

# Change begins, literally, in your backyard

By Huned Contractor

Eco-pioneer Jules Dervaes has transformed his small garden in Pasadena into an organic farm, run on renewable energies, that not only takes care of his family's year-long food requirements but also supplies to restaurants. His film on this revolution in urban sustainability has inspired thousands across the globe



In the midst of a densely urban setting in downtown Pasadena, a city in the Los Angeles County of the United States, radical change has taken root. Over 20 years, the Dervaes family have transformed their home into an urban homestead. They harvest nearly 3 tonnes of organic food from their 1/10-acre garden while incorporating many back-to-basics practices, as well as solar energy and bio-diesel. It's an amazing experiment that has not only turned out to be a great success but is prompting many to give it a shot after watching how the Dervaes family went about the process in a documentary film called *Homegrown Revolution* which, interestingly, has been shot and edited by members of the family themselves.

*Homegrown Revolution* is a short informational introduction to a project that has been called a "new revolution in urban sustainability". Calling the project Path to Freedom, the Dervaes family shows that change is possible. "We have done this in order to reduce our footprint on the earth's resources," said Jules who was present along with his family at the Vatavaran Film Festival held in New Delhi from October 27 to 31, 2009.

Environmentalism and the health of our planet is a theme that weaves through the film; even though it's a short 15 minutes, the narrative is packed with the history and successful outcome of this new urban sustainability movement.

"It is meant to inspire and encourage others -- young and old -- to take a look at what they have and realise that change can begin with a single step and can be created right in our own backyards," Jules said. Articles about Path to Freedom and the Dervaes family have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *FAZ (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)*. The family has been featured on ABC's Nightline, and CNN. "This is also our way to express our angst against the corporate powers that control the food supply. The Path to Freedom project has been established to promote a simpler and more fulfilling lifestyle," Jules elaborated.

Since the mid-1980s, Jules and his three adult children, Anais, Justin and Jordanne, have steadily worked to transform their ordinary city lot in Pasadena into a thriving organic garden that supplies them and their "citified" backyard farm animals with food throughout the year. These eco-pioneers also run a successful business selling fresh produce to local restaurants. The income helps fund their purchases of solar panels, energy-efficient appliances

and a bio-diesel processor to decrease the homestead's reliance on the earth's non-renewable resources.

"In our society, growing food yourself has become the most radical of acts. It is truly the only effective protest, one that can, and will, overturn the corporate powers-that-be. By the process of directly working in harmony with nature, we do the one thing most essential to change the world -- we change ourselves," said Jules, explaining his philosophy. Speaking about what led to the experiment, he added: "As a university graduate teaching secondary school math in New Orleans, I started to wonder about a better way of life. After I got married in 1970, I was seriously motivated to discover how I could best provide for my family. I wanted to make sure that my children would be healthy and strong and that they would be able to live long and happy lives. I believed the only way I could achieve this was to learn how to grow my own food."



Inspired by *Mother Earth News* magazine and the hope of a new beginning, Jules migrated to New Zealand in 1973 where he embarked on the path towards self-sufficiency and living off the land. "I moved back to Florida and bought 10 acres where I worked in lawn maintenance and raised bees for honey. Then I moved to southern California in the mid-1980s. As a result of a severe drought in 1990, I did away with my moisture-challenged lawn in Pasadena, replacing it with wild flowers, drought-tolerant plants and, eventually, edible landscaping. This drastic step of turning away from the American lawn fetish proved to be a major factor in turning our home into a homestead," he said.

For Jules and his family, the next area of immediate focus is water reclamation. "We already practise a number of water conservation methods and have plans to install a grey water filtering system to re-use our bathtub and bathroom sink water to flush the toilet. We recently replaced our asphalt shingle roof with a metal roof and will add gutters to capture rainwater for storage in cisterns. Our long-term goal is to further the work of Path to Freedom, not only in the number of people impacted, but, more importantly, in the depth and daring of our undertakings," he said.

#### **The Jules Dervaes inventory**

Location	Pasadena, CA
Property size	8,712 square feet
Garden size	3,900 square feet
Garden produce	Over 350 different vegetables, herbs, fruits and berries
Amount of food produced	10,000 lb annually
Energy usage	6.5 kWh per day, and decreasing every year
Solar power produced	9,000 kWh per year

Food storage facilities	Canning, drying, freezing
Composting methods	Making/using EM bokashi, vermicomposting
Fuel	Home-brewed bio-diesel
Hand-powered appliances	Blender, toaster, grinder, popcorn popper, solar oven, pedal-powered grain mill, hand-cranked radio, mortar and pestle
Non-toxic cleaning products	Vinegar, baking soda, lemon juice
Natural health practices	Homoeopathy, herbal remedies
Water conservation	Low-flush toilets, re-using laundry water, clay pot irrigation, solar outdoor shower, lawns used for growing food instead of for decorative purposes
Crafts and skills of family	Making wine, edible landscaping, sewing, fibre arts, animal husbandry, carpentry, plumbing, making candles, growing herbs, website designing, photography, filmmaking

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