

# Urban Roots— The Goodness is Growing by Johnny Livesay, Produce Manager

Urban Roots is a youth development program that uses sustainable agriculture as means to effect lasting change for youth participants, and to nourishing East Austin residents who currently have limited access to healthy foods. Young people cultivated a local, diversified organic farm, selling a portion of their harvest in the Austin area and donating a portion to local hunger relief programs. Through this process young people can connect to the land and learn the benefits of growing, eating, selling and donating organic food, as well as leadership, entrepreneurial and life skills, and the importance of giving back to their community.

I sent a few questions over to my friend Max Elliot who works with Urban Roots, and for some of their farm interns (youth workers). I hope that you find these answers inspiring, enlightening, and indicative of the good things that this program is doing for our community. Urban Roots is our Community Action Wednesday recipient for the month of July. They will receive 1% of sales each Wednesday, so come on out and support this great program.

**How did you become involved with the Urban Roots program?**

About a year and a half ago, I was hired by YouthLaunch to create an after-school gardening program at Webb Middle School. Well, we learned a lot during that year. We saw that young people love planting and especially like to eat fresh produce that they had grown. But we also saw that there were a lot of challenges working on a small school garden. I felt that the youth had a hard time taking ownership over the site and because the garden was at school, the garden didn't provide them a new and fresh experience away from what they saw everyday... and so we decided that the best way that YouthLaunch could provide youth an opportunity to truly serve their community by growing an abundance of fresh, healthy food was to create an urban farming program where we could grow 15,000 pounds of produce on an acre of land. And so, in early 2007, we started laying out the foundation for Urban Roots to start in the spring of 2008.

**How do you feel teaching young people how to grow vegetables benefits community?**

Urban Roots creates empowering opportunities for young people by using sustainable agriculture as a means to affect lasting change in the community. We talk a lot about food access and hunger. And over time, they begin to understand that their work out in the field is helping to directly feed those in need. This past spring, we donated over 300 heads of lettuce and over 500 pounds of onions to Meals on Wheels and our young people not only harvested and washed the produce, but also packed the bags at Meals on Wheels for homebound folks who received our produce. This summer, our youth will deliver and prepare our fresh produce at Caritas and will also serve the food that they grew and cooked to those in need. While we will not be able to solve all of the hunger issues in central, Texas, we will transform the lives of our youth farm interns who will gain an intimate understanding of the power that freshly grown food can have to fight hunger. And these lessons will serve them as well as the greater community for the rest of their lives.

**How important do you think locally grown produce will be over the next few years?**

In 2000, most folks never had heard of the concept of a 'foodshed', but that phrase is becoming more and more common as we talk about health and environmental sustainability. With increased globalization, people are yearning for a real connection with their local environment and one of the most direct ways that con-

**Local, organic, or both?**

I have to admit that I'm becoming more and more of a proponent of 'local' over 'organic'. I don't believe that it makes much environmental sense for 'organic' produce to be shipped halfway across the world. But it's also important to understand that central Texas will never be able to supply all of its food needs for locally grown foods. Most folks might not realize that only a few crops like okra, eggplant, and basil

thrive in our brutal August heat. And so, it's essential to think about where it makes most sense to grow foods in the most efficient and sustainable way. And that might mean that makes more sense to grow some organic foods in places like California or in Mexico and ship them to our area.

I believe that local food, if stored well, can be more fresh and nutritious. Local food definitely contributes to the local economy in many ways and it also connects people to unique, seasonal varieties, thus providing

folks with a more rich, regional identity. It is my hope that the more that a local community demands sustainably raised or 'organic' produce, then they can convince local growers to farm that way. In an ideal world, there would be abundant local, organic produce accessible to everyone.

The following questions were answered by Steve Young, one of Urban Roots youth farm interns.

**What made you want to participate in the Urban Roots program?**

I wanted to join to have a chance to really help the community. One reason was because of my grandma. She had a little garden; and I wanted to take after her a little bit. I don't live in New Orleans anymore and I used to go to her house and help her with her garden.

**What do you feel is important about what the program does for the community?**

I think it's important that Urban Roots gives people in need healthy and affordable produce for them and their families. And I think we're doing it well.

**What is your favorite thing about being involved in Urban Roots?**

It's being with the other people I am surrounded by at work. It makes me feel happy to be at work and everyone has the same goals - to help the community. It creates a strong bond between us.

**What's the best thing you've eaten that you have grown yourself?**

I think it was just yesterday, when I realized it was cucumbers. I remember Max told me to try it. But was a little scared to try it. But I tried it. And I ate the whole thing. It had this taste to it. It was fresh, real fresh.



sumers can connect with the land is through their food. And I believe that cultivating the skills to grow your own food is especially empowering to everyone who gets their hands in the soil.

**When did you become interested in farming or growing vegetables?**

When I was in college in New Orleans, I was feeling incredibly disconnected with the environment and had a pretty poor diet. And I had the romantic notion that working on an organic farm would give me the opportunity to dial into the subtle seasonal shifts. In 1998, I interned on a diversified organic farm in Colorado that had chickens, cows, goats, pigs, sheep, turkeys, and a 100 member CSA while also providing hands-on educational experiences for young people.

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**What aspects of your involvement with**

Urban Roots has brought you a sense of satisfaction or feeling of achievement? On a farm tour at the beginning of the season, when I asked where was the spinach, most of our youth farm interns pointed in almost every direction. Most had never seen vegetables growing in the ground and couldn't identify a lot of harvested vegetables. But over time, they have developed intimate relationships with every vegetable grown on the farm. Many of our youth eat the produce straight out of the fields. I especially loved watching one youth intern try a cherry tomato for the first time. He initially spit it out, but after a little encouragement, he came around and has loved them ever since. He told me, "I never knew that I liked vegetables before I came out here."

