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(NOTHING BUT) FLOWERS

Rodney Bender is a soil maven who knows a thing or two about community building. He is the garden programs manager at Growing Gardens, an organization that promotes home-scale organic food gardening to improve the nutrition, health and self-reliance of individuals and communities in Portland. As might be expected, Bender got his start as a sustainable food and food security activist in a garden.

"I decided I wanted a garden, and it was a total disaster. I did it again the next year and read lots of books and talked to people—I was hooked," he says.

Growing Gardens couldn't have been a more perfect fit for Bender, who received the 2006 Skidmore Prize for Community from *Willamette Week*, which recognizes people 35 and younger who work to make the region a great place through nonprofit organizations. Through Growing Gardens (www.growing-gardens.org), he organizes the building of vegetable garden beds in people's yards and provides them with the tools and education they'll need to continue gardening successfully and affordably. Bender matches up an experienced gardener with a new gardener in their neighborhood. Support is provided for three years in addition to monthly workshops on gardening, composting, cooking and food preservation.

"It offers the opportunity to people who otherwise won't make the connections of land to our well-being. Food security is a way of looking at hunger from a more holistic and preventative perspective," he explains. "It teaches people to be less reliant on emergency food programs and grow the food themselves to have access to fresh, local, organic produce."

According to Bender, Growing Gardens is not only the solution to hunger, but it makes a positive impact in affecting people's diet and provides a great community-building activity. "You get to know your neighbors more and share when you have a garden," he explains.

Community is the main similarity Bender sees between the sustainability and queer rights movements. "A cause can bring together a community," he says. "The tight-knit community [environmental activists] create is similar to the communities gay people create around civil rights issues."

However, Bender says he finds the environmental movement to be largely straight-dominated. "I believe that for many gay people, if they are going to get involved in an activist group, it's going to be something that affects



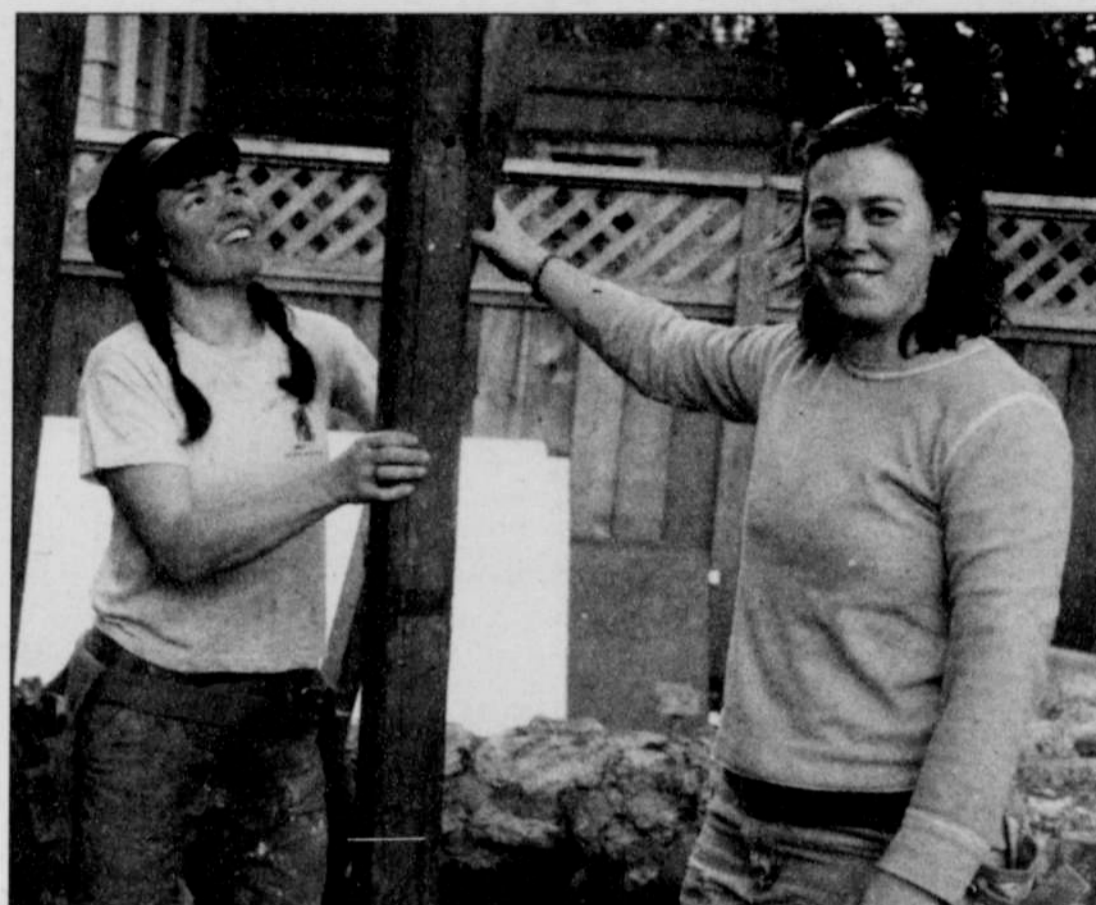
Rodney Bender teaches people to grow their own food.

them more directly, something that's more tangible to their daily lives," Bender explains. "During the civil rights movement, gay people had to fight for our basic right to be who we are. Then AIDS hit, which created an entire new group of gay activism, and today we're still fighting for basic rights such as marriage and domestic partner benefits. It's no wonder gay activists haven't put the environment on the top of their priority of involvement."

For queers who have the time, energy and resources to fight for multiple causes, Bender suggests getting involved where your passions lie. "Get involved with Portland's numerous nonprofit organizations. Go plant food plants in your yard," he recommends.

He says people could also join a co-op, shop at farmers markets and rely less on cars and fossil fuels to make a difference. "But it keeps going back to growing food for yourself. The local organic movement is not always accessible to low-income people, and growing your own can help you get around that," he adds.

No matter who you are, Bender sees one thing we can all do to better our futures. "It's important that we all become more aware of where our food comes from and what we put into our bodies."



Lydia Doleman (left) and Carey Lien put their power into natural building.

THIS MUST BE THE PLACE

The cliché "If you build it, they will come" might find new life in the work of Lydia Doleman and Carey Lien. The two work with the City Repair Project, an organized group action that educates and inspires communities to creatively transform the places where they live. They also work together at Doleman's Flying Hammer Productions, a natural building company focused on infusing the urban fabric with natural materials and empowering people to create their own healthy, natural and beautiful spaces.

"It's about reclaiming the commons and educating people that they're empowered to do so," says Doleman about City Repair, which was formed in 1996 by Portland activists who wanted a more community-oriented and ecologically sustainable society. Volunteers work with neighborhood residents to reclaim urban spaces, such as intersections, and transform them into community gathering places.

Driving around town, it is easy to spot the spaces this group has touched. "Sunnyside Piazza" in the Sunnyside neighborhood and "Share-It Square" in the Sellwood neighborhood are examples of what is referred to as intersection repair. "Portland has more intersections than any other city because we have 200-foot blocks," says Doleman, who identifies as bisexual. "Through intersection repair, we have a place to actually intersect

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