

# Despite drought, still digging in

## In San Pedro, gardeners try to keep a patch of the old country alive

By Joe Mozingo

The old Italian men pass their mornings near the top of the hill, tending thick grapevines and rows of fava beans, smoking crumbling Toscano cigars, staying out of the house. If you try to call Francesco "Frank" Mitrano at home, his wife will brusquely tell you that he's at "the farm."

The farm is a patch of soil by the 110 Freeway, where he harvests enough tomatoes from his crop to make spaghetti sauce for his family's weekly Sunday dinner. "Twenty-one people," he exclaims.

A half-century ago, Filipino seafarers re-created a piece of the old country on this weedy hillside in San Pedro.

Italian fishermen quickly joined them, as did others with horticultural skills [See Digging, A8]



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

**HECTOR NAVARRO**, 76, who's been churning the soil at the San Pedro community garden for 40 years, displays a fruit from a South American guama tree.

[Digging, from A1] honed all over the world — Mexico, Laos, India, Japan, Indonesia, Croatia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Arizona and Lawndale.

More than 250 parcels are connected by a maze of trails and pipes and hoses. Avocado trees soar as high as 60 feet. Giant banana leaves, ratoons of sugar cane and bright orange guavas — set amid a jumble of sheds, trellises, fences and retaining walls — give the hill the look of a rural village carved from jungle.

The community garden — thought to be the oldest in Los Angeles — grew quietly and off the grid, with unlimited water and little oversight.

But now, in a time of drought, it faces an existential crisis after the city drastically cut its water supply.

Though the heavy rains helped last year, the plots they have nurtured for decades are getting thirstier every day.

Mitrano, 83, barrel-chested with a burl of a nose and a sail rigger's forearms, sneered at the hose that dribbled at his feet.

"No hay presión," said Mitrano, using Spanish, the lingua franca of the garden. There is no water pressure.

When he lifted it to his waist, the water rose and stopped just below the metal rim. "This is water? Come on!"

He grumpily whipped the hose to get a drizzle on a row of thick Swiss chard.

The land is owned by LA Sanitation, which uses the top and bottom of the hill, but not the midsection the gardeners took over.

It's not clear when the farmers first tapped into the city water lines, but officials didn't seem to care until 2014, when Mayor Eric Garcetti ordered departments to cut water use by 20% within three years.

After sanitation managers found the community garden was sucking up to 300,000 gallons a month, they closed the taps except for a few hours two days a week.

The inevitable result: All the gardeners showed up to soak their soil at once. Water pressure plunged. Depending on where one's plot was situated on the steep slope, a grower might get an ample stream of water, a trickle or nothing at all. The north end lost water altogether.

About four of the six acres remain leafy and laden with mangoes, loquats and South American guama trees, whose beans taste like ice cream. In the sections with no water, trees turned into gray skeletons and the foliage withered away, unveiling an expansive eyesore of sun-blasted sheds, fences, wood stakes and tattered canopies.

A number of gardeners moved on. Others kept small



DAVID VIGUERAS, 66, grows a variety of produce in his garden. He lost his water when a neighbor diverted his flow by placing a T-junction in the pipe upstream. Photograph by JAZZAM KHAN. Los Angeles Times

## Farmers sticking to the plots

crops alive with buckets of water hauled down from a spigot at the top of the hill.

Fights broke out now and then as people tried to rejigger the archaic network of pipes to their advantage.

David Viguéras, 66, who grew up in Lawndale, lost his water when a neighbor diverted his flow by placing a T-junction in the pipe upstream.

"We had serious water wars going on," he recalled. "But I let it go. He loves his garden. I love mine."

A new pipe last year restored Viguéras' flow — but it left a different neighbor, Arturo Javier, 78, with a dribble. Now Javier grows only a bit of lettuce, radishes, cauliflower, cabbage.

The arid days took him back 50 years, when he left his five-acre farm in Oaxaca because the rain stopped and his crops withered. The sense of peace his San Pedro garden had long instilled was giving way to that old angst of trying to coax life out of dry ground. "I might give it up," he said.

He could become part of a larger exodus.

Soon, the city plans to start charging the San Pedro garden for the water, and elderly, fixed-income cultivators might be pushed out.

Many of the farmers had come to San Pedro in the 1960s to work the tuna fleets, docks and canneries. Others built boats, laid tile and brick, worked in restaurants, zig-zagged the Pacific as merchant marines, and fabricated machine parts in Wilmington factories.

Stuck in small apartments or houses with postage-stamp yards, they needed a place to get their fingers into the earth and eventually found their way to the hillside.

Across battered chain-link and chicken-wire fences separating the plots, they share seedlings and growing tips in Spanish, English, Italian and Tagalog. Sicilians learn how to grow avocados from *michoacanos*, who tend to fava beans and anise from the Mediterranean.

"Everybody good people here," said Giuseppe Orlando, 67, a retired fisher-

man who was picking pepperoncini peppers.

