The nonprofit organization Ubuntu Green is literally planting seeds of change within the Sacramento community, nearing completion of the first year of its Home and Community Gardens Project.

The project seeks to provide low-income families in the Building Healthy Communities target area with healthier access to food and to create a greater sense of community in the selected neighborhoods.

For more information on BHC: http://sacramentopress.com/headline/53692/Projects_underway_for_Building_Healthy_Communities

Building Healthy Communities is a coalition comprised of many different community-driven organizations that are all funded by California’s largest foundation—The California Endowment. The BHC seeks to implement a ten-year plan to renew the health in children and families in fourteen communities throughout California, and South Sacramento is one of them.

The Building Healthy Communities target area encompasses much of South Sacramento, including sections of Oak Park, Tahoe Park, Lemon Hill and Colonial and Fruitridge Manor.

For a map of the BHC targeted area: http://www.calendow.org/healthycommunities/pdfs/south_sacramento_111011.pdf

With 26 completed to date, the project is set to install four more gardens by the end of September, two of which will add to the four existing gardens at Sacramento High School in late August, and is seeking to establish 30 more by September 2012.

The project began in 2009 as a campaign for the development of community
gardens in Sacramento and evolved into a system of private home and community gardens with the partnership of multiple community organizations including Alchemist CDC and Rafael Aguilera of Sacramento Yard Farmer.

Feb. 26 marked the beginning of the project upon which six gardens were built at four sites in the initial effort to “create a community of folks who grow their own food,” said Charles Mason, the founder of Ubuntu Green.

The way the system works

After receiving contact from families living in the BHC-targeted area, Ubuntu Green chooses recipients of the gardens, prioritized on a greatest-need basis. This need is assessed from the area of the household, whether or not it is in the target BHC area, and from their website, "families that are already receiving or have received services from green and sustainable organizations in the area."

If approved for the project, Mason or Sacramento Yard Farmer Rafael Aguilera begin with a site assessment in which they decide the best placement for the garden box in the recipients’ yard, taking into consideration how much sun an area receives daily as well as the space allotted for the garden.

The recipient of the box then decides on the plants to begin the bed with based on the season and a date for the build.

A raised bed, typically 3 feet by 8 feet, is built by the yard farmer and a crew of volunteers. The bed is made of redwood to avoid contamination in the soil. Drip irrigation and a timer are installed and local farms and nurseries provide the organic soil and compost, plant starts and seeds.

The recipients are given a tutorial on gardening and quarterly packets complete with healthy food recipes and a list of places where families can access healthy foods including local stores and farmers markets. The packets are distributed in English, Hmong, Spanish and Vietnamese but are available in other languages on request.

After the build, residents care for their own gardens and can contact Ubuntu Green at any time with questions or concerns. When the next planting season comes around, residents again choose what they want to grow based on the season.

According to Mercado whose family owns two beds, the first bed has no cost for families in the BHC-targeted area, and some homes have purchased a second.
Community Feedback

Many homes and businesses have received the garden boxes to date, including the Boys and Girls Club, Sacramento High School and Old Soul Co.

Alberto Mercado, project coordinator for Building Healthy Communities and resident of Oak Park, was one of the first to receive a garden box in his front yard. The project suggests the placement of the garden in one’s front yard since it will have more visibility to the community than if it were installed elsewhere.

"Each person can affect at least five people," Mason said.

Mercado and Mason agree. Both have front yard gardens that have influenced neighbors to join the program.

"I never really gardened, and it was from seeing what he grew that inspired me," said Steve Gonzalez, an Oak Park resident and Mason’s neighbor. Gonzalez received a garden box about six months ago but installed it in his back yard due to the amount of shade in his front yard.

One aim of the program is to install the garden boxes in clusters in small neighborhoods, a method of creating community and meeting the people who live in your area, Mason said.

Duggan Irish, chef operator at Old Soul Co., called it “urban renewal … projects centered around building a type of community,” he said, “It’s the physicality of the labor – know what you’re cooking with because you grew it.” Duggan said he will use ingredients from the garden in the Old Soul kitchen if it produces enough.

The type of community that is slowly growing throughout Oak Park and South Sacramento “brings you back to your roots,” Gonzalez said.

The program has yielded significant changes throughout the many households it has become a part of.

“As adults, we take for granted where the food comes from and who grew it,” Mercado said, we’re “always looking for places to find healthy food but we have to go far. . . you grow it in your own home you’re reducing your Carbon Footprint.”

The program ultimately seeks to build at least 300 home and community gardens by 2013, half of which will be given to low-income households.
“To understand the sustainability behind the food you grow,” Irish said.

To summarize, with more home and community gardens, there will be less of a need to travel far for food in Sacramento.

“People think they are defenseless against this thing called climate change. People don’t think they can impact the environment. Yes you can,” said Mason.

Anyone who is interested in participating in the Home Garden Project or in volunteering may contact Ubuntu Green at http://www.ubuntugreen.org/300-edible-gardens-campaign/