tree crews can resume a proactive care and planting program, which is both urgently needed and ultimately more cost effective.”



There are around 20 plots in the garden available to the neighborhood. Credit: Callie Rhoades

Selna said he was shocked when he learned much of Oakland's tree work had ended nearly two decades ago. While he doesn't judge the city, he said that this is a critical issue that needs to be addressed and if the city cannot do it, people like him and others will have to take it upon themselves to do so.

"I believe that the volunteers and members of the community businesses are going to have to take up the mantle where the city has fallen down," he said.

And that's where the community garden comes in. Selna, Kauffman, and Lancaster worked with neighbors to build the garden. Twenty plots now fill the space open to the neighborhood. Edible plants, trees, and flowers are planted across the boxes.

Kauffman oversees the garden, but she emphasized that it's truly a community effort. She is aware that any change can be disruptive in a community that has already felt the impacts of gentrification. However, she also recognized the need for the illegal dumping area to be cleaned, and she wanted to talk with her neighbors to solve the problem. The result, she said, is a solution that is representative of and supported by everyone in the community.

“It takes some time to figure out a role that you want to have in the place that you live,” she said. “You don’t always know, and you don’t always get it right. I think there’s a lot you can really be frozen and scared about, but you can always pick up trash in your neighborhood or plant a tree.”

On the block itself, Selna and Lancaster have worked with the neighbors to plant street trees outside the garden. This has added to the various tree planting efforts they’ve undertaken, both on their own and as part of the group, across the city over the years. They’ve mainly focused on existing tree wells that have been left abandoned after their trees have been cut down. In the new year, the group wants to expand its work, perhaps setting up another community garden and doing more tree planting.

But their efforts aren’t free. The team has successfully raised money in the past, as much as \$50,000, but Lancaster said they’ve sometimes spent money out of their own pockets to help keep things running. They’ve also sold honey from their bees — with the help of a local beekeeper, Khaled Almaghafi, owner of [Bee Healthy Honey Shop](#) — to pay for the water in the garden.



The group has sold locally harvested honey to help pay for water for the garden. Credit: Callie Rhoades

For 2025, Selna is talking with local communities, organizations, and business owners who may want to plant trees in their area. He is also planning to use the [CalEnviroScreen](#) map to plan tree planting efforts in the communities in Oakland that need it most. With fundraising efforts underway, he hopes that word of their efforts will help spur other Oaklanders to take on the work of greening their own neighborhoods.

“Trees and gardens and greenery are essential to the health and welfare of the community,” said Selna. “It’s a tangible improvement we can make that’s not political here. Sadly environmental issues are political at a federal level and divide people. I think what we have here is a lack of prioritization and a lack of resources. I’m happy to take up the mantle to try to prioritize and get resources and solve the problem.”