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**BILL MCGRAW**

# Farming takes root in Detroit

## Hope spreads along with the compost

BY BILL MCGRAW • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST • MAY 4, 2009

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Springtime in Detroit: Shirtsleeves, baseball, the Stanley Cup playoffs -- and, in a carefully cultivated corner on the city's east side, people composting with rakes as the green shoots of a garlic bulb poke out of the earth.

ADVERTISEMENT A Southfield businessman made news last month when he proposed turning huge tracts of the city's vacant land into a commercial farming operation. But here, on a corner lot bordered by Meldrum Street and an alley, is the true nature of Detroit's growing agricultural movement: people preparing a small plot of land for planting.

On a recent Saturday, about a dozen volunteers from Detroit and the suburbs converged on the Earthworks Urban Farm for some old-fashioned agriculture.

"I think we can come a little bit more over to this edge," Patrick Crouch, Earthworks' manager, told Mike and Lauren Madison, a father-daughter team of rakers from Grosse Pointe Woods.

"We're mostly spreading compost today," Crouch said. "We're getting ready. We're taking advantage of the available labor."

Earthworks, part of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, comprises three parcels totaling 1 1/2 acres that yield lettuce, carrots, peas, beets, cabbage and other small-scale crops.

In 2008, the 11-year-old Earthworks turned out more than 6,000 pounds of produce, 900 pounds of honey, 2,000 tins of hand balm and 1,000 jars of jam. It also distributed more than 100,000 transplants to 600 community, family or school gardens in Detroit, Highland Park and Hamtramck.

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Some Detroit gardens just grow food. Earthworks has an underlying philosophy that entails social justice, community building and connection to the environment.

"The new life that's here is so inspirational," said Earthworks' Lisa Richter, as she stood in a toasty greenhouse, surrounded by seedlings.

As Detroiters grapple with how to build a future in a factory town where the jobs continue to disappear, the agricultural movement figures to play a role in the debate.

Crouch questioned whether commercial farms spread over large plots of land are the best way to go.

"I see that as community annihilation and not community development," he said.

Contact **BILL McGRAW**: [bmcgraw@freepress.com](mailto:bmcgraw@freepress.com)

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**Hypestyle** wrote:

Crouch: "I see that as community annihilation and not community development,"..

People need to stop making inflammatory remarks like that. Large-scale and smaller-scale farming plots can coexist. The point is putting the existing land into practical use again. Brownfield redevelopment is key. Detroit has 139 square miles of land, but only roughly half of it has any substantive population. There are no dramatic repopulation trends anywhere in the city, despite the midtown/downtown loft rehabbing going on. Currently there is no single industry to attract people from ton a 'massive' scale like various factories did in the early 20th century. The prolificacy of manufacturing as it existed back then is largely gone. It's time to accept that Detroit

will not have 2 million people anymore.

Neighborhood schools can be partnered with to have plots of land for students to work on- teaching soil science, botany, forestry and other related disciplines, for school credit.

05/08/2009 12:06:32 p.m. EDT

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**daveescaped** wrote:

Detroit is a terminally ill patient. Whether one chooses to stay by her side and comfort her as she departs this world or whther one chooses to remember her as she was and not visit her on her deathbed makes no difference. She'll be dead in the morning anyway. All of the hand holding in the world won't stop her death.

It's time to move on. If you want to stay in Michigan, fine. But find a new city.

It's like weekend at Bernies; Oh no, Detroit isn't dead. See, people are planting gardens! Detroit isn't dea, she's just holding her breath for a really long time....like 50 years.

05/04/2009 3:04:39 p.m. EDT

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**patgarry** wrote:

Replying to bye2mi:

I think somebody needs a life and fast.....

*"...people composting with rakes..."*

*HUH???? I use only plant materials, kitchen scraps, shredded paper etc in my compost pile ... certainly not RAKES. Doesn't anyone know that metal or plastic doesn't decompose?!*

*Oh wait, as usual the Freep FORGOT TO INCLUDE A WORD. In this case, it's spread. As in "...people SPREADING compost with rakes..."*

*Sheesh, the Freep is now down to a 2nd grade level. What's next? Mad-Libs where everyone gets to write their own story?*

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**bye2mi** wrote:

"...people composting with rakes..."

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