Everybody wants a “cure.” We want cut and dried, easy, fix-it solutions. But in this time and place in our society, we have a myriad of problems with no easy answers. I, however, have an answer (I won’t call it easy) that could ameliorate many of the biggest problems facing my generation: gardening. Everyone should have a garden, everyone. Sustainable community agriculture has the potential to save the world and bring about a paradigm shift that is so desperately needed. Let us look at the problems I purport to solve with such a simple answer.

The first problem I propose solving with a garden is the Environmental Crisis. We have several direct benefits here including the basic: if we grow more plants, there is more carbon in the ground, in plant matter, and less in the air—where it’s a liability. This is called carbon sequestration and it could be considered a main component of the gardening technique called Permaculture. Permaculture gardening seeks to work within natural systems and emphasizes planting perennials; which require less maintenance and work, and have larger, more stable root systems; which lead to greater carbon sequestration and overall soil health. In addition, when we have more carbon sequestering plants, we also have more oxygen cycling (plants cleaning the air) as well as more shade and cooling from the plants. Another direct benefit to the environment would be the reduction of the application of chemical pesticides and fertilizers and the stripping of nutrients from the soil in big monoculture (single crop) fields. Indirectly, we could save oil by not having to transport our food so far away from its origins and we would, ideally, need to manufacture less fertilizers and pesticides, which reduces the pollution from their manufacture and transport.

Another major problem that could be fixed by a garden is the current health crisis. Secondary to the environmental benefits listed above, we could improve the wellness of the people living in that environment. Imagine if we all could breathe cleaner air, drink cleaner water! We would also see a decrease in food deserts. These are areas where inhabitants have no access to fresh food, like fruits and vegetables or non-processed meats. A community vegetable garden could increase the availability of nutritious foods for those that would not otherwise have access to it. Increasing intake of fruits and vegetables, and decreasing sodium, sugar, and fat-loaded processed foods, has the potential to decrease food-related disease. What is a food related disease? Well, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity and high blood
pressure are some. There is even a growing body of evidence that suggests a healthy, nutrient-rich diet could help prevent certain cancers. While eating the produce from the garden would be the main direct benefit, one indirect benefit would be that growers would be getting their exercise through the act of gardening.

The third problem for which I propose such a simple solution is, I think, a single problem, with two prongs. The problem, as I see it, is an increasing sense of distance and isolation from our fellow human beings. This results in a lack of a local economy with greater centralization of power and wealth. Less money spent locally, between friends and neighbors, results in the possibility for greater income inequality. The second prong of this problem is the emotional and psychological toll such isolation has on us as human beings. By having a community garden, we create a meeting place and a joint venture, by which neighbors can become friends. By localizing agriculture, we create a vibrant local economy where money spent on a neighbors eggs or produce becomes money that is then spent on another neighbor’s goods or services- keeping money in roughly the same economic bracket, rather than trickling up. So, through a garden, we can create a sense of shared purpose and community, as well as helping to reduce dependence on big factory farms and far-away faceless corporations.

I’ve made this sound simple, the reality is that it isn’t. A community garden needs land (the most important and likely the most expensive), water, tools and a willing, dedicated and organized community. The good news is this movement is already happening. The American Community Garden Association is an organization devoted to networking gardeners and aspiring gardeners across North America. There are five hundred member gardens including some in New York City, Portland OR, San Francisco, Washington DC, and Boston and Holyoke MA. Spread the word. I believe gardeners could save the world.

By Amy Meunier