



GROWING FOR GOOD

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Alabama's urban teaching farms are using food and its power to connect us to improve the health of our state.

Not too long ago, most folks knew where their food came from. Even if you lived in a city, chances were, you had a family member or friend who farmed or at the very least, tended to a sizable veggie garden. While agriculture is still big business in our state, as our metropolitan areas have grown, and small to mid-sized family farms have been swallowed up by large corporate operations, we've lost something: a connection to the land and the bounty it yields, the fruits, veggies, poultry and beef that sustain us.

We've gained something too: staggering rates of type II diabetes and obesity in adults and children, dangerous problems that can be prevented with healthy lifestyles. Kids today are more likely to know how to download their favorite game to a smartphone than where peas or okra come from. Most have never experienced the simple joy of digging in the dirt and watching a green sprout push through the earth. And given the opportunity, many will choose a happy meal over a thick slice of ripe tomato any day.

But a crop of urban teaching farms has sprouted up across Alabama, and they are using innovative programs and a wealth of delicious produce to plant seeds in young minds. And while the idea of a farm sitting amid a city's masses of concrete and asphalt is relatively new, the message these fresh-food evangelists are preaching is not, it's a throwback to the old ways of thinking about, growing and eating food.

Jones Valley Teaching Farm in Birmingham began in 2002, and the non-profit's three-acre downtown farm has been at its current site downtown since 2007. In 2012, JVF launched

its school program to empower kids by teaching them about food production and the importance of eating fresh and local. "We are an urban farm, and farming is at the heart of what we do, but our mission is educating students," said Mary Beth Brown, development fellow at JVTf.

The goal is to start young and stay with it, continually and consistently reinforcing the concepts of health, nutrition, community and sustainability as well as more traditional "school" subjects like science, math and even language arts. "We have established a pre-K through high school pipeline, and the dream is to get these kids early and then keep them learning with us through high school," Brown said.

JVTf has partnered with six Birmingham City Schools and its staff has worked with each to build a farm lab that's used as a hands-on teaching space. "They are basically small farms, and we design each one to address the specific needs of the school community," Brown said.

Dr. Michael Wilson, principal at Glen Iris Elementary, the first school to partner with JVTf, explained the benefits he sees his students – and teachers – reaping. "The farm labs let us really dig into a wide range of topics and in a way that resonates with kids," he said.

Instead of looking at pictures of sunny yellow squash in a text book or watching ground being tilled in a video, his students engage all five senses; they see a head of lettuce getting bigger, bushier and greener, feel the little bumps on a cucumber's skin, hear buzzing bees, and taste the burst of flavor when a cherry tomato, still warm from the sun, pops under the pressure of their teeth. Through these first-hand experiences, they can better grasp and absorb all of the concepts being taught.

While the basics of farming and food production provide teachers an engaging way to interact with students, the priority – and challenge – of the JVTF program is tying the farm into the already existing school standards. Much of JVTF's curriculum is created in conjunction with the teachers at its partner schools. "When you look at the new teaching standards, we're asking teachers to make the materials they use more relevant and to teach across the curriculum," Wilson said. "Farming and food offer a perfect way to do that." They touch on social studies (culture and origins), reading (fiction as well informational text on how to grow and care for plants), science and math.

Victory Teaching Farm in Mobile, South Alabama's first and currently, only, urban teaching farm, takes its name from the gardens everyday citizens voluntarily created in their yards, on rooftops, in public parks and even abandoned lots to pitch in for the war effort during WWII. Victory's executive director Tarrant Lanier pointed to just one of the wins that farms like Victory can claim. "Studies are indicating that teaching farm programs that include hands-on components and build on what students are learning in school are improving grades, specifically science scores," she said.

The educational programs these farms offer serve dual purposes. "We are interested in developing their academic achievement overall but also interested in developing their nutritional literacy. We want them to recognize and develop appetites for whole, healthy foods; our farm lab lessons do that," Brown said.

"It's been proven that teaching farm programs are positively impacting children's food choices by increasing their preference for fruits and vegetables as well as their nutritional knowledge," Lanier said.

Students get excited to see something grow and to harvest something they've been a part of creating. "That excitement means the concepts stick with them," Brown said. She's as enthusiastic as the kids, and since coming to JVTF last year, has learned quite a bit herself. "I actually hated tomatoes most of my life, but last year, I was harvesting some of our heirloom varieties and tried one. It was mind blowing how much better it was," she said. "There's so much difference between fresh and something that was picked two weeks ago and shipped across the country."

