



YouthGROW Plants the Seeds of Opportunity for Worcester's Youth

In 2003, REC's Food Justice Program initiated YouthGROW, an urban agriculture-focused youth development and employment program for low-income teens. While YouthGROW originated as a drop in program, our partnership with Youth Works in 2008 provided resources and structure that helped us grow into a year round program serving 35 teens.



Hanh and Ben tending to their scallions



YouthGROW at the farmer's Market

Currently, YouthWorks participants working on the YouthGROW farms spend their summer maintaining two urban farms which grow over 2,000 pounds of produce to be sold affordably in Worcester's lowest income and food insecure neighborhoods via the REC's Mobile Market program. Teens learn hard skills in agriculture and social entrepreneurship while

learning about nutrition, food justice, and the soft skills needed to prepare them for future jobs and career.

Farm work is augmented with morning discussions which include Commonwealth Corporation's Signaling Success curriculum as well as YouthGROW specific modules regarding the food system, public speaking, conflict resolution and more. Youth who complete a full year in YouthGROW are eligible to apply for positions of increased leadership in the program and given responsibility for leading afternoon team projects. In 2017, these groups included our "Compost Royalty" team which visited the City's composting site through the DPW and then constructed five different composting systems at our Bell Hill campus to help minimize waste and educate community members. Other teams focused on our social entrepreneurship product, *Drop It Like It's HOT SAUCE*, and worked in the commercial kitchen incubator at the Worcester Regional Food Hub.



YouthGROW participant Lawreta tends to a plant



YouthGROW participants spreading mulch in downtown Worcester

Youth also had the opportunity to see four other farms on our weekly service learning trips, including visits to the Southside Community Land Trust in Providence, the Community Harvest Project in Grafton, the Mill City Grows initiative in Lowell, and the FRESH project in New London Connecticut. Youth learned about our regional food system, networked with other youth farmers, and contributed sweat equity to each of these farms, all of which work to alleviate hunger in New England. Youth concluded the YouthWorks season by hosting block parties at each of our farm

sites, welcoming their family and neighbors to see the transformed spaces they have worked on throughout the summer.

The YouthGROW program has proven its dedication to the community by growing fresh organic food right in the city of Worcester and selling it affordably to Worcester's low income citizens, while also employing many of Worcester's low income youth in skilled labor. These youth receive significant knowledge that could help them if they decide to continue a career of farming or sustainability, and the program has proven to be an incredible booster for Worcester's health, happiness, and generosity to the environment, making Worcester a greener city!



YouthGROW participants, summer 2017

For more information regarding the YouthGROW program or the Regional Environmental Council, please contact Grace Sliwoski at 508-799-9139 or youthgrow@recworchester.org