



Garden fresh

Urban gardening in Pittsburgh is providing lifelong lessons in healthy nutrition and renewing interest in growing food as part of local culture. by Christine O'Toole



Planting gardens across urban neighborhoods enables people of all ages to learn about nutritional food as well as consume it. Molly McHolme, a garden educator with the nonprofit Grow Pittsburgh, discusses natural solutions for eliminating pests in Dilworth Elementary School's garden with, from left, Kai Schaeffersmith, Violet Schaeffersmith and Olivia Whatley. Below, Kai holds an edible flower, which the students were given to taste.

The elegant sepia photo in Julie Butcher Pezzino's hand captures the inspiration of her work. It depicts a white-clad group of Dilworth Elementary students harvesting the school's bumper garden crop. Growing healthy foods is the mission of Ms. Butcher Pezzino's nonprofit, Grow Pittsburgh, which has helped revive that learning tradition at Dilworth. The vintage image, now almost 100 years old, proves gardening is an old-school skill.

Today's thriving schoolyard plantings along Stanton Avenue prove that everything old is new again. After a century of growing away from its agricultural roots, western Pennsylvania is rediscovering the vital link between growers and consumers. This time, the region's sustainable food movement unites elementary education, community gardens, farmers markets and professional development for farming pros and apprentices.

Grow Pittsburgh's Dilworth learning garden, now in its ninth season, is a model poised to expand with a \$1 million Heinz Endowments grant. The patented program, which was founded at four other Pittsburgh schools, will reach 50 more schools throughout Allegheny County over the next two years. Using a curriculum developed by Grow Pittsburgh and available on its website, the new gardens will be managed by The Kitchen Community, a nonprofit working with large school districts throughout the country to create "learning gardens."

"Grow Pittsburgh's school gardens are one of our wide range of programs, all aimed at insuring that folks at all age levels are connected to healthy foods and have access all along the way," explained Ms. Butcher Pezzino, executive director of Grow Pittsburgh since 2009. "In our minds, it really starts with the schools."

In addition to serving as an ongoing outdoor lesson in science and nutrition, gardening has become one of the skills promoted by the region's Remake Learning education innovation network. Andrew McElwaine, vice president for Sustainability and the Environment at the Endowments, a network member, said the foundation's board was excited about supporting Grow Pittsburgh in providing hands-on instruction in sustainability through school gardening and increasing its program's scale. The Hillman and Richard King Mellon foundations have agreed to award another \$1.5 million to the project.



Ms. Butcher Pezzino emphasized that the school-grown produce, planted to peak during the academic year, doesn't end up on cafeteria lunch trays because the garden is too small. The berries, garlic, cherry tomatoes, kale and collards introduce children to the science of gardening and the taste of new flavors.

"We try to plant things that kids will like," she said. The choices overcome the "yuck" factor. Nearly half of the responding parents and guardians in a recent Grow Pittsburgh survey reported that their child asked them for a new fruit or vegetable—one that their child had not asked for prior to participating in the garden program. Well over two-thirds, or about 70 percent, said their child now eats more fruits and vegetables.

And the change in eating habits affected families: More than one-third of the families reported that their child had influenced the family to eat more fruits and vegetables on a daily basis.

URBAN FARMER IN TRAINING ►

For some youngsters, the gardening bug becomes a serious interest. Grow Pittsburgh's Urban Farmer in Training program hires six to eight teens to tend community gardens through the city's Learn and Earn program each summer. A few of those gardeners continue into formal apprenticeships for those ages 18 to 24.

Rashay Evans, right, now a 20-year-old student completing her degree at Community College of Allegheny County, first grabbed a watering can at Homewood Children's Village's Kaboom! Playground summer program in 2014. "I didn't think I was going to like it. But it was interesting to put seed down, water it, and watch it grow," she recalled.

This summer she was an Urban Farmer in Training, a paid part-time post that found her in the city's Point Breeze neighborhood, shuttling between planting seedlings at The Frick greenhouse and staffing the Shiloh Farms produce stand. The work strengthened her interest in fresh foods and natural products; she hopes to pursue a business career in organic beauty products.



"As a country, we are subsidizing wheat and soy farmers, but not the produce farmers," Ms. Butcher Pezzino said. "Produce is expensive. Groups like Grow Pittsburgh and the Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank are subsidized differently, by the foundation community, to provide fruits and vegetables to markets at reasonable prices."

However, a special concern for urban gardeners is land tenure: how long they're allowed to farm a leased lot. While rural land is readily available, city growers usually have limited contracts for their farms. "Farming has a big up-front investment. That's a huge risk, if you lose your lease after two seasons," Ms. Butcher Pezzino explained. "We're working with the city for longer opportunities to access land."

