

## VENDOR SPOTLIGHT: JULIE BALAA

Julie Balaa is talking to a customer at her booth at the weekly Old L.A. Farmers Market in Highland Park. Balaa is a certified backyard “farmer,” and every week she sells food such as prickly pear cactus, perennial collards, Peruvian mint, and many plants that are used to freshen the air inside homes.

Balaa typically sells less-common foods, and instructs people how they can grow their own sustainable gardens. .

Her booth had bowls of New Zealand spinach, lamb’s quarter, California pepper seeds, cactus pads, as well as a variety of potted foods, such as purple tree collard, sapote, and ficus trees.

“All of these plants,” said Balaa, pointing to the plants around her booth, “can be used to create a sustainable garden in your own backyard.”

Balaa explained, “Lambs quarter greens are one of the most nutritious plants in the world, based on the data from the USDA. Eating lambs quarter in your salad, or your soup, is like taking a natural mineral tablet,” said Balaa

She does the same sort of sustainable harvesting with New Zealand spinach, which is a plant native to the west coast of South America. It’s a sprawling perennial – and “perennial” means that you only plant it once and you never need to replant it. It just grows and grows, and tender leaves can be pinched off regularly for salads and soups.

One of her popular foods is the prickly pear cactus pad, or nopales, which have been used in Mexican cuisine for centuries. “The prickly pear cactus has been demonstrated to be effective for treating high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes, as documented in such books as Prickly Pear Cactus Medicine by Ran Knishinsky,” says Balaa while she demonstrates how to clean one of the cactus pads.

At her table at the Farmers Market, Balaa had a list of all the plants that anyone could grow in their yards to create a perennial, sustainable garden for the least amount of work. Including trees, citrus, asparagus, onions, prickly pear cactus along with other foods too.



As part of the permaculture philosophy, Balaa and her family also recycle all of their kitchen and yard scraps by composting them into soil, rather than just tossing it all into the trash can. Since L.A. Compost also has a space at the weekly Farmers Market, Balaa also sends people to their booth to get more information about how to compost. Balaa is also the president of a local non-profit corporation, WTI, whose mission is to teach practical survival skills – such as producing your own food – to city-dwellers. Balaa can be reached at [juliebalaa@gmail.com](mailto:juliebalaa@gmail.com). She has just finished writing a book about low-cost emergency planning, which will be published later in the year.