Sara Peel was the most recent Sprouts Pre-K coordinator at E.A.T. (Educate, Act, Transform) South, a non-profit in Montgomery using its downtown farm to promote healthy lifestyles and sustainable food culture, and she's been amazed by the difference the applied teaching methods used by the Sprouts program as well as JVTF's and Victory's programs can make. "We work with schools to help them build their own gardens and then help

create a curriculum to work the garden into the topics they need to teach anyway," she said. "This past year, we worked in three pre-schools in the city, and I could see students gaining confidence and independence while working in their gardens."

Pre-school age may seem young to get kids into farming, but studies have shown that we develop our eating habits quickly, sometimes before we're six years old. "We want them to have a healthy relationship with food, and we think we can help them do that by showing them where food starts, how it grows, and getting them involved in the process. We want them to understand why they should care about what they eat and where it comes from," Peel said.

So why should they? The "eat local" idea isn't hard to sell to adults. Fresher fruits and vegetables just taste better. "Most produce sold in grocery stores is grown and harvested to survive shipping long distances and doesn't have the same flavor," said Jetson Brown, the resident farmer at E.A.T. South's downtown farm.

Kids can be swayed by their taste buds too. But first you have to get them to take a bite. "When children get involved in farming and growing veggies, they see them less as foreign objects and more as something they 'made.' They'll be more likely to try it, and because it is fresh and tastes better, more likely to enjoy it," Jetson said.

And when foods are palate pleasing, we tend to eat more of them; in the case of produce, that's a good thing, as Lanier explained. "Children are our future leaders, yet their generation is the first to potentially not outlive their parents because of the rise in diet-related illnesses such as diabetes and obesity, which are so often directly related to diets," she said.

More and more people are already asking questions about our food system and taking a closer look at what they eat and not just where it came from, but how it was grown or raised. "There has been an increased interest in farming and food production in the last few years because people are becoming more proactive about their health and wanting to re-forging a connection with their food," said Brown.

And food connects us to each other; its commonality makes it the ultimate bridge builder. "Everybody eats," Brown said. And anybody can learn how to do it better thanks to the educational camps, field trips and more offered by these farms that serve students beyond those who attend partner schools.

JVTF's Seed-to-Plate field trip program brings students to its farm for a science lesson and a snack that the kids prepare from foods they harvest onsite. E.A.T. South provides a similar field trip opportunity called





Good Food Days, as does Victory, with its field trips designed for all ages. Victory also hosts interns from the University of South Alabama Health Education program who learn more than they can on campus. “These students will be entering the work world soon, and we are providing beneficial knowledge that they can not get in the academic setting,” Lanier said.

The Farm School at Stone Hollow Farmstead in Harpersville offers a variety of programs for school groups that go hand-in-hand with classroom curriculums including its “Egg Production and Processing” field day where children gather eggs, wash, prepare, pack and label them and then sell to the Stone Hollow Farmstead Kitchen. Parents can also sign their kids up to be a “farmer for a day” with SHF’s Life on the Farm Saturday sessions.

These farms don’t just appeal to kids; they reach adults too. “We are creating awareness for our students, but also their parents. We are teaching why and how to access fresh, good-for-you food,” Dr. Wilson said. The food the farms produce is an edible change agent for the people who live in nearby areas with limited access to healthy foods. “The food we grow is sold at markets held at the farm. The target community is the surrounding neighborhood that is a designated ‘food desert,’” Lanier said. JVTf sells some of its harvest at its onsite farm stand (that runs on an honor system) and at Pepper Place Market.

Our state’s urban teaching farms are helping Alabama families get and stay healthy, plus, they contribute to the health of our environment by promoting sustainability. “Healthy food begins with healthy soil, so it’s important to talk to children about sustainable farming practices and the importance of small farms,” founder of SHF Deborah Stone said.

And they’re creating more vibrant communities. “Supporting your friends and neighbors who make their living in the local food system keeps money at home, where you live,” Jetson said. “We’re teaching youth why sustainable agriculture is vital to their futures but also the future of our environment, our communities and the local economy,” Lanier added.

Kids and adults leave urban teaching farms with a sense that they’ve been a part of something bigger: they’re helping feed those in need and building a local food system that will keep giving back.

And while starting and maintaining these farms and their programs requires hard, sweaty, time-consuming toil, the results, sometimes seen in something quite small, satisfy far more than the need for sustenance, they satisfy the soul. “It’s hard to describe the feeling of looking in a child’s eye when they pull a carrot from the ground and have that ‘aha!’ moment. You can watch a light turn on; it’s really special,” Wilson said. “We can change lives by changing thoughts about food and providing access to good food, and that’s worth a lot.”

Learn more about these farms and find out how to sign up for field trips and other learning and volunteer opportunities on their websites.

jonesvalleyteachingfarm.org

stonehollowfarmstead.com

eatsouth.org

victoryteachingfarm.org