

## FILM/DOCUMENTARY

**The Garden, (2009), 80 minutes,  
Directed by Scott Hamilton Kennedy,  
Black Valley Films.  
Review by Rhonda Teitel-Payne**



The call to support the South Central Farmers seemed straightforward: Latino farmers in inner city Los Angeles fighting to keep land given to them by the city. Touted as the largest community garden in the US, the 14-acre South Central Farm was plowed under in 2006 after a land ownership dispute that entangled the city of Los Angeles, neighbourhood residents, and immigrant farmers who had worked the land for twelve years. This is a convoluted story of private land expropriated by the city, handed over to the farmers for more than a decade, and then sold back to the original owner for the same purchase price. From the opening aerial view of acres of verdant gardens in the midst of an industrial desert, to shots of bulldozers plowing down corn while the farmers hang from the fence in tears, there is an undeniable dimension of tragedy. *The Garden*, a 2008 film by Scott Kennedy, only begins to peel back the layers of complexity in a case study that shapes political and community organizing with visceral dramatic turns.

The characters and story line are far more complicated than they first appear. The farmers become divided into two camps—the incumbent farmers and the “organizers,” such as Tezo and Rufina. While the film uses familiar tropes to frame Tezo and Rufina as heroes, there are also indications that some farmers viewed them as newcomers more concerned with their political agenda than with farming. When the farm is criticized by the local community for using public land to provide financial gain for a small number of farmers, the activist leaders attempt to restrict the number of plots each family may use. They claim to be enforcing rules agreed to by all of the farmers, but their approach is heavy-handed and met with resentment that leads to violent confrontation.

Some community garden organizers call the inability of the organizers to build grassroots support with the local African-American community and local Councilor Jan Perry a key failure leading to the loss of the garden. Interviews in

*The Garden* with Juanita Tate, head of the concerned citizens’ group that opposed the farm, show her as a difficult personality shadowed by corruption charges. The film references Jan Perry’s reluctance to act on behalf of the farmers as non-constituents (and illegal immigrants), but it doesn’t mention she assisted the farmers in finding new, less contentious, land in another part of the city, until the very end of the film.

Both factions use the word “community” selectively for specific political ends. Rufina talks about the “community” not receiving the eviction notice well, but she is speaking about the gardeners, not the broader neighbourhood. Perry and Tate have an equally selective and contrasting view of who constitutes the community and what its needs are, wanting to use the land for a sports field. The film never mentions the pressure to create jobs in an economically depressed area, nor the status of the neighbourhood as a food desert. When I passed through the area to visit the (razed) garden in 2007, I didn’t see a single food retail outlet.

Ralph Horowitz, the developer who now owns the land, comes off as a repugnant character. Horowitz gave the farmers five weeks to raise \$16.3 million to buy the land. When they succeeded, he retracted his offer because (in addition to the allegation of anti-Semitic remarks) he didn’t “like their cause.” His reasoning is as offensive as the act itself. Like those who think that poor people should be grateful for whatever charity they receive, Horowitz complained about the farmers’ lack of “gratitude” for having any use of the land at all. “They owe me.”

The film is positioned as a battle of individual property rights (the developer) against community needs (the farmers), yet the more compelling struggle is really the flip side of this—that community gardens are framed as private uses of public land. Juanita Tate railed against the farm as a commercial enterprise, stating that the farmers were making unfair sums of money while the rest of the community had no access to the land. The film did not mention if the produce was indeed sold and, if so, where and to whom. Is growing fresh produce for sale in an area marked by poor food access not a benefit to the community? This question is particularly relevant as Toronto, like many cities in North America, investigates the possibilities for scaling up urban agriculture in order to respond to the growing desire for local food. As a community garden organizer, I find it inconceivable that anyone can conflate creating income substitution opportunities for people living on low incomes with giving up public land for profit. Perhaps it is a question of scale and situation—the SCF case was 14 acres of highly contested land and there were allegations of concentration of usage within a limited number of hands.

The current status of the farm is a painfully familiar one. While the farmers have found other land and are growing once again, as of June 2008 the 14 acres remain empty—devoid of food, job-creating industrial applications or community amenities.

Rhonda Teitel Payne is the Urban Agriculture Manager at The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto, an organization that works to increase access to food by linking local urban agriculture, community networks, and anti-poverty advocacy. The Stop coordinates cooking classes, drop-in meals, perinatal support, food markets, an 8000 square foot garden, a greenhouse, and an experimental sheltered garden. For more information, see [www.thestop.org](http://www.thestop.org).