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Urban farm produces food, lessons on Franciscan traditions

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By CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE
Ecology

The Earthworks Urban Farm in Detroit, recently named one of the top 10 urban farms in the United States by *Natural Home* magazine, uses its organic garden to spread lessons on the Franciscan tradition of nourishing the body, soul and spirit.

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Natural Home regarded community service as its primary criteria in ranking the farms.

"These places provide public access to their crops and many afford invaluable services to low-income families and the homeless," said Letitia Star, writer for *Natural Home*.

Established in 1997 by Rick Samyn, then a Capuchin Franciscan brother, Earthworks is more than just a community garden. It provides volunteers with a way to reconnect with nature on a visceral level.

Samyn said he saw individuals disconnected from their neighbors and their community, and this was his catalyst to begin the garden on a small plot of land behind the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. "The idea of gardening from a Franciscan perspective is about relationships and love," Samyn said.

Apart from focusing on gardening fundamentals, Earthworks helps educate about food justice issues and how to use patience and love to convey a message.

Questioning the origin of food can lead to discussion of larger globalization issues such as migrant worker conditions and poverty, but Samyn cautioned, "As we pursue issues of justice and movements to heal, we have to do it with love. Temper justice with love."

Lisa Richter, outreach coordinator of Earthworks, believes that a community's interaction with nature allows for a better connection with spirituality and also acts as "a place to put one's own beliefs into action." This conveys the Franciscan vision of a brotherhood and sisterhood united with all of creation in an effort to reconnect with the natural world, she said.

"The garden is a more effective place for inspiring communities," Richter said. "The garden seems like a place to bring ideas together. We can all relate to food."

Last year, the gardeners harvested more than 6,000 pounds of produce that was used to feed the hungry by way of the soup kitchen and Women, Infants and Children, a federal grant program.

Earthworks also hosts Growing Healthy Kids and Youth Farm Stand, which educate children about gardening basics, nutrition and cultural awareness.

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