

## Earthworks Urban Farm

At a community garden in Detroit, kids grow food to supply a soup kitchen.

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**D**RIVING THROUGH DETROIT'S LOWER EAST SIDE you see derelict shops, rotting Victorian homes, dilapidated factories slated for demolition, ragweed and lovegrass growing violently over sidewalks, and creeper vines enveloping telephone poles and old street lights, reclaiming the land. You also see dazzling street art on the crumbling wall of an old school or church, admonishing the doubtful that "Detroit never left," designers restoring the Ford family's historic homes to their old glory, Michelin-star restaurants donating to local charities, and, among all these sidewalk-crack dandelions, [Earthworks Urban Farm](#).

Turning onto Meldrum at Mt. Elliott Cemetery, where some of the most elite Detroiters of the 1800s were laid to rest, you pass a boarded-up Baptist church and two fire-singed homes where several temporary settlers are taking cover from the sun, lying on old pizza boxes. Then, there's Earthworks. Like a lantern, a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi greets you outside a hoop house as if to say, "This is the place."

Earthworks Urban Farm is a nearly two-acre certified-organic farm spread out over several blocks. The primary growing space, a half-acre behind a community food bank, boasts rows of radishes, arugula, mustard greens, potatoes, garlic, and spinach. There are also a greenhouse and hoop house for year-round production. Earthworks has orchards with cherry, apple, and peach trees, an area where they make their own compost, and an apiary hosting forty hives. Every year they send approximately four tons of food directly to the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, just a stone's throw away.



Earthworks Youth Program students learn about different types of soil. All photographs by Steven Stechschulte. Used by permission.

It was Brother Rick Samyn who dreamed these two wild, overgrown acres into a farm in the 1990s. He was a member of the order of Capuchin Franciscans, who first made their home in Detroit's Islandview neighborhood back in the 1880s, when the area was still farmland. They built St. Bonaventure monastery and traveled by foot, horse, and buggy to the far reaches of metro Detroit to offer confession and spiritual advice. During the Great Depression they expanded their focus when the neighborhood's poor started knocking on the door to ask for bread. "They are hungry; get them some soup and sandwiches," the doorkeeper, Fr. Solanus Casey (now beatified and on his way to canonization in the Catholic Church) was known for saying.

Their ad hoc soup kitchen grew as word spread; in time the lines grew to more than 2,000 people a day. This inspired the Islandview Capuchins to evolve through the years to respond to the needs of their neighborhood in whatever hunger arose. When the neighboring Packard Automotive Plant, which had employed 40,000 at its peak, closed in the 1950s and thousands of Islandview residents were unemployed, they knew where to turn. When the KKK rose in prominence in the 1960s, burning crosses in neighborhood yards, the Capuchins delivered fiery homilies against racism and marched for civil rights. Through UAW strikes, race riots, deindustrialization, and the ensuing unemployment and poverty, the Capuchin brothers were a lighthouse.

So, in the 1990s, when the leader of the Capuchins' youth outreach programs, Brother Rick Samyn, was making a grocery list and a neighborhood child asked him, "What gas station do you get your groceries from?" it was a clear alert to neighborhood need. The Capuchins would do what they always did: they would feed the hungry.

“There was this food desert, like so many urban areas. No grocery stores. Not much in terms of gardens,” explains Brother Gary Wegner, the current executive director of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. “And so it started with Brother Rick wanting to give kids an opportunity to see where food really comes from.”

At that time, nineteen of Detroit’s neighborhoods were labeled food deserts by the Michigan Department of Agriculture. Over thirty thousand residents didn’t have access to a full-line grocery store and 50 percent of households were food insecure, relying on corner stores, liquor stores, or fast-food chains to eat. People would have to travel miles away from their homes for adequate or healthy food, which posed a problem for the third of Motor City residents who didn’t have access to a vehicle.

“After the riots in the sixties, people were moving out of the city in droves, so over time these vacant buildings were demolished and the lots left vacant,” says Wendy Casey, director of Earthworks.



Beaumont Hospital medical residents pull weeds and help pick produce.

“Deindustrialization, automation, industry consolidation, and disinvestment really hit the neighborhood particularly hard,” explains Tim Hinkle, director of public relations for the Capuchins. “Schools closed. Shops closed. Grocery stores closed, including the one that was right on the spot where Earthworks is now.” The population of Detroit dropped from two million in 1950 to 680,000 today. At one point, 37 percent of Detroit was vacant land. As residents left the neighborhood for the suburbs, supporting businesses closed, including the little grocery store on the plot of land across from the Capuchins. Eventually that store, along with most of the surrounding homes and businesses, was demolished. Aerial photographs from that time show urban core receding to urban prairie, a reality that yielded unlikely juxtapositions. Pheasants moved in. Deer are still frequent grazers at the Earthworks garden, and are becoming the latest

nuisance in Detroit backyards. “It’s an industrial city that has aspects of rural now,” says Brother Gary.

