Growing the Community

Whether gardeners grow for their own kitchen or for others, community gardens and farmers markets change how people interact with the soil.
Tracy Speights lives in the West End neighborhood with her husband and three children. Last year, health problems sent her looking for an inexpensive way to provide fresh vegetables for her family. But with only a couple of chain grocery stores and a handful of convenience stores in the area, access to fresh food is limited.

was having trouble with the available produce at the grocery stores in our area," she says. "I would just try to find the best looking peach and the best looking tomato and then go home and cut off the bad sides. It made me think, 'What did I really pay for here?'"

She considered driving to stores in other parts of town where the selection was better, but that meant using more gas, and prices at those stores were often higher than the ones in her neighborhood.

"There were times when I would just say, 'I'm not going to buy fresh vegetables today. Let me see what's in the frozen section.' Sometimes I would even resort to processed foods, but when you have to eat you have to eat," she says.

But that's not an issue anymore. Tracy soon discovered fresh fruit and vegetables growing at the West End Urban Garden. The fully organic garden leases 4'x8' plots to members of the community for $7 to $25 a season, based on ability to pay. Sixteen families leased plots last season.

The gardens are a project of local non-profit organization Urban Ministry, Inc. and Community Church Without Walls, a United Methodist church in West End that meets in the homes of its members. In spring 2008, Urban Ministry purchased an overgrown lot located just off of Cotton Avenue and 12th Street Southwest. Later that year, they brought in program director Ana Shambulia, a professional chef and master gardener, and garden manager Myron Pierre. The two would design the gardens, create programs and perform day-to-day maintenance.

Today, the gardens are an urban oasis, trimmed with heirloom rose bushes and ornamental stones. The street is lined with newly planted dogwood trees, a gift from the Keep Birmingham Beautiful Commission. A path cuts through the raised beds that, come summer, will boast English peas, lettuce, onions, carrots, cucumbers, beets and other vegetables. In the children's section of the garden, there will be plenty of peanuts and strawberries so the neighborhood kids can have their fill of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

Produce not grown in the leased plots is given to seniors in the community, and Shambulia occasionally supplies vegetables and herbs to Café Dupont in downtown Birmingham.

The WE Urban Garden also hosts classes and cooking demonstrations on the third Saturday of each month for community members who want to learn about organic gardening and cooking with items from the garden.

"The gardens were started to address the food scarcity issues and the health issues in the community," Shambulia says. "The transition to healthy eating can be costly. West End is a primarily low-income neighborhood, so it helps make the transition to healthier eating better when families are able to grow their own vegetables."

Which is just what Tracy Speights did. She decided it was time to get involved and learn how to grow her own food. It wasn't long before her children began to notice that the broccoli from the garden tasted better than broccoli from a frozen dinner.

"I guess it's awakened their taste buds," she says.

A year ago, the only leafy greens her oldest son would eat would be piled on top of a hamburger. Now, 20-year-old Rashiau eats salads made with lettuce grown at the WE Garden. Sometimes, he even throws in a few strawberries or mandarin oranges. Her youngest son, Calvin, is a finicky eater. He is intrigued by the fresh food and is more likely


to sample different vegetables when he sees her pull it and bring it home.

“It’s been life-changing for us as far as food is concerned,” she says. “I know what I put on it. I know what’s in it. And that’s better for me and my family.”

Grow to give

There are two types of community gardens represented in Birmingham: those that offer community plots for residents to grow their own food and those that produce food to be sold or given away. P.E.E.R., Inc., an East Lake community development group, started its production garden in a lot adjacent to East Lake United Methodist Church in 2009. The garden produces sweet potatoes, butternut squash, strawberries and cucumbers that are donated to local ministries, sold at the East Lake Farmer’s Market and incorporated into the market’s produce basket program.

“I’ve realized that a lot of people in my community want to eat better and probably would if they had access to fresher food and knew how to prepare it in healthier ways,” says Tomeka Young, project manager for the P.E.E.R. community garden. She is currently working with community leaders to find properties where residents can have their own plots.

In 2009, Mountain Brook Presbyterian Church donated 3,000 pounds of vegetables to Magic City Harvest, a non-profit organization that distributes food to those in need. The vegetables were grown in its newly established community garden, nestled on the church’s property off of Brookwood Road.

Not long after the garden took shape, church member Lynn Terry learned that it had just as much to give to her as it did to the people receiving the food.

