

DETROIT

A FARM GROWS IN MOTOWN

Detroiters often use the phoenix rising from the ashes as a metaphor for the city's resilience. Worms might be just as apt a symbol this time around • by KORLA MASTERS

THE CITY OF DETROIT has several thousand vacant houses, but Darryl Howard has at least as many worms. Howard is an intern with Earthworks Urban Farm, a program of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen on Detroit's East Side. He dreams of running a small business that supplies worms to farms that dot the city landscape.

As Howard and his colleagues (invertebrate and vertebrate alike) know, worms work with materials that, from the outside, appear spent—and surprise us by producing rich, healthy soil. As he digs his hands into the dirt, still in the phase between food scraps and soil, a smile breaks across Howard's face. "This is how I feed myself, my family, my community, and the world."

Detroiters often use the phoenix rising from the ashes as a metaphor for the city's resilience; in its 300-year history, Detroit has gone through several periods of bad times and has come back each time. Yet worms might be just as apt a symbol this time around.

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Detroit could come very close to feeding itself. According to the Detroit Food Policy Council, farming less than half of the vacant publicly held land in the city could yield three-quarters of the vegetables and almost half of the fruit consumed by

Detroit residents. In a city that bleeds money when buying food, that could be enormously stabilizing.

Furthermore, the economic impact is far from the only benefit. There is cultural and social power in growing food for your community.

The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network cultivates that power alongside the food it grows. Hanifa Adjuman roots herself deeply in this call to cultivation. As education coordinator for the network, she is steeped in the story of farming in Detroit, bringing elders with decades of experience together with youth for whom agricultural work carries reminders of their slave forebears.

A frequent reaction from new participants is, "We thought slavery was over." Adjuman sees her work as healing work, explaining that "now we're doing it for us." She stresses the importance of African-American people understanding that people have the power to provide for community sustenance. The network has created a food security curriculum that raises the complex issues, painful and hopeful,



A boy waters a garden for Growing Healthy Kids, a program sponsored by Earthworks Urban Farm.

that surround agriculture in Detroit. These transformative conversations embrace the decades-long history of farming in Detroit, long practiced to put food on the table prior to the declaration of an "urban ag" movement. What is important, Adjuman insists, is that youth know that "this is good work, sustaining on so many levels: mind, body, and spirit."

His hands full of dirt, peels, and worms, Darryl Howard muses, "This called me." Becoming rich soil is a process of transformation, rather than death. Worms are not conspicuous like phoenixes, but in the process of creation, good soil is a thing of immense beauty. ■

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