“It was during a time when there was a lot of attention on Detroit and how to repurpose all of the vacant land,” remembers Wendy. “What do we do with these urban centers that have been decimated by disinvestment?” Many real estate developers saw the situation as an investment opportunity, buying up properties in the thousands with the expectation that they had found the next great urban market. Instead, these properties continued to fall into disrepair, with neighbors helpless to beautify their own neighborhoods and improve their property values. But while many developers were strategizing about how to revive urban life, Brother Rick Samyn looked out at the two acres of industrial brownfield surrounding the monastery and he didn’t see empty space. He saw a farm.

## Detroit’s Farming History

Detroit has a storied history when it comes to urban farming. During another economic crisis in 1893, Detroit’s mayor Hazen S. Pingree became a major proponent of vacant land cultivation as a means of helping unemployed workers in the city, largely Polish and German immigrants fresh from the agricultural economy of Europe. As a railroad and dockworker strike embroiled the city and cries of “bread or blood” echoed outside his office, he came up with a way to provide “bread” for those most deeply affected by the economic crisis. He called it the “potato patch plan.”

The plan was to let Detroit’s poor residents garden on vacant land to grow their own food. There were plenty of skeptics, and editorial cartoons ridiculed the idea. But one year later, the critics were sheepishly silent. In its first year, nearly a thousand families raised \$14,000 from their crops on 430 acres of formerly vacant land – potatoes, yes, but also beans, squash, pumpkins, string beans, cabbage, cucumbers, corn, and beets. Within four years, the program had over 1500 families participating, and was adopted in other cities: New York, Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, Seattle, Duluth, and Denver. Pingree was invited to speak all over the country. At a talk he gave in Terre Haute, Indiana he said, “Until such a time where society has learned to ‘do justice to all,’ we must depend on the methods nearest at hand.”

## Earthworks Grows

The “methods nearest at hand” for Brother Rick were the land and any willing participants. He used the land across from the monastery, where a community food bank operated out of a warehouse on a corner of one of the acres. Its owners charged him nothing. He built a few raised beds and planted some staples – tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers.

“In the beginning it was just going to be a community garden,” explains Wendy. “Then he incorporated youth and the program just grew. It became two youth programs, one for younger and one for older kids, and then we added an adult training program and a market.”

A few raised beds eventually became the 1.25-acre farm it is today. The team of one friar became a staff of five and a roster of over a hundred volunteers. All the farm’s produce is donated to the

Capuchin Soup Kitchen, which serves approximately 150,000 meals a year to Detroit residents experiencing hunger and often homelessness or unstable housing.

Today, volunteers come from all over the world. They've had several groups from France and Germany who were inspired by the work. "For better or worse, true or not, Detroit has become a symbol worldwide of urban decline in the United States," explains Brother Gary. "And so when you see things like Earthworks begin to flourish, that captivates the imagination and then they want to come and see it themselves."

Earthworks has expanded to include a farm training program, Earthworks Agriculture Training (EAT), begun in 2010 to provide Detroit residents with skills needed to succeed in agriculture. Around ten people take the course each year, receiving training on the fundamentals of growing food. Since its inception, several students have already created their own businesses using skills gained from the program, from catering to starting their own farms. One woman started a line of natural herbal skin care products. Another became a fruit and flower producer. A third started a class on flower arrangements and terrarium design. Most of the EAT participants come from the surrounding neighborhoods, including some of Detroit's most impoverished areas.

## A Space to Escape

One of Brother Rick's earliest green-thumb disciples was a six-year-old boy with unrivaled energy, a quirky personality, and a closet full of superhero T-shirts – Tyler Chatman.

"I've been here for a *good* minute," says Tyler, now an adult. "I started off in their youth program and I just kept coming back because it was so interesting to me."

Seeing grown men in long brown robes who chose poverty and shuffled off for lauds and matins when bells rang was never a barrier to Tyler. "Other people in my neighborhood might have been curious why there were people walking around in robes, but I grew up going to church, so I knew what they were about."

Besides, Brother Rick had the knowledge Tyler was drawn by: a boundless capacity for all things gardening. "It was more than just showing us how to plant a seed and learn where food comes from. He took us around Detroit, to find more areas with potential for different farms. We learned about pest control and how to maintain a garden through all stages of the growing season. He taught us things like how to take tomatoes and grind them up into tomato paste. We had a day where we all made our own fresh salsa from garden vegetables. There were days we would make pizza and pies. It was basically teaching us how to grow our food and how to prepare it – how to be self-sustainable."