Her 20-year-old daughter, Burton, had recently passed away. Burton had a nervous system disorder that confined her to a wheelchair. Over time, taking care of her had taken its toll on Lynn’s body. She suffered displaced discs in her neck, a damaged nerve in her arm and a collapsed lung.

“I was in a lot of pain, physically and mentally,” she says. “I would come home and just lay in the bed.”

Then, she heard about the garden.

“So, I went one Saturday to the garden and I don’t know what happened there, but pulling those weeds, just getting in that dirt, it was just like me and God hashing it out with the weeds and the peas.”

After a while, she had completed nine rows and was sunburned.

“I felt like I was saving a life, nurturing that plant,” she says. “I realized the longer I was out there, the more I dug, the more it was like punching on a punching bag. Suddenly, I didn’t think about the pain, and I could just sit there and cry and laugh and smile and sing along with my iPod.”

And once the vegetables were ready for harvest, Lynn says it wasn’t just about making herself feel better, but about doing something for somebody else.

“I don’t know what led me out there that day, but it has been extremely fulfilling,” she says. “Giving to charity is not always about writing a check. It’s about taking 30 minutes to pull some weeds and save a plant, because that little plant is going to feed a child.”

Growing trend

Research by the United States Department of Agriculture ranks Alabama as one of the most food insecure states in the country, which means that the availability and accessibility of fresh food is inadequate. Rates of obesity among adults and children are also highest in the Southeast, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While some neighborhoods, such as east Avondale, have had community gardens for several years, new gardens are sprouting up throughout the city, from the Birmingham-Southern College campus to neighborhoods such as Crestwood, Norwood, Southside and East Lake.

Shambulia suspects that Michelle Obama’s White House garden, part of the first lady’s initiative to fight childhood obesity, has inspired more people to grow their own food. From a historical perspective, the resurgence of community gardens usually coincides with recession or war, says Edwin Marty, executive director of Jones Valley Urban Farm (JVUF), which, in addition to its production farm, offers community plots to those who live and work in downtown Birmingham. In the last few years, the farm received countless requests to help churches, schools and neighborhoods replicate their community garden model.

While the Alabama Cooperative Extension System offers classes for individual gardeners, there were no opportunities for community garden training. To fill this need, JVUF created its Growing Together program, a six-part training series for those interested in maintaining a community garden.

“At JVUF we’re all about building a healthier community,” says Rachel Reinhart, program director. “Increasing the number of successful gardens around Birmingham will inevitably increase the opportunity for youth and adults alike to eat more fresh, healthy food. This will go a long way toward improving our community’s chance at being healthy. And it all starts with the first seed.”
Please Ask Before Picking
But the program also stresses the importance of sustaining community gardens. Many gardeners start gardens, either at home or in their communities, and then abandon them.

"Usually this is because they don't have the basic knowledge or resources to keep them going," Reinhart says. "By training a group of individuals in the skills and practices of community gardening, and showing them how to secure the right people, tools, resources and commitments to keep their gardens thriving, we have helped develop a network of healthy plants, healthy people and healthy communities."

Another group working to support community gardens in Birmingham is the Community Garden Coalition, a project of Catalyst. Since 2008, the coalition has provided support and served as a resource to local community gardens. The North 32nd Street Community Garden in Norwood is the first garden the coalition assisted with from start to finish. The community garden plots at North 32nd Street are currently all rented for the 2010 season.

The group has also partnered with Urban Ministry and Jefferson County Family Court to start a second community garden in West End. The Our Garden will be maintained once a week by at-risk youth in the family court system.

"We just try to lend a helping hand, be it building raised beds or going to get compost or horse manure. Basically creating partnerships within the community so that people can have a connection to the gardens," says Crispin Piazza, co-founder of the Community Garden Coalition for Birmingham and past chair for the Urban Sustainability committee of Catalyst.

But Marty says the best way to ensure that community gardens have a lasting effect on a community is for city government to purchase plots and turn community gardens into public land, since less than 5 percent of urban and community gardens in the United States own their own property.

"There's a potential role for the government to legitimize these garden efforts and make them more secure. That sends a message to the neighborhoods that this is important, and we recognize how great this garden is and what role this garden can play in the future of this community," he says. "Wouldn't it be awesome if, in America, this isn't just a response to a recession or a response to war, but part of who we are in terms of our relationship to our communities and in terms of our relationship to our food?"

Visit bhammag.com for a recipe from West End Urban Garden.

