Brandon Lafavor in the garden he has dug outside his apartment block in Seattle.

Concrete jungle

The jilted generations are turning the mean streets green, **Jake Lynch** writes

I love how Australians call a campfire a ''bush telly''. It just makes sense – the magnetism of the thing, the endless variety in a frame that from a distance appears unchanging. The way it draws people to it is almost spiritual, and perhaps clasps the end of that thread in us that leads back to a more ancient time when the fire was about survival.

It seems vegie gardens are like that too. A young bloke who lives in our apartment block here in Seattle put together a little patch around the side of our building. That was March, and by July, the spring onions had sprung, and the lettuces were filling out, and where before there was just soil and seeds, there grew leaves and vines. People would come out to dump their rubbish, have a look at what Brandon Lafavor, 24, was doing, and pretty soon there would be four or five neighbours, who had never given each other the time of day before, standing around having a chinwag, making note of the changes and talking about the seasons.

As my first American winter gave way to my first spring, I saw vegie patches sprouting up all over the place – in backyards, but also on the strip in front of houses, and in planter boxes on concrete pathways. The local school built a garden out front where people were free to take whatever grew there. The proliferation reminded me of some poorer cities in Asia where people grew food for survival. But in the Seattle suburb of Queen Anne, there are BMWs and European hybrids in the driveways, Obama signs in every window. The demographic is similar to Mosman, and there is plenty of disposable income to spend on organics.

I was standing around with Lafavor one Sunday watering the patch and wondering what is motivating people to get into the dirt for the sake of a few fresh lettuces. For him, it isn't economic necessity, but a more meaningful way of life.

For someone who grew up in a prosperous and stable Australia, the United States in 2008 seems a place on the precipice. Since September 11, 2001, many people feel besieged. The financial crisis and the state of the big cities has many Americans doubting their government and the big corporations. Crime is up, obesity is up, unemployment is up. The gap between rich and the poor is greater than ever.

Against this backdrop, community gardens are the hot topic in urban planning, hailed as a way to encourage more interaction of people with their communities, more exercise and healthy eating. Waiting lists for plots are hundreds long.

The Seattle City Council's P Patch program provides 2500 organic plots for 6000 people. Fifty-five percent are on low incomes. The council has established two farmers' markets in low-income neighbourhoods, worked by immigrants from farming backgrounds.

P Patch program director Rich Macdonald is a former attorney who, after losing his job, turned to community gardening to reconnect with the farming heritage of his grandparents.

''In a some ways it was about community organising, and political for me only in a sense of wanting to be a part of my neighbourhood, getting involved in something fun that was going on there, something that brought people together,'' he says.

Growing your own food is something of a social statement, whether it be about pesticides, Third World regimes, or self-sufficiency in a frightening world. Today, this is true more than ever.

''Crisis situations in cultures can make for very surprising changes,'' the executive director of City Farmer, Michael Levenston, says. City Farmer was set up by the Canadian Government in the late 1970s to help people in cities become more involved with what they eat.

''When we were trying to put the words ''city'' and ''farmer'' together, or ''urban'' and ''agriculture'' together, back in '78, it was about as fringe, as oddball, as you could get,'' Levenston says. ''But now, we're in a hot time, and a lot of people are turning to urban agriculture, and you could say more with a fist in the air, than not.''

Many Americans are questioning the food system that has provided a surplus of cheap, poor-quality food, creating an epidemic of obesity and diabetes.

In many areas, the only place to buy groceries is the 7-11 or corner liquor store, and access to fresh, let alone organic, fruit and vegetables is scarce. It is predicted that unless eating and exercise habits change, one-third of all children born in the US in 2000 will become diabetic.

The calorie-dense high fructose corn syrup is in more than one-quarter of all supermarket products, and thanks to US government subsidies, it is very cheap for food corporations. Of the $US114 billion in commodity subsidies between 1995 and 2004, corn got US$42 billion – more than cotton, soy, and rice combined. The only fruits or vegetables to get government support were apples and sugar beets, which received US$610 million.

Which is why high fructose corn syrup is in products from soft drink to hummus and cereal, replacing more expensive natural ingredients. It is why a large bag of Cheetos costs US89c, but a pound of apples costs $US4. A recent study found $US1 could buy 1200 calories of potato chips and biscuits, or 250 calories of carrot.

Shops that sell fresh and organic produce are far more common in higher-income neighbourhoods. Only 42 per cent of people in Washington State, where I live, consider fresh fruit and vegetables affordable enough to include in their diet.

The move back to local food networks is more than about soil and seasons; it is about survival – financially, environmentally and psychologically, and in this environment, activist groups are emerging. City Slicker Farms, out of the mean streets of Oakland, uses terms such as ''environmental racism'' and ''economic discrimination''. Launched in 2001 by community activist Willow Rosenthal, City Slicker Farms has set up more than 80 plots and small farms, using disused blocks and backyards. In the 13km grid of streets that makes up West Oakland, there is not one supermarket selling fresh produce. Most of the 20,000 residents are below the poverty line, and buy their groceries at the liquor store.

City Slicker Farm produce is sold on a sliding scale based on income, so families can afford fresh fruit and vegetables.

The blueprint for groups like City Slicker, which receives no government funding, is in New York. After the Great Depression, the small area in the south of Manhattan, known as the Bowery, became synonymous with crime, unemployment and drug abuse. But it was here in 1973 that artist Liz Christy and a group of mates began finding ways to make things grow among the rubble and ruins, often using guerrilla tactics under the cover of night.

Now, the NYC Green Guerillas advise more than 30 garden groups, and the amount of land for food production is increasing every week. There are more than 600 community gardens in New York. But with the Federal Government showing no interest, programs like these rely on city councils, chambers of commerce, and volunteer groups.

In Vancouver, where Levenston runs City Farmer, even private developers have caught the wave. Omni Development is expanding the community garden it built on a downtown site awaiting development. After demolishing the existing building, Omni paid more than $US50,000 to establish the community garden, to be farmed by local residents in the 18-24 months before new construction begins.

Author Bill McKibben explores the possibilities of community gardening in his book *Deep Economy*.

''Farmer's markets are the fasting growing part of our food economy – suggesting new possibilities for everything from land use patterns to community identity,'' he writes.

''In the face of energy shortage, of global warming, and of the vague but growing sense that we're not as alive and connected as we want to be, I think we've started to grope around for what might come next. And just in time.''

■ Jacob Lynch is a former Rural Press journalist living in Seattle.