

Teen Works

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PHOTOS BY JOHN WALLS

How one group of city kids helped transform a community garden project into a thriving business

By Peggy Acott
Photos by John Valls



My visit to the Food Works farm begins bright and early on a Friday morning. Swallows arch and dive, and a hawk glides slowly overhead. It's quiet enough to hear the buzz of insects, and in the distance, a busy sound of another sort: young voices in conversation and laughter.

Arriving at 9:30 a.m., I'm clearly the slacker here—the work crew has already been harvesting for two hours. For the last three months, this troop of ten 14- to 21-year-olds has been rising earlier than roosters to catch a ride across the St. John's Bridge and up Highway 30 to a one-acre plot of land on Sauvie Island. They're part of a youth-run entrepreneurial business known as Food Works, and for their summer break they have had an uncommon job for city teens: farming.

To be fair, waking up early is almost unanimously the least favorite part for these teenagers. But the young Food Works farmers are committed to their jobs and happy to be working together. I picture my teenage son at home, snoring into his pillow, and I know I'm someplace extraordinary.

Food Works grew out of the St. Johns Woods Garden Project, an adventurous collaboration started in 2001 between the St. Johns Woods housing community in North Portland and [Janus Youth Programs](#). Desiring to build community, create job opportunities for young people, and introduce urban agriculture, Janus and St. Johns Woods residents orchestrated the construction of three 2,500-square-foot gardens and hired one adult and seven high school students to manage the plots. The Garden Project gives 30 families living 200% below federal poverty guidelines the seeds, tools, fertile land, water, and technical support to grow their own food.

From the outset, the teenagers living and working in the community were the lifeblood pumping through the Garden Project and surging it forward. In 2003, these teens informed co-founder and supervisor Tera Couchman, in a no-nonsense way, "we need job skills and we want to sell food." They decided to start with salad mix, approaching the Portland Farmers Market to request a table. By the end of the season, they had earned \$1,000. It wasn't a lot, but they felt a flush of victory that inspired another declaration: "We want to do a farm."

As luck would have it, Couchman met Amber Baker of Sauvie Island Organics, a vegetable farm fifteen miles from downtown Portland. Baker relayed that the farm had an acre of land that she could offer the student group, along with the loan of farm equipment, materials, and willingness to mentor. And so began the Food Works farm.

Since that time, Food Works has solidified more every year, with Baker now working as the full-time supervisor and maintaining the land when the students are in school. The ten crew members participate in all aspects of planning and running the farm. There is a waiting list for participation, and the program draws young farmers from high schools around the city: Roosevelt, Jefferson, De La Salle, Grant, and others. For many, this is their first paying job, and they are held to high standards of attendance and timeliness.

For Boru Guyota, the early mornings are part of a life he's long known: Before arriving here with his family two years ago from Ethiopia, he helped grow corn and wheat on the family farm. The program has attracted a number of students who have recently immigrated with their families from East Africa. These students find that urban farming helps ground them in this new place and serves as an excellent bridge to the American workforce. As a result, many of the crew have tremendous expertise and familiarity with agriculture.

At the Food Works farm, the more knowledgeable members help teach the beginners. In the field on this sunny morning, one of the three crew leaders encourages a new member to try a pea she is picking. The younger girl has never tasted one fresh. She spits it out, making a face and exclaiming that she doesn't like the texture. They both laugh.

Further down the plot, another shows a new member which peas to pick, and which aren't ready and should be left on the vine. Ahoefa Ananouko, who helped her mother work on a farm in her native Togo when she was a young child, has become one of the crew leaders. She admits that there are challenges to taking a leadership role: "It's being willing to step up and do things when no one else will... to know when it's time to be serious and when it's okay to joke around," which can be hard when working with good friends. But the positive returns are worth the responsibility. "One of my favorite things is when we have great energy as a group," she asserts, popping a pea into her mouth.

The momentum of Food Works has taken everyone involved by surprise; each year the farm has been more financially successful than the last. While much of the money Food Works makes goes back into the program and covers their salaries, part is used to sponsor an annual harvest party for their community. Last year, they also decided to purchase school supplies for neighborhood kids with leftover funds.

In addition, throughout the course of the year, they set aside hundreds of pounds of produce for weekly "Food Pass Out" days for the low-income residents and families at St. Johns Woods and New Columbia. Giving back in this way is an important part of the Food Works experience. Students who have been in the program say that the community element motivates them.

Food Works has more than one leg up over most entry-level summer jobs. Couchman points out that the program teaches a wide range of skills, from communication, leadership, group decision making, and business management, to marketing, cashiering, and food handling. The program supports crew members in their transition to other jobs, as well as to post-secondary education. Five Food Works' graduates, all immigrants from East Africa, have received college scholarships through Janus. Food Works graduates have won awards for their community activism, traveled around the nation to present at conferences, and seen their grades improve dramatically—one young man raising his GPA from 1.5 to 3.5 during his employment.

Now a few weeks into fall, there is no more salad mix, but there are collards, peppers, squash, and potatoes left to harvest, and a few more 6 a.m. market days to attend. Although "back to school" means that the Food Works farmers

are trading in their pitchforks for pencils, they will continue having weekly meetings to evaluate this year and plan for the next. The future of the program is in the hands of the students, as it has been from the start.

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