

Raising lettuce, leaders in North Portland

Food Works youths grow vegetables and self in Sauvie Island soil

BY STACY BROWNHILL
STAFF WRITER

"We'll need 40 bunches of dinosaur kale for the markets ... Those cabbages could ripen a week more ... Let's get a better price for the salad mix ... We need trellises for those beans..."

Such seasoned farm management decisions came not from veteran farmers, but from North Portland teenagers who participate in Janus Youth's Food Works program, part of Village Gardens. The ten-year-old youth employment and empowerment program grew 10,426 pounds of organic produce and made \$10,178 in sales last year alone, and is on the forefront of increasingly popular youth urban agriculture programs.

Destiny Giles, age 17, Lavette Lacy, age 20, and Dijhena "Daedae" Thomas, age 16, are this summer's crew leaders. Confident and upbeat, the three young women are in charge of two acres of organic produce on Sauvie Island. They decide what to grow, when to harvest and how much to charge. They bargain with buyers, calculate profit, and strategize timelines.

"Before working for Food Works, I knew how to plant a flower," says Giles, "but that was about it." Now the teenager walks through the fields with familiarity. She tracks sales, writes the Food Works newsletter, and coordinates school group fieldtrips to the site.

Is Giles interested in a career in agriculture? "No way," she laughs. Business,



Above and below, young adults in the Janus Food Works program get hands-on experience from seed to harvest in producing their own food. PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOOD WORKS

management and writing are more up her alley, she says.

Twelve teens work at Food Works part-time, year-round for minimum wage or more, and an additional 20 work part-time during the summer, in exchange for stipends of \$300 per month, bus passes, produce, school credit and a professional reference. Prudence Eca and Markishia Duckett are this year's summer interns, leading 2 crews of 10 in harvesting and team-building activities.

Organizations like Food Works and Growing Gardens in Portland, The Food Project in Boston, Just Food in New York and the newly launched national Food Corps, are working to combat an increasingly urban, obese and food-ignorant generation of young Americans.

"We work with elementary schools to get kids out in the garden, tasting fresh fruits and vegetables and physically active," says Caitlin Blethen, manager of Growing Gardens' Youth Grow program. "Research shows that food preferences are developed before sixth grade, so our hope is that young kids will eat more fruits and veggies. Our goal is really hunger and obesity prevention, and empowering people to grow food for themselves."

The rise in urban youth farming programs is also a response to rising food prices. Wholesale food prices rose sharply by 4 percent in February and have doubled



since last summer, according to the U.S. Labor Dept., and one in four Americans is "worried about having enough money to put food on the table in the next year," according to the Food Research and Action Center. There were an estimated 18,000 community gardens as of 2004, according to the American Community Gardening Association.

"It's the whole food security issue," says

Food Works grows:

- | | |
|-----------------|------------|
| arugula | melon |
| basil | mustard |
| beets | onions |
| cabbage | parsley |
| carrots | peas |
| chard | peppers |
| collard greens, | potatoes |
| corn | spinach |
| lemon cucumbers | squash |
| eggplant | sunflowers |
| lettuce | tomatoes |

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CORRECTION

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