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# VEGETABLES AND CONCRETE: Urban gardeners are turning vacant lots into profitable produce plots

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**BY MARTY HAIR**  
FREE PRESS GARDEN WRITER

Greg Willerer raises specialty organic produce -- burgundy bush beans, pungent herbs for flavoring teas, edible flowers -- and sells them to restaurants.

It's unusual fare, "stuff you just can't buy off a truck," he says.

The fact that he grows this produce in Detroit, near Tiger Stadium, might strike some as unusual.

But Willerer, a 38-year-old teacher who loves to cook, is one of many urban gardeners turning to microfarming as a smart use of vacant land. He says his neighborhood near the old stadium is nearly as open as the country, ripe for cultivation. Growing produce to sell allows residents to reap some economic benefit from unused space where businesses and homes once stood.

"What we're doing here is kind of a wildfire of positivity," he says. "We're not going to be filling the void left by the auto industry, but we're doing something."

Across Detroit, Highland Park and Hamtramck over the last decade, an urban gardening movement has taken hold in backyards and community gardens. The harvest is good-tasting and nutritious fruits, vegetables and herbs, produced at reasonable cost and in areas where fresh organic produce can be difficult to find.

For extra cash or to launch niche businesses, an increasing number of gardeners are beginning to sell their produce at farmers markets and elsewhere under a new Grown in Detroit label. Several will be

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Urban gardeners who are Roy's in Detroit far



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on an Aug. 1 urban garden tour.

One stop on the tour will be at a roofless brick building on Chene. A former furniture factory, the building is now owned by a church called Peacemakers International, which ministers to addicts and prostitutes.

Open to the sky, like a light-filled sanctuary, the old factory has become a walled garden in the last three years. The salad greens and other produce grown there are being sold to the Henry Ford in Dearborn, which has made a commitment to buy locally grown food. The church also has a community garden a block away.

"One day we'll have lots of lots. The pastor owns 17," predicted Teresa Miller, 49. She says she arrived at Peacemakers a few years ago as a crack addict. She works there as a secretary and in the gardens, having learned organic gardening techniques through the Garden Resource Program.

The program is a 4-year-old collaboration of groups that promote urban gardening: Detroit Agriculture Network, Greening of Detroit, Michigan State University Extension and the Capuchin Soup Kitchen's Earth Works Garden. For a modest annual fee, members get seeds and plants as well as access to information and class instruction.

Of the hundreds of individual and family, school and community gardens involved, this summer 35 people, double last year's number, are raising produce to sell. The garden resource program supports them by paying the cost for farm market stall rentals, insurance, the Grown in Detroit logo and compostable bags.

Willerer was at a farm market in northwest Detroit one sunny afternoon earlier this month, selling Grown in Detroit produce alongside Roy Kelly, 12, who will be a seventh-grade student at University Preparatory Academy this fall.

For the last two years, Willerer has used hands-on gardening to teach both environmental science and economics. Students who are interested sign up to participate.

Roy, who raises produce in a garden at the school, says he already has learned a lot about plants, like how nasturtiums, which he raises for their edible flowers, grow better in poor soil.

"It's fun," he says, and he gets to keep the money he earns helping grow and sell produce.

**Grown in Detroit**

Others in the program are exploring niche markets with food products. Detroiter Marilyn Barber, 50, who has been in the Garden Resource Program for three years, grows and purchases collards, which she prepares as a spicy stir-fry. She's now investigating ways to preserve and package them to sell.

Dawn DeMuyt, 44, of Highland Park, says she left a corporate job last winter to "do what I love" -- develop a business growing and selling 20 varieties of heirloom tomatoes in her Highland Park yard with her partner, Patrick LaMourie. She still works part-time for a program that promotes ways to turn

• Ashley Atl

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gardening into retail opportunities. In an e-mail, she says most backyard or microfarmers have to juggle several ways to make money as they pursue farming as a livelihood.

Also selling produce with the Grown in Detroit label at farm markets this summer are Cornelius Williams, 66, and his partner Leslie Huffman, 48. They hope to add a hoop house, or unheated greenhouse, later this year to extend the growing season at their farm-garden on Detroit's east side, where they grow collards, lettuce, okra, green beans and peppers.

"I want to be an example of what can be done -- and it's good," says Williams, who is a builder. He especially likes to show neighborhood youngsters how plants grow and where food comes from. Most have no clue, he says.

"They don't have the opportunity to see grandma or mom in the backyard, gardening every day," he says.

### Vacant lots for the asking

When it comes to potential for gardening, Detroit is a land of vast opportunity. The city owns 20,000 vacant parcels that are available free by permit for gardening during one growing season, according to James Canning, deputy press secretary for Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. He says the city is considering creating several community gardens that could be open next spring.

Ashley Atkinson of the Detroit Agriculture Network says she would like the city to provide longer lot leases, allow fences and provide water sources to encourage gardeners willing to invest time, money and inspiration on lots.

Some of that investment could pay off as demand increases for locally grown food. The Henry Ford, for example, now buys 70% of its produce, grain and meat from local farmers, according to Susan Schmidt, director of food services and catering.

"If we can get food locally, instead of shipped from God-knows-where, with the fuel to get it here, the more the better," she says.

Starting this fall, Peacemakers plans to add shiitake mushrooms to its crops. Meanwhile, Miller is considering other ways to expand its production.

She nodded in a direction across the street from the church. On the corner is what looks to be a long-vacant building. It is empty. It has no roof.

"One day I want to go over and find the owner. And then I want to make it into a strawberry patch," Miller says.

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