

GROW

Where You're Planted

HUNTSVILLE SEES AN URBAN FARMING RENAISSANCE

BY DIANA LACHANCE | PHOTOS BY ROBIN CONN & GLENN BAESKE



Before it was the Rocket City, Huntsville was a sleepy agricultural town known for its cotton and watercress. Today, many residents are returning to those roots by planting community gardens.

For some, it's a chance to connect with neighbors. For others, it's an opportunity to revisit a youth spent outdoors. But no matter what the motivation, says Lee McBride, Master Gardener and chair of the education subcommittee for the North Alabama Food Policy Council, these urban farmers are all "united by the common thread of growing food."

Currently, Huntsville has more than 20 community gardens spread across the city. Many, if not all, rely on the assistance of the Tennessee Valley Community Garden Association (TVCGA) and its knowledgeable coordinator Alice Evans.

"The TVCGA was formed to help existing gardens leverage their assets, create power buy opportunities for gardens, help new gardens get started correctly, and give new community garden leaders the tools to not only survive but thrive," says McBride.

One of the most successful of these community gardens is the Monte Sano Community Garden (MSCG), located on Monte Sano Boulevard next to the Little Green Store.

"The Monte Sano garden is a textbook example of how to set up a new garden properly," says McBride. "Garden space is rented to folks for a season, and each grower 'owns' their food production for that season within their assigned plot."

KT Bothwell and her sister Maggie Patrick founded the MSCG in late 2010.

"Maggie and I were talking one day, and she thought it would be neat to start a garden up here," says Bothwell. "So we organized a meeting of interested folks."

The group considered a number of sites, eventually deciding on the land adjacent to WHNT Channel 19.

"We liked the idea of turning an unused space into something useful," says Bothwell, who approached the station manager and ended up securing permission to use the site. Now, there are 24 organic raised-bed plots assiduously tended by the members of the MSCG, which already has a waiting list.

Eventually, says Bothwell, she hopes to expand the garden so that it can become a source of fresh produce for those who would otherwise have limited or no access.

"In a future phase, we want to have a section that's not plot-held, where people can row-garden and donate whatever is grown there," she says.

McBride says that this kind of "mission-based" or "community-service type garden" is an important part of the urban gardening





Joy McKee, Denise Taylor, Sherry Calvert (with water hose), Robin Cox (in back) and Gwen Walker tend the Lewter Park Community Garden in Five Points.

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grow? It's important to know your tomato does not just appear on the store shelves. And that plays into the nutritional challenges we have – children are more likely to eat something they've grown."

That's certainly true among the youth who tend the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) Community Garden, which sits on Sparkman Drive next to the Physical Plant. Started a year and a half ago to provide a forum for learning about the importance of consuming local and organic foods in a sustainable manner, the all-volunteer garden is managed by UAH Earth System Science graduate student Claire Herdy.

"I am personally very devoted to the local food movement and think that community gardens can have a big impact on our overall food security," says Herdy. "I love that gardens bring people together and create a community of caring individuals. Fostering this will only benefit a community."

The community is already benefitting, and vice versa; the garden recently partnered with high school student and aspiring Eagle Scout, Zach Clark, whose troop will be helping prepare the garden for fall.

That's exactly what McBride says the movement is all about: "Community gardens are the perfect incubator for sub-acre farmers who want to grow clean food and make a difference in a community and earn a decent living."

So whether it's about eating healthy or helping others to eat healthy – or even just getting out and enjoying the fresh air – the end result is the same: community gardens are making a comeback here in Huntsville. ✿

movement, providing supplemental nutrition to low-income citizens and home-bound seniors.

That's precisely what Huntsville's Operation Green Team, along with consultant Robin Cox, had in mind when they broke ground on the Lewter Park Community Garden (LPCG) in Five Points.

"The Green Team office has been working on the food issue since the inception of the North Alabama Food Policy Group, since that first initial report in which it was highlighted," says Cox, referring to Mayor Tommy Battle's 2010 sustainability report to encourage the greening of Huntsville [see sidebar]. "So even before the LPCG, they were donating seeds and giving group instruction for planting in the food desert."

(A food desert is an area with little or no access to foods that are needed to maintain a healthy diet.)

The garden simply takes that one step further. "It's about institutionalizing community gardening as a way of life," says Cox. "That's why the Green Team is such a valuable partner – non-profits come and go, but the government is always there."

And while LPCG is just a pilot program at this point, the hope is that, eventually, urban gardening won't be a novelty. Instead, it will become a way of life for the city's next generations.

"It allows us to hit so many different age groups, to start kids out early," says Denise Taylor, Operation Green Team's coordinator. "Because how much fun is it to see something

WHAT IS THE FRESH FOOD INITIATIVE?

During the summer of 2010, the Food Bank of North Alabama, the City of Huntsville, and the Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network held the first public discussions about creating a food policy council.

"It was clear residents wanted to know more about where and how their food is grown, wanted greater access to fresh, healthy food choices, and wanted to support local north Alabama farmers," says Kathryn Strickland, community food security director of the Food Bank of North Alabama.

The outcome was the Fresh Food Initiative, which seeks to make fresh, healthy food choices accessible to seniors and families who qualify for SNAP benefits (formerly food stamps) and are trying to eat healthfully on a limited budget.

"The program doubles the value of SNAP benefits up to \$20 when participants purchase foods directly from farmers at participating farmers markets," says Strickland, resulting in "a win-win-win for local farmers, the local economy and seniors and families trying to eat healthy."

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

- Make a contribution to the Food Bank of North Alabama (www.fbofna.org) in support of the Fresh Food Initiative.
- Host a "local foods dinner" for friends and family and ask guests to make a contribution to the initiative (www.hsvgreenlink.com/host-a-local-foods-dinner/).
- Urge area businesses to support local producers. "We encourage residents to ask where their food comes from, whether they are in a grocery store or a restaurant," says Strickland. "Simply asking will help support local farmers and encourage more and more retailers to source locally."
- Volunteer on the North Alabama Food Policy Council (www.nafoodpolicycouncil.org), a group of farmers, food industry directors, chefs, restaurateurs, health professionals, engineers, professors, parents, students, and everyday citizens interested in advising on policy that affects our local food system.



The Lewter Park Community Garden, spearheaded by Operation Green Team, helps provide fresh food for low-income citizens and home-bound seniors.