



# Urban Oasis

Eco Centro's project to bring agriculture to a downtown college campus shows how cities can sustainably feed their populations

BY LEA THOMPSON

Lea Thompson

**O**ur current food system exists on borrowed time. Growth of global food production will need to increase by 25 to 70 percent by 2050 to meet population increases projected by the United Nations. And, for San Antonio, a city with some of the highest food insecurity rates in the nation, according to federal statistics, that means changing our food production methods and perhaps even our cultural identity.

The William R. Sinkin Eco Centro, a sustainability center located on the San Antonio College campus, is determined to make urban agriculture part of local culture, potentially helping meet the city's food-access problems.

The issue hits especially close to home for the center. It's estimated that one in two community college students will experience food insecurity during a semester, and that rate is even higher among SAC students.

"Imagine passing fruit trees on your way to class and being able to pick [fresh fruit]," Eco Centro Director Meredith Miller said of the scenario she's trying to cultivate. "You'd have your snack on your way to class, and then after class there's a produce box available for you to take home, with recipes and nutrition information, and access to a public-health nurse if you need it."

## A New Mission

Since its 2014 inception, Eco Centro has become a San Antonio community resource like no other. The center, funded in part by a federal seed grant, regularly hosts free gardening events, offers meeting space for local organizations and invites students to connect with its mission to grow native plants and food. However, its goal of bringing sustainable farming to the urban core is in step with other initiatives around the nation.

Similar to the Sustainable Food Center in Austin, Eco Centro wants to establish itself as a core part of the regional food system. SFC partners with local farmers and federal food programs such as Women, Infants and Children and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or food stamps, to expand access to nutritional education and healthy, affordable food.

Institutions such as Rutgers University have also introduced agriculture to college campuses. The student-run farm at the New Jersey school offers interdisciplinary study opportunities while delivering community sourced agriculture to surrounding areas, said Clayton Leadbetter, Rutgers' plant breeding coordinator. The university has also partnered with area food banks, community kitchens and garden networks to bringing

fresh produce to needy students.

Eco Centro's aims are no less ambitious.

Within the next five years, the center plans to transform 75 percent of SAC's campus landscaping to include native plants and habitats for wildlife and pollinator species such as bees and butterflies. What's more, it wants on-site gardens to be productive enough to feed students, faculty and staff.

Around 10 percent of the project has been completed to date, and the team is putting together the research, strategies and partnerships to meet its full goal.

Eco Centro has already cultivated a total of 8,500 square feet of garden space that includes vegetable patches, native plants and an urban farm. Some of the areas are child-friendly.

In addition, the campus now includes so-called food forests, or areas that offer multiple layers of food production. Passers-by might see a cluster of trees, bushes and a manicured garden, but together the same mini-ecosystem can yield citrus varieties, black berries and herbs. It also offers space for the birds, bees and butterflies that help pollinate vegetation. Planted fruit trees are expected to begin producing by late spring.

"We wanted a space where people and classes could come and sit, where people can come and study — and a space for the bees, the birds," Miller said. "A food forest allows **47** →

# Food

Find more  
food & drink  
news at  
[sacurrent.com](http://sacurrent.com)