

# A growing passion for GARDENS

**It's harvest time for city teens running their own patches of green**

BY ABBY LUBY

When teens from the South Bronx step out of the car and into the 4-acre vegetable garden in the Catskills, they marvel at the open fields and rolling hills. Then they get to work. They clip tomatoes off the vine, peel back large leaves of Swiss chard and dig potatoes out of the ground. "My favorite thing to do is shoveling the earth and covering the rows with mulch," said 18-year-old Arsheio Carrasco, who was preparing the organic garden for fall plantings a few weeks ago. "There's a lot of work to do here — not like down in the Bronx, where there is nothing but trouble."

Carrasco has worked at Harmony Garden for the past three years through a program at the Highbridge Community Life Center. Located two hours away in Chester, N.Y., it's funded by the Sisters of St. Dominick and the Servium Ministry Fund.

Harmony Garden is one of a growing number of teen-run agriculture projects in and around the city. And the benefits, say the young men and women working there, are endless.

"Fresh vegetables taste totally different and better," said Rhondai, 16, Carrasco's younger brother. "When you pick them from the garden, you know where it's from — not like in the supermarket."



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Antoine Franklin, 16, has been picking and planting there for two years. "There are no gardens near where I live," he said. "We have some flowers, but not vegetables." Antoine brings home a bag of fresh goodies to his family during harvest season. "I'm a tomato lover. My whole family especially loves cherry tomatoes," he said. "I've been picking dinosaur kale, cabbage and beans."

The program employs eight teenage boys from the South Bronx, who get paid \$7 an hour. "They live and work up here for five weeks at the end of the summer," said Hubert McCann, a Highbridge Community Center social worker who trained the teens to manage the sprawling garden. "They learn how to plant and harvest vegetables while earning money to go back to school."

One East New York garden, flourishing on what was once a half-acre vacant lot, is an oasis in the middle of rowhouses. Run by United Community Centers and East New York Farms, the eight-year-old patch of green overflows with fruits and vegetables near a man-made pond under a willow tree.

About 22 teens ages 13 to 17 work in the garden every year, planting, harvesting and selling at the nearby farmers' market. Beds are packed with collards, eggplants and lettuce, and 10 varieties of tomatoes grow in brimming rows along with thick vines of long beans, cucumbers and grapes.

Getting all this produce to Saturday's farmers' market is a big part of being involved with the garden, said 14-year-old Joemi Regalado. "I've worked here for two years, and the heavy harvesting times are now in the fall," Joemi said while snipping cherry tomatoes. The farmers' market, on New Lots Ave. and Barbey St., is open from June to November. "It starts at 7:30 in the morning," Joemi said.



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**SEED PROJECT** Digging into a sunflower at an East New York farm

"We set up tents and tables. Selling food to people helps us with our math."

Jonah Braverman, urban agriculture coordinator at United Community Centers, said the garden program is specifically geared to meet the needs of mainly Latinos and African-Americans living in the East New York community. "The teens work about 10 hours a week and make anywhere from \$5 to \$8 an hour, based on how long they've worked in the garden," Braverman said. "They are inspired by the experience of growing foods and seeing produce that's never sold in stores. For the teens, it creates

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stuff, and I've cut back eating at McDonald's."

Teens in Harlem are getting a lesson in health,

too, thanks to a garden behind Public School 154.

Sandwiched between the school building and the playground, several large, raised wooden boxes sprout greens, herbs and vegetables while tomatoes, beets and cucumbers grow from round wooden tubs. Started two years ago by students from the High School of Food and Finance in Manhattan, the patch of green is educational as well as decorative.

"The kids connected the dots between nutrition, food access and sustainable agriculture," said nutritionist Elizabeth Solomon of Eatwise, a Food Change program that collaborated with the kids to start the project. "By growing their own food they are able to see why low-income neighborhoods have a lot of obesity and diabetes. Now they don't get disgruntled but combat the apathy by growing their own healthy vegetables."

Rosalba Nueva, one of the innovative teens who started the garden, appreciates the self-satisfaction it gives.

"We could eat food that we grow ourselves," said the 15-year-old in a final harvesting in September. "Cucumbers with lemon are one of my favorites."

The teens share their experience with the elementary school students of PS 154. "We show students how to start plants inside and then grow them outside," she said. "They also learn why it's important to eat healthy food from the farmers' market instead of buying them at the grocery."

Carla Turenne, 17, fell in love with eating salad greens. "It's great because you get free food and you learn about vitamins," she said. "If gardening is in my life, I won't have to buy vegetables. I can grow tomatoes on the fire escape."

Eleventh-grader Richard Owens has taken his PS 154 garden experience one step further — to a Manhattan restaurant where he's learning to cook. "I like to sauté Swiss chard in extra-virgin olive oil," he said. "Putting fresh basil in salads also tastes great."

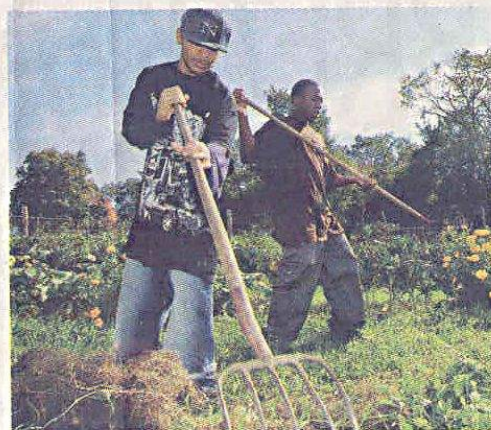
For Richard, growing vegetables is more than putting good food on the table.

"When you tend to the plants it's great — plants don't talk back," he said. "But the best part about working in the garden is it's like therapy." ♦





**I-PODS Joemi Regalado collects okra at the United Community Center's Youth Farm in East New York.**



FRANK KOESTER

**DIGGING IT Rhondal Carrasco (left) and Antoine Franklyn at Harmony Farms in Goshen, N.Y.**

ownership and stewardship with the community. It gives them a sense of place."

Edwin Sanchez, 13, started working there in March. "Planting food gives me another power," he said. "People buy what I grow."

For Jason Thomas, 16, helping those who can't afford produce is the draw. "It's called Community Supported Agriculture," he said. "For a family, it costs \$17.75 every two weeks to get a bunch of fresh fruits and vegetables."

He has even started ditching fast food in favor of slow-cooked meals.

"It makes sense to eat what we grow," he said. "I've been eating less junky stuff, and I've cut back eating at McDonald's."

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