

# the root of things

## Urban Roots provides new perspective

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The pizza sat on the restaurant counter, piled high with steaming vegetables. Still warm from the oven, the scent of cooked onions, bell peppers and tomatoes filled the kitchen. LBJ junior Veronica Garcia, one of the high school students clustered around the counter, slid a slice of pizza off the tray. Lifting it to her mouth, she took a bite and savored the taste.

But for Garcia, this was not just any pizza. She had grown the vegetables that covered each slice herself.

Beginning in February 2008, Garcia joined Urban Roots, a six-month youth development program in which a group of high school students works on a sustainable farm in east Austin. During this time, these students learn about the benefits of organic food and develop leadership and other life skills.

"They taught us about working together and farming in general," Garcia said. "We first started off planting—we worked together to plant [the produce], then weed it and maintain it and then pick it from the ground and sell it at the market."

LBJ junior Chris Matthews worked with Urban Roots in the summer of 2008. Like Garcia, he first heard about the program during his freshman year of high school.

"I was 15 and couldn't get a job at most places," Matthews said. "This sounded cool and was a good way to help the community, so I looked it up on the Internet and filled out the application."

When Garcia and Matthews applied for Urban Roots, the organization was still in its pilot phase. The idea for the program had developed from an existing youth gardening project at Webb Middle School, directed by the current Farm Manager of Urban Roots, Max Elliott.

"Max was doing a middle school gardening program, but he was intrigued about the idea of using high schoolers and giving them a chance to be more empowered and have a say in the everyday workings of growing food," Urban Roots Education Coordinator Mike Evans said. "I had worked in Boston for five or six years running a program similar to Urban Roots, and I'd dealt with youth farming, so I talked to Max about his ideas."

When Elliott decided it was time for a change, he called Evans and the two worked together to create a model for their new program. Drawing inspiration from other related programs around the country, the pair received funding and support from the umbrella nonprofit organization Youthlaunch. Evans said they

that they understand a little more about what it means to be outside and connected to a piece of land."

Evans and Elliott selected an acre of land near Eastside Memorial High School where they could base the program. With the preparation work done, they began accepting applications for Urban Roots. After receiving more than 50 applications for only 15 available positions, the two of them interviewed each student and decided who to hire.

"We're really looking for people who are interested in trying something new, that like to be outside when it's hot and are willing to try and work hard, and to work with people from all different backgrounds," Evans said. "We have people from all sorts of different schools and areas in Austin and different life experiences."

Garcia said she agrees with Evans, stating that the diversity of people working at Urban Roots was an important part of her job experience.

"My favorite part was just being there on the farm and working with others," Garcia said. "Everyone comes from a different community, so it is nice. I made a lot of good friends there."

Along with Garcia and Matthews, LISA senior Vivian Alston was one of the first 15 students to be a part of Urban Roots. She has continued to work with the program and is currently applying for her third year at Urban Roots.

"My first year I was an intern, so I did exactly what they told me to do," Alston said. "We did farm work, and since it was the first year of the program it was a lot of experimentation, too. My second year I led the kids and had my own group of first year interns to lead, so I was in a more responsible managerial role."

Although Alston has been a part of the program as it continues to evolve, Evans said that the basic goals of Urban Roots have not changed. According to him, Urban Roots strives to give students both the experience of a paying job and the opportunity for personal growth.

"One of the important things to know is that we're a youth development program, so we're teaching young people life and job skills that are important to them," Evans said. "Some people come in thinking that we're going to be working the entire time but we're not working the whole time. And some people come in thinking that this is just going to be a [learning] program, but we definitely do work really hard."

That work specifically involves managing the three and a half acre farm, on which they cultivate more than 50 species of plants and vegetables, including beets, cabbage, squash, cilantro, spinach and tomatoes. The students not only grow vegetables but are also allowed to take a portion of the produce home for their personal enjoyment. Garcia said that after eating the organically grown food, she discovered a newfound liking for vegetables.

"I especially loved the carrots we grew," Garcia said. "After washing them, we

made him wish that fresh produce was more widely accessible in Austin.

"I could taste the difference between organic food and pesticide foods at H-E-B," Matthews said. "I love organic food. It made me think that there should be more farmers markets in my area, since there are not a lot in this part of Austin. Most are downtown, and it is sometimes difficult to go there."

For Alston, the added price of organic food initially deterred her from going to farmers' markets. However, after eating her personally grown produce free of charge from the farm, Alston says her outlook on organic food changed.

"Now I spend every Saturday at the farmers' market," Alston said. "I realized that [organic food is] more about treating the land well and your body well. Instead of just trying to make food cheap and efficient we should strive to make it healthy and better for us."