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**To Market We Go**

BY MARTI BUCKLEY KILPATRICK

Farmers markets are more than mere alternatives to the supermarket. They shorten the distance between individuals and the food they consume, allow people to cultivate relationships with producers and make it possible for farmers to earn more selling directly to the public. "Consumers are able to put a face on the food that they're purchasing and eating," says Don Wambles, director of the Alabama Farmers Market Authority. "There's no better place for consumers to buy fresh, local produce than our farmers markets."

The state's motto is "Buy fresh, buy local," and it speaks to a virtuous cycle in which everyone wins. "It supports local farms and increases the economic stability of the local community," Wambles says. "At the same time, consumers are eating more fresh fruits and vegetables and are reaping the benefits of a healthy diet."

The intangibles represent an equally powerful draw on shoppers: the smell of earth and vegetables, the sight of mounds of colorful produce, and connections made with fellow shoppers. In Birmingham, fresh produce abounds, along with markets in which to find it. Read on for our guide to area farmers markets.
Birmingham Farmers Market
The largest market in the state, Birmingham Farmers Market is open year round. While some produce arrives on interstate 18-wheelers, local vendors also sell their goods.
What: The basics: sweet potatoes, okra, tomatoes, squash, peanuts and pecans; jams and jellies; Hispanic goods; plants; taco stand; flea market
When: Daily, 5 a.m.-8 p.m.; during off season, 6 a.m.-5 p.m.
Where: 344 Finley Ave. W.
For more info: alabamafarmersmarket.org or (205) 251-8737

Center Point Farmers Market
This city market with a small-town feel consists of about 15 vendors, mostly farmers from Blount and Chilton counties, and often hosts live music.
What: Local fruits and vegetables, honey, berries, peaches, sno-cones and popcorn
When: Thursdays, 1-5 p.m.; June 3 through Aug. 26.
Where: Center Point City Hall, 2209 Center Point Parkway.
For more info: centerpointchamber.com

East Lake
The East Lake market’s basket program does your shopping for you. For $25 a week, pick up a bundle of produce every Saturday. Extra donations go toward a program that delivers baskets to senior citizens and low-income families in the area. Free pancakes are served every first Saturday, and free health screenings are offered every third Saturday.
What: Basic local produce, honey, jams, art, baked goods
When: Saturdays, 8 a.m.-noon; May 29 through Oct. 9.
Where: 7769 Second Ave. S.
For more info: www.perrinc.org/farmers_market.html or (205) 836-3201

Fresh Market on the Green at Ross Bridge
At the Ross Bridge market, shoppers can sit on the expansive green or in the café and enjoy coffee against the backdrop of live music. The market is kid-friendly, featuring inflatables and special activities like face painting. June 5 is both the opening Saturday and the day of the BarkIt Market, a canine throwdown with a parade, the Bama Air Dog Frisbee show, doggy gourmet and prizes for best-dressed pup. Other events include the Ross Bridge 10K and an antique car show.
What: Alabama-grown produce, locally harvested honey, fresh breads, fresh herbs, handcrafted jewelry and art
When: First and third Saturdays, 8 a.m.-noon; June 5 through Sept. 18.
Where: 2101 Grand Ave.
For more info: (205) 680-5372

Mt. Laurel Farmers Market and Craft Fair
Mt. Laurel’s Saturday market takes place along a stretch of its main street, giving it an old-time air. The brand-new dog park makes this market extra dog-friendly. It’s also a great stop for the sweet tooth; cupcake vendors and the ice cream truck are regular fixtures. The last market is a huge fall festival, with hay rides and more than 50 vendors.
What: Local produce, crafts, woodworkers, folk art, art, eggs, goat’s milk and cheese from R & N Farms, berries and stone fruit from Booser farms, fresh flowers
When: Saturdays 8 a.m.-noon; June 5 through Oct. 9
Where: Manning Place in Mt. Laurel
For more info: mtlauried.gov or (205) 408-8696

Pepper Place Saturday Market
Pepper Place, in its 11th year, is a cornerstone of the farmers market scene. Features include cooking demonstrations from the city’s big-name chefs every Saturday at 9 a.m. Each market has live music, heavy on the bluegrass.
What: Fresh flowers; specialty produce from vendors like Snow’s Bend and local high school gardens; cheeses from Wright Dairy; arts and crafts
When: Saturdays, 7 a.m.-noon; May 15 through Oct. 9
Where: 2829 Second Ave. S.
For more info: pepperplacesaturdaymarket.com, (205) 802-2100