The water situation is more acute in San Pedro because of its big trees, many tended by the same gardeners for nearly half a century. Though most garden councils prohibit fruit trees, or limit them to 5 or 8 feet, San Pedro has no such rules. There are 20-foot orange and lemon trees, even taller fig, loquat, guama and avocado trees. Some fruit hangs so high, gardeners can't reach it even with a tall ladder and extension pole picker.

"They've grown there so long, they grow whatever they want," said Maria de Leon, the new garden manager, who works for a non-profit, From Lot to Spot.

That bit of anarchy, she said, created a "hidden gem."

She hopes that won't change too much if gardeners upgrade the pipes and use modern, less wasteful irrigation methods.

At Hector Navarro's plot — his "ranchito" — he can sit in the moist, loam-scented shade and feel as if he is on his family's *finca* in Michoacan, though he's only 300 yards from the busiest port in the United States. He snacks on loquats to help his blood pressure and slices open sweet lemons, which he says "are good for the lungs."



He borrows a hose from his friend Mitrano, who was getting running water this day. Navarro has managed to keep his place relatively lush, but he still is losing two decades-old avocado trees.

Navarro, 76, has been churning this soil for 40 years.

The retired warehouse worker has had unsteady years of late. A new landlord tried to evict him in order to raise the rent on the bungalow in Wilmington where his

family has lived for decades. She backed off after he hired a public interest lawyer. President Trump's rhetoric against immigrants had him so fearful of getting sent back to Mexico, he became a U.S. citizen.

On a recent morning, he picked a bay leaf, crumbled it and inhaled the sharp aroma. "Good for anxiety," he said.

He checked his orange, guava, lime and lemon trees for flower buds. The papayas were still green; chayotes and nopales would come soon. He rubbed leaves with his fingertips and looked for mold and aphids, admiring the reddish-green spring shoots. He started many of his plants from seeds he bought at a market in Tijuana.

He knelt and picked weeds that sprouted from rains much too meager to help his deep-rooted trees.

The food he grows here in two side-by-side plots — about 1,600 square feet altogether — helps keep his grocery bills down. But, more important, he treasures the serenity of his garden, the connection to the land he had as a child.

Eugene Gayap, 78, thinks about his late father when he's at his plot. He used to follow his dad around their land north of Manila, helping him harvest rice and corn and pick breadfruit, papayas and mangoes.

Since the drought, all that's left to remind him of home are a malunggay tree — sacred in the Philippines — some taro root and bitter melons. These days, with buckets of water from a nearby spigot, he grows Italian food — anise, rapini, fava beans — because they require less water than his tropical fruits.

"I learned to eat anise

from the Italians and eat cactus from the Mexicans," Gayup said.

In a well-irrigated section, Carol Christian, 56, who grew up in South Los Angeles and spent summers at her grandfather's farm on Black Bayou in Louisiana, plants the okra, collared greens and purple-hulled peas of her childhood, among Japanese kabocha squash and other vegetables she learned about from neighbors.

She listens to contemporary Gospel on a portable stereo as she plunges her trowel into dark rich soil to plant some Chinese long beans.

Vigueras — her onetime boyfriend, now just friend — introduced her to the garden a few years back and they salvaged an abandoned plot left in shambles. "I was going to cry when I saw it, it was so bad," she said. "Just wood, pipes everywhere. Like a cave, no light."

His enthusiasm sold her. They terraced it, dug out pits for rain barrels, cut some branches to get sunlight.



**FRANCESCO MITRANO**, 83, harvests enough tomatoes to make sauce for his family's Sunday dinners.

Christian's mother died recently and she named the plot after her, Audrey Mae. She comes here in the morning to light incense and pray.

In his own garden, Viguera uses every inch, planting papayas, manzano bananas, mint, malanga root, citron, green beans, corn, bell peppers, Japanese cucumbers, zucchini. He even grows bamboo to make his own trellises.

Viguera got his plot 12 years ago when one of the Filipino founders passed away. He planned to cut down a tree he didn't recognize, but was told it was a sacred malunggay, known elsewhere as a moringa. A spiritual man himself, Viguera kept it and now considers it the heart of his plot.

He loves spending time here.

"I think I like growing it more than I like consuming it. Mostly, I eat it right here when I'm working," he said. He listens to jazz, boils citron into tea on a camping stove, chats in rudimentary Spanish to his neighbors. Sometimes one of his adult daughters comes to visit.

He gestures toward the houses that rise up the Palos Verdes Peninsula. "The people over there, they call this 'Little Mexico,' and they don't mean it in a nice way. I try to make it look aesthetically nice."

He adorns his borders with sunflowers, poppies, lilies and bandera espanola. Others use morning glory.

A decade ago, he fought a city proposal to level the gardens for baseball fields.

"This is a gift," he said. "This is a blessing here to have one of these gardens."

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