



# GROWING FOOD GROWS RESILIENCY

Olivia Schmidt, *Horticulture*

## Food Security in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico has multiple barriers to food security. One is that they are only able to receive shipments from U.S. ships, limiting where food can be sourced from and causing increased food prices. Another is the high dependency on imported food (up to 85% in some places). Others include an under-funded supplemental nutrition program and frequent natural disasters such as droughts and hurricanes making farming challenging.

To paraphrase Dr. Edly Santiago Andino, professor in the College of Agriculture at University of Puerto Rico Mayaguez, after a disaster like Hurricane Maria in 2017, people struggle to feed themselves and their families. Ports can be too damaged for ships to deliver goods, a huge issue when 85% of food is imported. Dependence on outside food sourcing is changing, though. Movements towards small-scale farming are growing.

**“We grew up in a colonial regime being told that without the US we would die from hunger or end up like Cuba. Our ancestors and lands were exploited, agriculture was disparaged, but we are part of a new generation that sees sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty as an act of rebellion.” Ian Pagán-Roig, founder of El Josco Bravo**

## Losing and Regaining Self-Sustainability

The native Taíno people of Puerto Rico, who lived there before Spanish invasion, were able to grow all the food they needed for a thriving population. After colonization and seizure by Spain and the U.S., natural resources were exploited and farmland was converted to cash crop production. Farming knowledge was lost as dependence upon imported food increased. As a result, today’s Puerto Rican food system lacks resiliency, as evidenced by Hurricane Maria.

Restoring food cultivation knowledge is a vital part of increasing resiliency on the island. Efforts must focus on educating the next generation. Such an effort can be seen in the school garden we helped install at Escuela Especializada en Tecnología Gerardo Sellés Solá in Caguas. School gardens like this can teach kids basic food-gardening skills



and “plant the seed” for some of those kids to become food growers later in their lives, whether they become farm owners or just have a few tomato plants on their balcony.

## Taking Things a Step Further

Teaching food gardening skills to youth is only half the solution. The other half lies in teaching them how to cook. If they have the skills to prepare healthy meals with the fresh foods they are growing in their garden, they will be much more motivated to be growing those foods in the first place. Thus I argue that the island needs not only more opportunities for kids to get their hands dirty farming, but also more vegetable-cooking education.



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