

Fort Bend subdivision one of dozens across U.S. mixing suburbia and farmland

By **Matthew Tresaugue** | March 13, 2016 | Updated: March 13, 2016 9:57pm

1



Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Houston Chronicle

IMAGE 4 OF 17

Otter Creek has two bridges that cross over it, each featuring the name of the creek and lights. Harvest Green, the first agrihood in the Houston area, is rising along the Grand Parkway in Fort Bend County ... [more](#)

Harvest Green would seem to be the archetypal subdivision of Houston's urban edge, with roomy houses, manicured lawns, parks and ponds, walking trails and streets named to suggest the natural setting it displaced.

But look again, and you see unexpected things: a young pecan orchard at the entry, spicy salad greens growing in a field across from the first row of houses, and herb gardens and fruit trees in cul-de-sac medians.

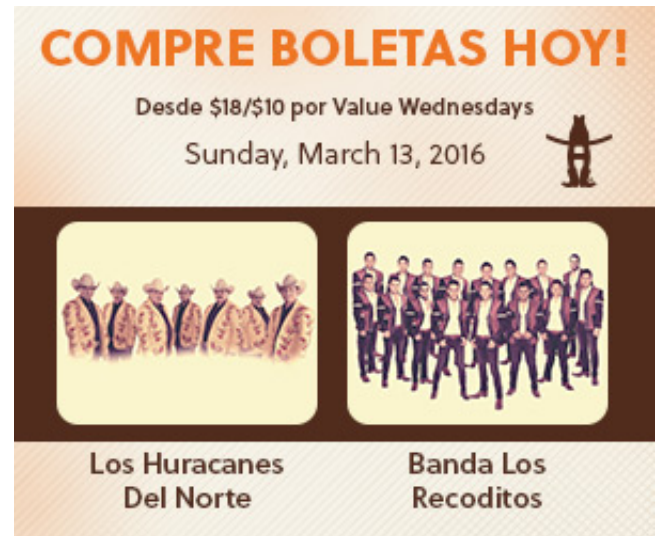
The Fort Bend County development is greater Houston's first so-called "agrihood," a residential subdivision built around acres of working farmland and pastures. It's part of a national movement to incorporate agriculture into suburbia, driven by a desire for healthier eating and pastoral living near big-city jobs.

There are roughly 200 agrihoods taking root across the country, from Charlottesville, Va., to Gilbert, Ariz., to Boise, Idaho, said Ed McMahon, an expert on sustainable development at the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit research group.

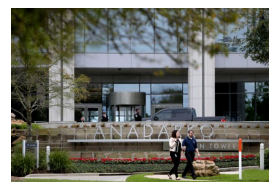
"I've been hearing about a new one once a week for the last year," McMahon said. "People want this authentic lifestyle where everyone isn't plugged in and tuned out all the time."

This month, Harvest Green's first residents are moving into new homes - prices range from \$300,000 to \$600,000, with future houses expected to top \$1 million - where cotton and corn were once industrially farmed.

In other times, a dreamy developer would



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have transformed the roughly 1,300 acres near the Grand Parkway into a master-planned community wrapped around a golf course. Two country clubs - Pecan Grove Plantation and Black Hawk - are within a short drive of the new subdivision.



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But the 18-hole course and clubhouse are not the sales lure they once were, so Johnson Development Co. is offering a different hook for its 2,000-home project 27 miles southwest of downtown Houston: agriculture.

A new suburban vision

The developer has set aside 4 acres among the houses for an organic farm to serve as the hub of neighborhood life. It's managed by a full-time contractor, Edible Earth Resources, a Houston-based gardening firm that also will conduct classes and help residents who lease 20-by-20-foot plots to get their hands dirty and grow their own food.

The site also will feature a regular farmers' market, a farm-to-table restaurant and a teaching kitchen. And there will be pathways connecting the farm to nearby schools, allowing students growing up with technology to connect with the land and crops.

What's more, residents can buy memberships in a community-supported agriculture program, or CSA, located on 300 acres near the housing tract. The program, also to be managed by Houston-based Edible Earth Resources, will provide members with a weekly supply of just-harvested produce.

"We want to get people out of their homes and build a community," said Shay Shafie, Harvest Green's general manager. "Eventually, it will have a country-club feel, but around a farm."

Shafie said more than 140 houses have been sold since October, a pace that is well ahead of

first-year projections. He said the development should be built out in five to seven years.

The demand comes at a time of waning interest in suburban subdivisions that look alike: squared-off grids of boxy houses, with maybe a park or golf course nearby.

Craving authenticity

Instead, people seem increasingly interested in where and how their food is grown. And millennials, especially, tend to prefer authenticity over comfort and predictability, said McMahon, the land-use expert.

"For hundreds of years, everyone was a farmer or lived near farms, and they knew where their food came from," he said. The new interest "doesn't mean that they do the farming. It's really about how you can create a special and different community that we haven't had for a long time."

Planners said agrihoods can help preserve existing farmland as the Houston area continues to spread out. Some formerly rural cities, like Magnolia and Tomball, have zoning rules that would allow new developments to border farms.

Tana Ross, Magnolia's economic development coordinator, said the small but growing Montgomery County community would welcome a farm-focused subdivision.

"It would be a good fit with our roots and culture," she said.

New farm, old ways

The locavore lifestyle appeals to Jessica Forray, a mother of three boys who is moving to Harvest Green from Sugar Land next month. Their new four-bedroom house will come with planter boxes for a backyard garden of tomatoes, peppers, herbs and berry bushes. And she intends to lease space in the community farm for more fresh produce.

"It's like going back to our roots," said Forray, who describes herself as a gardening, health and fitness enthusiast. "That small-town, close-knit community doesn't really exist anymore."

Forray also said she is looking forward to getting tips from the professional farmers on site.

"I'm a self-taught gardener," she said. "I've never had anyone to tell me what's right or wrong."

Edible Earth Resources is promoting soil health at the farm by leaving fields untilled and planting cover crops that rotate with cash crops to blanket the fields year-round and act as a green manure.

Repeated plowing can degrade soil, leading to the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides to produce high yields.

Instead, the secondary crops, such as legumes, decompose and increase organic matter in the soil. The method minimizes erosion and requires less water.

"We feed the soil, not the plants," said Keenan Hooper, farm manager for Edible Earth Resources.

Already, one section has produced several types of tomatoes, peppers, kale eggplant, broccoli and snow peas, among other crops.

"We are growing things that you can't get in a supermarket," Hooper said. "They're varieties with unique flavors and what interests us."

Hooper said it will take time for the soil to be just the way he wants it. But that's fine because the farm will be there for years to come.

Johnson Development Corp. placed restrictions on the farmland to ensure that it isn't covered with houses in the future.



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