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Neighbor, Can You Spare a Plum?

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

OAKLAND, Calif.

THE loquats were ripe and just begging to be picked.

But there was a problem. Although the tree was planted on private property, the loaded branches hung over the street.

Did that make the fruit public property?

In the end, with no one around to ask, Asiya Wadud decided the answer was yes. So she added them to a bag already heavy with Meyer lemons picked (with permission) from a yard a few blocks away. Then she headed off to check on some plum trees.

It was just another day of urban fruit foraging for Ms. Wadud, one of a growing number of people who looked around their cities, saw trees full of fruit and thought, "Delicious."

A year and a half ago, Ms. Wadud, who studied urban sociology in college and bartended at Chez Panisse, began organizing a little neighborhood fruit exchange called Forage Oakland. She did it as much to build neighborhood relations as to get her hands on some of that fruit.

It works simply. A woman with a yard full of lemon trees, say, can share her bounty in exchange for a paper bag full of someone else's persimmons when they come into season. So far, 200 people have signed up.

All over the country, the underground fruit economy is growing. At new Web sites like neighborhoodfruit.com and veggietrader.com, fruit seekers can find public mulberry patches in Pennsylvania and neighbors willing to trade blackberries in Oklahoma.

In Royal Oak, Mich., a woman investigated how to start a fruit exchange modeled after Fallen Fruit (fallenfruit.org), an arts group that designs maps of accessible fruit growing in Los Angeles neighborhoods.

In Alaska, cooks used [Facebook](#) to find willing donors of backyard rhubarb, the first dessert crop that grows after the long winter. In Columbia, S.C., university students pulled spare peaches from orchards and donated them to a [local food](#) bank.

Supporters of this movement hold two basic principles. One, it's a shame to let fruit go to waste. And two, neighborhood fruit tastes best when it's free.

"There have always been people harvesting fallen fruit," Ms. Wadud said, "but there's a whole new

counterculture about gathering and eating public fruit. This tremendous resource is growing everywhere if people just start looking around.”

Jennifer Perillo, a mother and food writer who lives in Brooklyn, became an accidental neighborhood fruit forager last summer. She was driving to her mother’s house in Bensonhurst when she saw vibrant red balls hanging from a tree in someone’s yard. Cherries!

She saw a peach tree, too, and leaned over a fence for a sample. The owner was none too happy, but when she explained that she only wanted her children to taste a fresh Brooklyn peach, he gave her half a dozen.

Then she started looking for fruit in her own neighborhood, Carroll Gardens, finding apricots and figs in abundance. “Honestly, for years I walked around the neighborhood in my own world and I never noticed all of this before,” she said.

Three years ago, Katy Kolker had a similar experience in her northeast Portland, Ore., neighborhood. Fruit was going to waste, and she decided to do something about it.

She and some friends went to the home of a woman who had planted apple trees 30 years before, but was too old to pick them. They gathered nearly 200 pounds, gave some to the woman and went back to prune her trees.

That apple adventure inspired the Portland Fruit Tree Project, a database of more than 300 trees, each registered by the owner, who promises to call about two weeks before the fruit is ripe to arrange a harvest.

“A family can only really eat 20 pounds of fresh [apples](#) or so before they cry uncle,” Ms. Kolker said. “A fruit tree is really made for sharing with your neighborhood.”

This year, 20 picking parties are planned. Half the fruit goes to the people who pick, and half to a local food bank. Ms. Kolker reserves half of the dozen slots at each picking party for low-income people.

Hynden Walch, a voice-over actress for animated films, put together a more modest fruit program in her Los Angeles neighborhood. “I would walk up in the hills where I live and I would see all this incredible food just dying on the tree and rolling down the hill,” she said. Plus, her own seven fruit trees were going unpicked, which was an embarrassment.

Last August, she sent an e-mail message to her neighbors asking them to drop extra fruit and garden bounty at her house, where she would divide it up and give everyone back a bagful.

Since then, membership in her little Hillside Produce Co-operative has doubled, and other neighborhoods are copying her.

She recently filled bags with lemons, oranges, grapefruits, kumquats and loquat jam. The jam came from a chef who didn’t have fruit but had skills.

“Everyone’s contribution weighs the same,” she said. “A fig will get you a bag. In my gigantic idealism, where money isn’t the center of the universe, this is a small way I can right the balance of the world.”

For cooks, like Samin Nosrat, a cook at the restaurant Eccolo in Berkeley, free fruit is like a little kitchen

miracle. She sneaks grape leaves to wrap sardines. Once, she stumbled upon so many fallen green walnuts on a sidewalk that she piled a bunch into a blanket she retrieved from her car, and made nocino, a walnut liqueur.

Ms. Nosrat calls it opportunistic cooking, which she means in the best way.

“It’s cooking from nothing,” she said.

As with content on the Internet, though, not everybody believes that fruit wants to be free.

Danila Oder, who works at a hospital in Los Angeles, learned that lesson a few years ago when she wrote a list of tips on making public fruit tree maps for Fallen Fruit.

A woman whose tree was included on one of the maps was furious that people were raiding her trees, even though some of her fruit was hanging over public space, making it legal to pick under California law.

Since then, Ms. Oder has wrestled with the issues of fairness and legality, which can vary by state and neighborhood. She has come to see that not everybody is respectful when it comes to the civic sharing of public fruit.

“If you let everyone know who’s got extra food, someone is going to break in or go over the fence,” she said.

Then there is the debate over whether money should be made from spare backyard fruit. Two new Web sites are trying to find a balance. The thousands of people who have registered on veggietrader.com can choose to swap or sell their backyard garden’s overflow, [Craigslist](http://craigslist.com) style.

[Neighborhoodfruit.com](http://neighborhoodfruit.com) offers a swapping system and lists 5,000 public fruit trees around the country. The founders are considering charging a \$4 finder’s fee for people who want to use the site, said Kaytea Petro, who helped start the project.

That sum could help pay for the Web site but still be affordable for people with low incomes, who might be able to sell pies or other items made with the fruit. The fee would be waived for people who give fruit away.

They might even add a V.I.P. service for “the super-fancy Slow Food people who really like the idea of extremely local food but don’t have time to go get it,” she said.

Of course, there are legal considerations. So the founders carefully worded their site user agreement. “If they register a tree with malicious intent, then they are liable,” Ms. Petro said.

Some money-for-fruit models are less ambitious. Jennifer Fisher, a stockbroker, sells the Santa Rosa plums that proliferate in her Berkeley backyard.

“It became this big ordeal to give away my plums every year,” she said.

She decided to set out a table of paper bags each holding a generous pound of plums. Next to them was a box where people could drop in a dollar per bag.

Last summer, she made \$75, including the dollar she charged parents who wanted their three children to

pick the fruit themselves. It's not about the money, Ms. Fisher maintains. She just wants to make sure the plums go to people who really care about fruit.

"You could just give them away," she said, "but if you sell them for a dollar a pound you know people are using them."

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