

# Cultivating neighborhood harmony

**On Henderson Avenue in Long Beach, a garden now thrives in place of crime and fear.**

ROBERT LATURCHI

Long Beach City Councilman Dee Andrews casts a fid drawn-out groan before describing what the Henderson Avenue neighborhood used to look like.

"Henderson was just a bad, I mean, bad, bad street," he said. "That's what everybody came to pick up their things."

Just a few years ago, two adjacent apartment complexes on the 1900 block of Henderson were havens for drug dealers and prostitutes, according to city officials. Neighbors were leery of leaving their homes, and the complexes drew a high number of police calls.

But these days, the scene is decidedly peaceful. The crime-plagued apartments have been replaced by healthy plots of squash, golden chard, watermelon and cucumbers thriving in Long Beach's salty breezes.

After years of battling with the apartment owners to clean up their properties, an arm of the city's redevelopment agency bought the buildings in 2007 for \$1.6 million, said John Edmond, chief of staff for Councilman Andrews. The city paid \$200,000 more to relocate several dozen tenants and clear the land.

"We come out and see a garden now instead of a bunch of people trying to do their last bit of no-good before the sun rises," said Rachael Chavez, 34, who helps manage the garden.

The garden—a two-year experiment in community building intended to last until affordable housing is constructed on the site—has helped to heal a neighborhood and draw out residents.

"There was a lot of fear. People running out of the apartment buildings, gun shots," said local resident Berenice Abila, 26, as she stood outside with her 1-year-old son. "And now it's a garden. Now it's peaceful."



**GOOD TO GROW:** Galey Wright, 6, left, and her sister Branning, 10, help their father, Don Wright, plant carrot and red isb seeds in their small plot. The community garden is also becoming a hub for a diversity of neighbors together. Photograph by GUY LAWRENCE FOR THE LATIMES



**GIVING PHAS A CHANCE:** Craig Courten walks through the garden where two crime-ridden apartment complexes once stood. Housing will again be built on the site eventually.

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—STEPHEN DUPREY, neighborhood resident

"These relationships never would have happened without the safe arena of gardening," said Stephen Duprey, 34, a resident who lives just blocks away but would rarely pass through Henderson before.

About 40 plots tended by some 70 volunteers speak to the diversity of the gardeners, including Filipinos, Mexicans and Indians zigzagging between gardening boxes. Duprey, his pants muddied, stopped at a plot tended by a Cambodian family and pointed to an overflow of ruffly greens.

"They've brought in plants I've never seen before, and I've been involved in horticulture for 50 years," Duprey said, pointing out a variety of spinach commonly used in stir fry dishes. "There's a cross-pollination of ethnic and economic diversity."

Homes will eventually be built on the site. Until then, residents hope the garden continues to rehabilitate the neighborhood.

"There used to be lots of drug-dealing, gang-type activity, lots of graffiti, just a delinquent of the neighborhood's appearance," said Long Beach Police Lt. Randy Allen. "If you drive down Henderson now, it doesn't look like it did in the past."

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