



rrstar.com

Rockford Register Star | The Rock River Valley's Leading Information Source

<http://www.rrstar.com/opinions/x1542104610/Community-gardens-grow-all-sorts-of-skills>

Community gardens grow all sorts of skill



Dave Kostka (left), an educator and board member with the Angelic Organics Learning Center, watches as Isaiah Fultz (center) and Jon-Neesha Fort use nets to collect bugs in the garden behind the Salvation Army in Rockford during a Roots & Wings program.

By Amy J. Van Horn

Rockford, as you all know, is good at pointing out its shortcomings. Which makes it all the more important to set the record straight when the criticisms are unfounded.

In a July 28 piece on this page, our columnist Ed Wells said the west side, in particular, needed community gardens. “We don’t respect food enough,” he wrote.

In a July 28 piece on this page, our columnist Ed Wells said the west side, in particular, needed community gardens. “We don’t respect food enough,” he wrote.

In fact, this community offers several programs that teach the value of gardening and growing your own food. They acknowledge the powerful community connections that can be created by the simple act of working the soil.

One program, Roots & Wings, is exactly what Wells ordered. “We could see a food co-op,” Wells wrote, “with classes to teach the youngsters not only about gardening, but also about cooking and proper nutrition.”

Enter Roots & Wings, a youth garden project of Angelic Organics Learning Center, the educational partner of Angelic Organics, a community-supported farm in Caledonia. Since 2003, Roots & Wings has partnered with neighborhood organizations on the west side.

“We work hard and learn about healthy food, but also play and grow together,” the Web site at learngrowconnect.org says. “We help in the fields, milk goats, collect eggs from the chickens, and learn about organic farming through hands-on experience. Roots & Wings encourages at-risk youth to become leaders, with teens helping teach younger kids about gardening and food.”

The leadership development aspect is key, according to Constance McCarthy, a volunteer with the Roots & Wings program. Each week, the kids learn a different leadership concept — such as respect, persistence, initiative and motivation — and discuss how they can put those principles into action.

During the summer, the kids also learn job skills, money management and public speaking by selling their produce at the North End Farmers Market every other Saturday. They also sell lip balm and other natural products they have made. McCarthy wrote in an e-mail to the Register Star that she often gets comments from other adults about how polished and professional the kids are.

The youth also take classes in cooking and nutrition. They are encouraged to take the lessons — and the produce — home to their families.

McCarthy says they are working on a project they call Fight the Fat, which will produce a cookbook and video in the format of a cooking show. The video will be shown to community centers, churches, schools and other groups on the west side.

This year, Roots & Wings is at the Salvation Army on Kilburn Street, Concord Commons and Northwest Community Center. The program has received grants from the United Way, the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois and the foundation’s youth-driven philanthropic arm, In Youth We Trust. Last year, a Roots & Wings group made a presentation to the judges during the America In Bloom contest.

Other local programs are less youth-centered, but they highlight the community-building potential of gardening:

The Rockford Park District offers garden plots for a nominal fee to residents (\$30) and nonresidents (\$45). The plots are at the Johnson tract in the 5000 block of Spring Brook Road; Churchill Park at 2002 Seventh Ave.; and Lockwood Park. They are assigned in mid-March. Call 815-987-8800 for details.

The University of Illinois Extension office and Winnebago County Master Gardeners are partners in Plant A Row for the Hungry. Call 815-986-4357 for more information.

These programs make up a bounty of learning and gardening opportunities. They deserve respect — and they have earned it.