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[Life](#)

Urban farm grows organic veggies, economic opportunity and fellowship

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By Maryanne Kocis MacLeod, Macomb Daily Staff Writer

"Give a man a fish; you have fed him for today. Teach a man to fish; and you have fed him for a lifetime. Teach him how to sell fish, and he will eat steak."

— Author Unknown

s Michigan residents cultivate new job prospects — including the film industry — local food proponents such as Patrick Crouch are addressing basic human needs with what they believe to be a more practical solution: safe and sustainable urban agriculture.

"What happens when all those state tax credits get voted away?" posited Crouch, program manager for Earthworks Urban Farm, an offshoot of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, as he picked his way across a delicately fragrant patch of young watermelon. "The filmmakers will pack their bags for the next state with the latest and greatest opportunities."

By any standard, learning to grow your own vegetables — particularly in a so-called "food desert" such as the

city of Detroit — is a smart investment, both economically and nutritionally.

According to a 2007 study sponsored by LaSalle Bank, about 550,000 urban Detroit residents must travel twice as far to the nearest traditional grocer than they do to purchase food from a fast food restaurant, convenience or party store.

With this in mind, Crouch said, the goal then is to make safe, fresh food accessible to all.

"Whether we live in urban areas or the suburbs, everyone deserves access to safe, quality food," Crouch said, adding that the growing number of contaminations from imported and commercial foods has driven demand for local organics at farmers markets nationwide.

That doesn't mean it's easy to get people to embrace sustainable urban agriculture, Crouch said, people who struggle day-to-day to eke out three squares and reliable shelter; people with limited educations, job skills, family support and self-esteem — and few tangible reasons to believe a better life is possible.

"It's not the kind of thing you can force or hurry," said Crouch, whose various gardens are scattered throughout the neighborhoods surrounding St. Bonaventure's Monastery at Mount Elliot and St. Paul, and largely nurtured by a crew of suburban volunteers. "We've learned a lot in the 12 years since Brother Rick Samyn

founded Earthworks."

One important finding: It is more fruitful to encourage personal enterprise than impose battle plans, no matter how brilliant or well-intended. (Just ask any newspaper editor worth her or his ink for confirmation.)

Case in point and new this year at Earthworks: a sprawling and vibrant youth vegetable garden; a mobile produce stand that visits local farmers markets and teaches its operators marketing; and, most recently, organic certification.

"Organic certification is one tool to increase the economic viability of small-scale agriculture — certification gives crops greater value," Crouch said. "We look at this as an opportunity to serve as mentors to other urban farmers who want to improve their marketability."

"Soup kitchen guests aren't the only ones who benefit," added Alison Costello, Capuchin Soup Kitchen executive chef. "Hundreds of volunteers and members of the general public who come in contact with our program begin to appreciate the importance of safe and accessible fresh foods."

With these milestones in mind, let's take a closer look at three farm volunteers who've helped make them possible.

Pleasant Ridge's Rosemary Spatafora

Growing up in Detroit during the '50s and '60s, Rosemary Spatafora thought corn and beans came from a can. But when the A&P at the corner of 18th and Myrtle burned down during the race riots — and was never replaced — suddenly, buying groceries became a major undertaking.

"Today, when I'm talking to kids in the city about getting fresh food," said Spatafora, who has spent about three Wednesday mornings a month at Earthworks for the last three years, "they want to know which gas station I'm going to. Obviously the fresh food you get at a convenience store is limited. It's my goal to help people, particularly children, recognize their connection to the earth. You can grow your own food. You can be self-sufficient."

It's no surprise that Spatafora's favorite aspect is youth education. But she happily sifts and hauls compost, digs, weeds, seeds and harvests as necessary.

"One of the most exciting things is all the urban gardens popping up," Spatafora said.

She is especially fond of a tiny farm on the playground of her former elementary school. Besides vegetables, the farm keeps goats for milk and cheese, honeybee hives, chickens and even horses.

"I was invited to a graduation party near there recently and was amazed by the beauty of the place," Spatafora said. "When I went to school there, the area was extremely urban and densely populated. Not beautiful at all."

Call that progress.

Eastpointe's Gene Yuells

As a retired occupational health and safety specialist for the federal government, Gene Yuells was in search of ways to ply his passion for woodworking.

"My girlfriend saw a mention in the Earthworks newsletter for someone with those skills to help care for the beehives," said Yuells, who, in addition to more traditional farm work, helps create signs and arbors and recently built several raised plant beds. "And the rest is history."

Gardening through Earthworks even encouraged him to start an impressive vegetable garden of his own.

"My back yard has always been very swampy," Yuells explained. "Using what I learned there, and doing some reading on my own, I decided to create raised beds to keep out the water. Now I grow my own carrots, beets, radishes, spinach, peppers, squash, tomatoes and strawberries.

"One of the biggest things I've learned is that you don't have to do it all at once," Yuells added.

His personal garden, however, isn't the only one on an upward trajectory.

"At Earthworks we're producing 20 percent more vegetables than last year," said Yuells, who helped jumpstart the 2009 effort through seed propagation. "And what we're producing is of a very high quality."

Though the majority of the harvest is returned to the soup kitchen, the rest is distributed to the community and through farmers markets, or retained for seed.

Yuells currently is trying to help erect a year-round hothouse that meets city building codes.

"I love to see this program grow like crazy," said Yuells, who also "loves" working with his fellow volunteers. "It just means more people at poverty level and below gaining access to quality food."

St. Clair Shores' Shawn Cahill

Shawn Cahill readily admits she isn't the "outdoorsy" type.

"I'm really not into spending lots of hours outside," Cahill said.

But at Earthworks, where she has volunteered for three months, the end definitely justifies the means.

"I'm not the biggest of gardeners. It's the sense of community that I like here so much," Cahill said. "It's encouraging to be around like-minded people. We all believe in the Earthworks mission, but also share environmental concerns.

"The commercial agriculture industry is one of the biggest polluters and perpetrators of animal cruelty," Cahill said. "At Earthworks, we aren't only organic, we're concerned about the state of our food. And we talk to each other. There's a real warmth."

Some of her favorite moments include the camaraderie of soup kitchen lunches and Saturday potlucks.

"We eat really good bread, jam and honey from the farm, greens, radishes — it's really simple but really good," she said. "We don't need any more than that."

Cahill hoped that getting involved with Earthworks would motivate her to tackle the weed clumps in her own back yard.

So far that hasn't happened.

She is, however, nurturing a potted tomato plant and can finally see beyond the acres of decay to the lively vegetable gardens springing up all around the city.

"There is so much life going on — you just have to look for it," Cahill said.

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