Last year, Urban Roots grew more than 17,000 pounds of produce. Although students like Garcia and Alston take home a small portion of that amount, they sell about 60 percent of the food at farmers markets. The program donates the remaining 40 percent to local relief organizations, such as the Capitol Area Food Bank and Meals on Wheels. In addition to donating the food, students prepare meals for those in need.

"It feels good helping out, like when we went to the homeless shelters and cooked for them," Garcia said. "It was nice that we got to interact with some of the homeless people. I had a lot of fun."

Outside of working on the farm, Urban Roots provides a number of workshops to help students develop life skills. One such class provides instructions on public speaking, an essential ability when students lead other volunteers on the farm. According to LBJ senior Rachel Dembo, who worked with Urban Roots earlier this year, she became a more confident speaker during her time with the program.

"I learned how to get over the shyness that I had before I started," Dembo said. "We had to hold eye contact with people. We were in workshops and we had to write about what we liked to do, and then I had to stand up in front of everybody and talk, and that's how I got off the shyness."

These learning opportunities are what differentiate Urban Roots from other jobs available to teenagers. Although Urban Roots provides students with compensation for their work, Garcia said that the intellectual benefit significantly outweighs the financial aid.

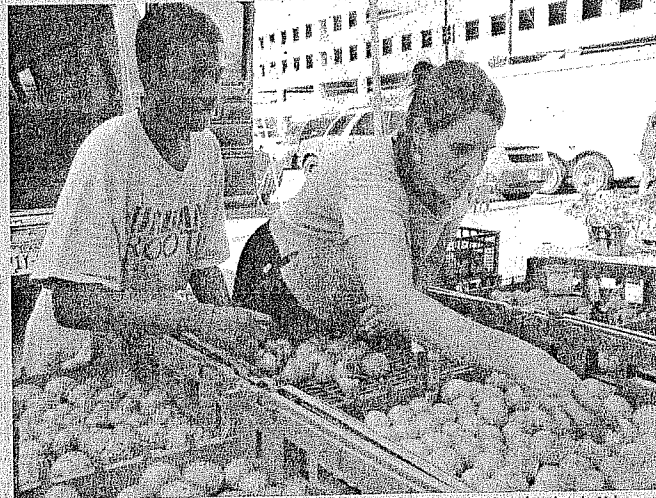
"I made \$50 for working a full day, but it wasn't really about the money," Garcia said. "I went because I enjoyed my job. The money was just a bonus. I am more environmentally conscious now, and I just want to do something to help."

Urban Roots provides teenagers with a diversity of skills and insights they rarely get the chance to experience. Evans says that this hands-on work truly gives students the opportunity to understand the environment and appreciate where the vegetables they eat originate.

want them just to learn about having some connection with the environment, so



LBJ junior Chris Matthews works up a sweat as he carries tomato cages across the farm. These cages will aid in the successful growth of Matthews' tomato plants. photo courtesy of Max Elliott



LBJ sophomore Mohammed Mbayat helps out at Tecolote's farm stand, a local produce booth. Urban Roots students volunteered there over the summer. photo courtesy of Max Elliott



LBJ junior Veronica Garcia, LASA senior Vivian Alston and LBJ junior Chris Matthews display a head of lettuce grown on the Urban Roots farm. photo courtesy of Max Elliott

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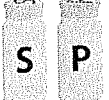




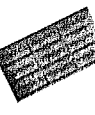
**Create homemade compost.**  
Recycling your food waste is a great way to create compost. All leftover food can be contributed to the compost pile except for animal products.

**Share with your community.**  
Encourage others in your neighborhood to start a garden. Split the costs of heavy equipment and share advice for successful growth. "Sometimes the smaller environment changes are often better than the bigger ones," McClenon said.

**Watch it grow.**  
Evaluate your garden's progress each day and watch out for animals eating your crops. "If you make it part of your routine to go out and water your garden, you will end up really enjoying it, but I can't deny that it's a lot of work," McClenon said.

## Where does your food come from?

Produce travels thousands of miles before ending up on your plate. The environmental movement has encouraged people to purchase their food locally, reducing the amount of gas emissions caused by extensive transportation between countries. Below is a list of food items and how far they travel to reach the shelves at your local supermarket.

- |   |                                  |   |                           |
|---|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
|    | COFFEE — BRAZIL                  |    | SUGAR CANE — BRAZIL       |
|   | TOMATOES — CHINA                 |   | TEA — INDIA               |
|  | SALT — CHILE<br>PEPPER — VIETNAM |  | LETTUCE — CHINA           |
|  | GRAPES — ITALY                   |  | BACON — UNITED STATES     |
|  | WHEAT — CHINA                    |  | CHOCOLATE — COTE D'IVOIRE |

graphics by Natasha Smith