

## The Front Lawn Farm The Sellwood Garden Club Farms People's Lawns—and Everybody Wins

by [Patrick Alan Coleman](#)



Photos by [Lydia Brooks](#)

**Marie Richie is a farmer**—but not your ordinary farmer. She's a farmer of lawns.

While Richie may be standing on a sidewalk on SE 70th, half a block off Clinton, looking over a row of fat Japanese daikon radishes—technically speaking, she's standing on her farm. But instead of this farm existing outside the city limits, it resides on six 500-square-foot patches of front lawn along a single city block. They're part of a network of plots covering a cumulative two thirds of an acre, producing a total of 200 unique crops, supplementing the diets of more than 22 homes, and providing fresh, daily produce to 25 local restaurants.

Richie and her partner Kat (who preferred not to use her last name) run the Sellwood Garden Club, a name that conjures images of genteel ladies in white gloves drinking tea beneath hyacinth-covered gazebos. But by Richie's own characterization, the club is more punk than priggish. Also, they don't actually have any gardens in Sellwood. What they do have is an urban-agriculture model built in part through elephant dung, distributed network computing, financial crisis, and guerilla farmers markets. White gloves would only get dirty.

"Sometimes the model is easier to understand if you explain it as small-scale

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sharecropping," Kat explains. By verbal agreement, homeowners (and some renters) allow Kat and Richie to grow crops on their property in exchange for a selection of produce from the entire garden network. Each week from early May through Thanksgiving homes receive a "rent basket" of fresh veggies. Participants are asked only to buy a \$40 water timer and continue to pay the water bill. Ritchie says that the amount of vegetables her clients receive is equal to what they would get from holding a half share membership in a community supported agriculture (CSA) farm.

"It's easily enough for two normal eaters," she says, "mostly enough for two vegetarians, and good solid supplement for a family of four."

This kind of urban farming has been steadily gaining ground on Portland's Eastside. Other groups that have similar programs include City Gardens Farm, Sunroot Gardens (with produce and tools transported strictly by bicycle), and the Urban Farm Collective, which draws on the labor of all its members to grow and pool crops.

Though the Sellwood Garden Club came into existence in 2008, this is its first year as a full-scale operation, and for Richie the flowering of a long germinating idea.

"I had come up with the idea of distributed network farming about 15 years ago when I was in ag school," Richie says. "But people just weren't ready for it yet."

At that time, genetically modified pest-resistant corn (Bt corn) had just hit the market and her classmates at the University of Minnesota were transfixed by the possibilities.

"People just weren't concerned about where their food was coming from," Richie recalls. "I'd be hanging out with the farm boys talking about my ideas and they'd say, 'That's stupid, nobody farms in the city.'"

They do now. But getting a large-scale inner-city farming operation off the ground wasn't easy. Luckily, Richie and Kat had a baby elephant on their team.

In 2008 the Oregon Zoo was trying to find ways to solve notorious foot problems with their elephants, including the pregnant Rose-Tu. A simple idea was proposed: Why not lay down more straw? The solution was a success, but with more straw came more dung. After Samudra, the perky new baby elephant, was born, the zoo soon found itself neck deep in elephant crap.

"It's beautiful stuff," says Richie, "But they had way the heck too much of it." After getting connected with the Oregon Zoo horticulturalist, Richie and Kat found themselves driving down Highway 26 at 6 am on a February morning, hauling an enormous load of elephant dung.

"We looked like a steam-powered truck," Richie jokes. "I think we managed to launch a pat at a white BMW tailgating us."

Months later, the magic of pachyderm compost is evident on the stretch of SE 70th. The lawns are lush and green in the summer sun—but not with grass. In one yard it's a wonderland of kale and various greens, in another it's beans, in another it's broccoli and radishes.

Each yard has its own strengths and weakness in soil quality and degrees of shade and sun. That variability allows for a larger variety of plants. Also, since the plots are geographically isolated there is little risk of cross pollination and select plants can go to seed, providing the Sellwood Garden Club with a good basis for the next year's crop.

The variety of produce grown by the club is in part what makes it so attractive to local restaurants that rely on them to supplement vegetable orders.

"They have a lot of everything," says Drew Jacobs, sous chef at Lauro on SE Division. He's just recently been connected with Sellwood Garden Club, but is impressed with their produce.

"It's terrific," he says, and notes he's often cooking with vegetables just hours out of the ground. "Any vegetable picked the day of or the day before is very good."

Jacobs also revels in the local angle. "It's very cool to know that it's coming directly from the neighborhood," he says. "It's a good feeling."

Chef David Siegel of Belly Timber feels the same way. "It's always nice working with someone local," he explains. "They're growing in areas all over Southeast Portland. You can't get any more local than that."

Siegel found the Sellwood Garden Club on the micro-blogging website Twitter. He began following them, more and more interested in the products mentioned in their tweets. Eventually he contacted Kat and Richie and started placing orders.

"I've been steadily increasing the amount of produce I order from them," he says. He enjoys not having to place a minimum order, and the variety of products fits well into his menu, which changes weekly.

The Sellwood Garden Club has strong ties to technology like Twitter. In fact, the idea for the inner-city sharecropping model was inspired in part by Richie's fascination with distributive network computing, which draws on the combined power of a dispersed network of computers to complete large computing tasks.

But Twitter, websites, and blogs do not preclude the necessity for human interaction. On a Sunday afternoon at 4 pm, Richie is outside a small parking lot on SE 43rd and Hawthorne holding a hand-lettered plywood sign that reads "Farmers Market."

This is the Hawthorne Urban Farmers' Market—or what Richie like to call the "Bloody Mary market" because it runs from 1 pm to 6 pm.

"Hey. Hipsters need their vegetables too," Richie says. "Even more so because they've been drinking all night."

Crammed into the smallish parking lot are vegetable vendors from other urban farms, gleaners, garlic growers, a clothing stand, and a woman selling all-natural black lipstick. There are no fees or contracts to set up a table here. No one is in charge, but if anyone asks it was the guy who just left awhile ago... you know... Charlie.

Here veggies are traded for beer, or other veggies, or cold hard cash. There really aren't any rules and there's no telling what oddities might be peddled. This is where the Sellwood Garden Club sells the remainder of its produce. As people walk by—marveling at some of the alien Asian vegetables Kat and Richie have harvested from the farm—Richie is happy to jump up to offer explanations or samples. She's genuinely excited to talk about her variety of roots, shoots, and fruits, and speaks of their flavors with a mellow reverence. "Ohhhh," she'll say, "Those are radish pods. They're a bit fiery. And they're really good with beer."

For Ritchie, this is her way of saving the world—one lawn at a time.

"I have always, always wanted to save the town when the town really needed saving," she wrote in a recent email. "If we start now—perhaps if we helped get the distributed urban farm plot off the ground in a big way—Portland could sustain itself in an emergency. Then, I'd have finally done something *really* good."