But more than learning self-sustainability, Tyler found the farm was a space to escape alternatives. "I kept coming back," explains Tyler, "It was interesting to me. It was something to do as opposed to sitting at home playing video games." At the time, Tyler says there weren't many kids his age in the neighborhood. So coming to a blossoming orchard with a lively monk, a gaggle of volunteers, and other interested students made for a great alternative. "It's kept me out of trouble. Being in Detroit, things could be kind of rough. There were probably moments where if I didn't come to the soup kitchen and learn how to grow food and things like that, I could have

been out in the streets doing something I'm not supposed to be doing and probably getting myself into some kind of trouble. Being outside in nature, putting my hands in the ground, doing some hard work, pretty much built the character that I am now."



Earthworks Agriculture Training students prepare a row for seed.

That was twenty-one years ago. Today Tyler is the farm manager at Earthworks. He oversees the planting season, monitors pests and weeds, determines what crops need to be planted for each year, manages the volunteers, and teaches the classes. Every day from 5 a.m. to 4 p.m., you can see Tyler bustling between the farm and the soup kitchen. "He even comes on his days off," chimes in Wendy, chuckling.

"I just love working with my hands. I like to be active," Tyler responds. "It's pretty incredible to be able to take a tiny little seed no bigger than the tip of my finger and it becomes this massive amount of fresh-grown produce. You can take a tiny tomato seed, put it into the ground, and you'll see a whole big stem of tomatoes growing from that one little seedling. You'll have twelve or thirteen tomatoes, and you can harvest those and it'll just keep coming back with more until it's time for its cycle to end." Tyler grins sheepishly, "It's a pretty marvelous job that I have here."

## A Girly-Girl

Brittney Hughes was a self-professed "girly-girl" who considered dirt the stuff she had to clean off her car, and grass a nuisance to mow. That was before joining the EAT program. It wasn't exactly a match made in heaven. Though she had grown up just blocks from Earthworks, she had never heard of it.

"The EAT program was truly not part of my nature. I would never have thought to put my hands into some soil on a daily basis," laughs Brittney. The director of the EAT program at the time,

Marilyn Barber, had been a member of Brittney's church. When Marilyn was looking for participants for her program, the pastor recommended Brittney. Brittney had been working eight to ten hours a day in the stuffy, hair-sprayed air of a salon, styling hair and doing makeup. She loved it, but from the first few hours she experienced between the rows of crops at Earthworks, kneeling in the dirt, she found something she loved even more.

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"This program truly changed my direction in my career, in life, and in the way I see myself. I grew up so much because of this," Brittney reflects. "I learned how to sustain myself and how to teach others."

In the EAT program Brittney and the other students learned not only how to grow food, process it, and market it – they also learned business management. Because of this Brittney was inspired to start her own green-based business. She's created beauty products that she sells at several events each year. "I've traveled and met wonderful people from all over the world and it truly changed my life," she says. "I never got to step outside my environment in such a beautiful way."

## Speramus Meliora

Detroit's motto has an interesting backstory. Inscribed on its official seal are the Latin words *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*, though few residents know what they mean.

The fledgling city was just 104 years old when a fire swept through in June 1805. Established by the French explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac in 1701, it had survived the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, and all the trials of establishing a city when a local baker's tobacco ashes carried in the wind to the hay in his stable. Within minutes his barn was consumed in flames. The fire spread quickly to the neighboring homes and shops, too quickly for the efforts of the "bucket brigade" that Detroiters formed, passing buckets of water from the Detroit River. Their efforts were in vain; the fire razed the city by late afternoon. Amazingly, all six hundred residents survived, but they now faced an unthinkable reality.

They had nothing left but empty lots. Father Gabriel Richard, a pastor of Ste. Anne de Détroite church, organized food shipments in the immediate aftermath. One of the local judges immediately went to work drawing up plans for the reconstruction of the city. A chief justice and architect drafted an ambitious new layout for the new streets of Detroit. When some residents wanted to pack up and move downriver to Monroe, Father Gabriel urged them to stay and rebuild with the words *Speramus meliora, resurget cineribus* – "We hope for better things; it shall arise from the ashes."

At crucial points throughout the two centuries since, Detroiters have faced these same bare plots of land with little more than the seeds in their pockets and a collective desire for survival and asked themselves the questions: eat or starve, stand or despair, surrender or endure. For two centuries, they've answered those questions with the motto: "We hope for better things; it will

rise from the ashes.” And for the last twenty-five of those years, Earthworks has been one of those “better things.”



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