Riverchase UMC Farmers Market
This small market in Hoover takes place in a church parking lot and began as an outreach to local farmers.
What: Local fruits and vegetables sold by producers, peaches, honey, fresh-baked bread, relishes and preserves
When: Thursdays, noon-5 p.m.; May 27 through Aug. 26.
Where: 1953 Old Montgomery Highway, Hoover.
For more info: riverchaseumc.org, (205) 987-4030

Valleymdale
This Hoover-area market, located in a small church parking lot, hosts several activities throughout the season, including car shows and blood banks. There are also cooking demonstrations scheduled, featuring chefs from Little Savannah, Hot and Hot Fish Club and Sol y Luna, among others.
What: Local produce, locally raised meat, baked goods, local honey
When: Saturdays, 8 a.m.-noon; May 15 through Sept. 4.
Where: 4601 Valleydale Rd.
For more info: valleymdalefarmersmarket.com

New in 2010

Trussville Springs Farmers Market
This farmers market, an offshoot of the two-year-old Fresh Market, is managed by a local farmer, Andy Kemp, who is also one of the about 10 vendors selling their own produce.
Saturdays, 8 a.m.-noon, June 5-Sept. 4. Trussville Springs development, 6655 Gadsden Highway. The Fresh Market is on Tuesdays, 2 p.m.-5:30 p.m., May 25 through Sept. 14 in the North Mall.

Urban Cookhouse Farmers Market
This new market on the curb in downtown Homewood will feature produce from the farmers that also supply the namesake restaurant, Urban Cookhouse, as well as cooking demonstrations and samples.
Saturdays, 7 a.m.-noon; beginning May 22 with end date to be determined. The curb in Homewood at the intersection of 18th Street South and 29th Avenue South.

West End Community Garden Market
Produce for this new curbside market will come from the West End Community Garden and will include greens, tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, peppers, and herbs.
Saturdays, time TBA; June through October. Princeton Hospital’s Healing Garden, 10th Street SW off of Tuscaloosa Avenue.

Metro Area Markets

Blount County Farmers Market
Primarily produce and fruit vendors, with an emphasis on tomatoes and peaches.
Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, 7 a.m.-1 p.m.; June 5 through Oct. 30. 500 New St., Oneonta.

Columbiana Farmers Market
This market is in its fifth year of selling locally grown produce.
Saturdays, 7 a.m.-noon; Dates TBA. West College Street and Summer Classics Way, Columbiana.

Walker County Farmers Market
This newly expanded yet still cozy market sales only produce grown by the vendor.
Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, June through October. Airport Road, Jasper.
Tips from foodrevival.com’s Amanda Storey

1) Meet Your Farmer: A farmers market is the perfect opportunity to shake hands with the person growing your food each week. Ask about their farm and thank them for their work.

2) Be Environmentally Conscious: Carpool with friends. It will reduce your carbon footprint while giving you enough time to catch up on the week’s events. Grab your canvas bags and reusable water bottle before heading out the door.

3) Create a Supper Club: There’s no better time to create and share delicious suppers. Challenge your supper club members to utilize the entire market when creating their recipes to keep your gatherings fun, interesting, sustainable and delicious.

4) Give to Others: Many Birmingham residents live in food deserts, which are communities with little or no access to healthy, fresh foods. Consider shopping for a family in need while at the market, or invite them to come with you on your next trip.

5) Spread the Word: Be bold with your support by proudly updating your Facebook status after each market trip, mentioning the veggies you bought and how you plan to use them. You might just inspire someone’s very first farmers market visit.

Snow’s Bend Farm
David Snow and Margaret Ann Toohey

Young people devoting their career and time to tending soil is a rarity. Even more unusual are those who do so on land that’s been in the family for 150 years. David Snow and Margaret Ann Toohey are in their seventh year of farming the 10 acres outside of Tuscaloosa that is Snow’s Bend Farm. After seeing his family’s land leased to a conventional farmer and sprayed with harmful chemicals, David felt a growing duty to see the land used responsibly. The couple went to work on farms around the world, from Washington state to Ecuador, learning about sustainability along the way. After starting with only a quarter of an acre, they built up every year to a farm that yields between 10,000 and 20,000 pounds of produce per acre. Their fruits and vegetables are coveted by the city’s best chefs and include everything from fava beans to plum heirloom tomatoes.

Snow’s Bend produce can be found in Birmingham at Pepper Place Farmers Market, at a handful of restaurants around town, and in the community supported agriculture boxes of their approximately 150 members.