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## Urban Roots helps youth interest grow

By **CAROLYN ROST**, Country World Staff Writer

July 10, 2008 - Located in East Austin is a one-acre piece of property where not only organic vegetables grow, but also a place where youth are growing into active, community-minded citizens.



**Members of the Urban Roots program pull weeds in a vegetable garden. The program prompts youth to grow, sell and donate organic food.**

-- Staff photo by Rost

Through a new program called Urban Roots, Austin youth, ages 14 to 17, are connecting to the land and learning the benefits of growing, eating, selling and donating organic food. At the same time, they are also learning leadership, entrepreneurial and life skills and the importance of giving back to the community.

According to coordinator Mike Evans, Urban Roots is one of three programs under the larger umbrella non-profit organization known as Youth Launch.

"All the programs empower young people to engage in community service," Evans said. "We try to get people thinking about how they are serving their community."

According to the Youth Launch website, Urban Roots is a youth development program that uses sustainable agriculture as a means to effect lasting change for youth participants, and to nourish East Austin residents who currently have limited access to healthy foods.

Growing food is a part of the program, Evans said, but it is also about where the food goes.

"It goes to feed people in need. It goes to feed other members of the Austin community. Part of our goal is to have fresh healthy produce accessible to people who can't necessarily buy that."

The program, which started in January, targeted East Austin high schools, but youth from all over Austin could apply for the job. According to Evans, about 40 applicants were interviewed and 16 youth were hired to work at the farm.

"The interview process was sort of emblematic of the work we do out here. It was part group interview to see how people interacted in a group and it was part one on one."

The youth that were hired started working at the farm in February, he said.

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“It’s a pretty dynamic program because we are asking people not just to work here, we are asking them to interact with people from different backgrounds.”

For Steve Young, 17, working with others and working hard has been a good experience.

“I enjoy everybody. Everybody’s energy. It’s a team effort. It gives you a good feeling because you came out here early in the morning and you got the job done. You go home, go to sleep and you’re ready for the next day.”

As well as growing and harvesting the vegetables, the youth also deliver their fresh produce to places in Austin such as Caritas Soup Kitchen. They also help prepare the food there. Giving back to the community, Young said, is “another big part about Urban Roots.”

“We’re trying to show people that, not only do we grow the vegetables, but we also give back to our community. I am the start of a long, long program, hopefully.”

For 14-year-old Paul Mendoza, learning how to farm and being outdoors is what he has enjoyed the most. Learning leadership skills, he said, has helped him and his peers build confidence.

“We have volunteer days and one of our interns has to lead around a group of volunteers. Show them the ropes. Show them how to do their jobs. So it builds our confidence up at the same time.”

Through the Urban Roots program, Evans said, the youth can work together on an “even playing field.”

“We had some people who had worked in the gardens with their parents or their grandparents, but for the most part, this is a pretty even playing field no matter what background you’re from. Very few young people know about gardening or farming or agriculture so it’s a great way for people to come in. It’s not like a basketball program where some people are better than others. Everyone comes in at the same level.”

The program, he said, not only teaches about agriculture, leadership and public speaking, it also teaches about hard work and responsibility.

“Showing up every day, having a good attitude and working hard while you are here — I think young people are really getting a lot out of it and understanding how hard it is to do this kind of work and what kind of work they need to put into a job. They need to come with a good attitude and it helps to lift everyone else.”

Every week, Evans said, the youth receive feedback.

“We all sit in a circle and go around and say (to each person) - this is what you are doing well, your positives, and this is what you could improve on. Everyone gets to hear, no matter how good you are or if you’ve had a bad week, there’s room for growth. It’s not just a work program and it’s definitely not a camp. We’re a hard working program.”

For more information about Youth Launch and the Urban Roots program, visit [www.youthlaunch.org](http://www.youthlaunch.org).



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