The next phase of a city vacant lot initiative is expected to address this issue. Meanwhile, the borough of Millvale, northeast of Pittsburgh, has reclaimed vacant lots at six scattered sites. The Gardens of Millvale, a project led by the town's business district, has been a catalyst for neighborhood cleanup and community action. Local examples reflect a growing trend in which cities such as Detroit and Cleveland have allowed local growers—including brewers—to sow hundreds of empty inner-city lots.

Also placing pressure on Pittsburgh growers is the city's resurgence. "A challenge we face is that the land that's appropriate for farming is also attractive to developers," Ms. Butcher Pezzino noted.

Public parkland has become a practical solution for community garden sites. Halfway up the city's South Side Slopes, the Bandi Schaum Community Garden thrives on a reclaimed ballfield, with 88 plots in use and a waiting list of 100. Grow Pittsburgh hopes to extend the program to county-owned parks in the future.

But such urban efforts will never grow all the fresh food a region of two million needs.

"A city the size of Pittsburgh needs a thriving rural agriculture industry to feed itself," said Franklin Egan, education director for the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture. PASA is the largest state coalition of sustainable farmers, producers and consumers in the country. Founded in 1992, its successful programs, including the highly visible "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign, have been adopted across the U.S.

PASA recently received a \$100,000 grant from the Endowments to strengthen its mentoring and training efforts, aimed at ultimately expanding the region's food supply. Over the past five years, PASA participation in western Pennsylvania has grown by 30 percent, now comprising more than 800 members. Egan plans to increase that number.

"Statewide, we have a large pool of farmers with under 10 years' experience, and a large group with 20-plus years of experience," Mr. Egan explained. "But in the middle ground, a significant number don't stay in farming. They want to serve communities but don't find a business model that works."

He hopes to prevent those failures with a data-driven approach that develops best practices. "This isn't academic research," he said. "Our goal is to produce farmers who have tried something new in a rigorous, quantitative way and are prepared to talk about it with peers."

Both Grow Pittsburgh, and PASA have apprenticeship programs, but PASA's is in dairy farming. With the country's second-largest number of dairy farms, 99 percent of which are family-owned, Pennsylvania milk production is a growth industry.

Representatives of PASA and Grow Pittsburgh work together on the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, a network that last year drafted a new agricultural code passed by City Council.

"Since the start of [Mayor William] Peduto's administration, we have been able to move faster," Ms. Butcher Pezzino said. "We want to make it easier to grow food in the city. It's a great way to bring people together and foster community action. It's still not easy, but we can get there." **h**



BUGS OF PITTSBURGH ▼

The nonprofit Grow Pittsburgh has encouraged a literal grassroots organization. The Black Urban Gardens and Farmers of Pittsburgh cooperative embraces its acronym, BUGs. Its founder, master gardener Vikki Ayanna Jones, describes BUGs as a group that is involved in social justice issues as well as food sufficiency in the black community. BUGs' Homewood Farmers Market opened for its first season in June, with Grow Pittsburgh's support. Its dues-paying members maintain a dozen gardens on vacant lots and private properties in the Hill District and Homewood—which requires keeping updated inventory, as shown below.

"BUGs and our projects bring a commitment mentality," said Ms. Jones, a grandmother of 16. "A lot of projects piggybacked off need we saw in the black community—only one of the [schoolyard] gardens is in a black school! We have senior citizens and summer campers who work in the gardens, as well as Grow Pittsburgh apprentices and a couple of young men in the horticulture program at Bidwell Training Center."



Garden variety

EBT CARDS ►

Efforts to expand access to fresh food include a program that allows families receiving public assistance programs to use their EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards at local farmers markets. Just Harvest, a local nonprofit dedicated to preventing hunger, devised the card-swipe system that enables food stamp recipients who visit one of 18 participating markets to go to a designated tent, swipe their cards and receive tokens to purchase produce from vendors who later exchange the tokens, pictured right, for cash. Dubbed Fresh Access, the program also allows these customers to receive a bonus \$2 in produce for every \$5 they spend at the markets.

Just Harvest reported a 42 percent increase in EBT sales since the inception of the program in 2013. Last year, EBT sales represented more than \$40,000 of \$150,000 in revenues at participating markets. And in a 2014 survey, 80 percent of food stamp shoppers said their produce consumption has increased as a result of the program.

"The most difficult aspect of providing healthy foods is the price point," said Julie Butcher Pezzino, executive director of the nonprofit Grow Pittsburgh. "We often forget that when we talk about low-income individuals in our rural communities in southwestern Pennsylvania, a lot of the low-income people are farmers. They can't afford to come to low-income neighborhoods and provide produce like we do, below supermarket prices."

