

## Growing Gardeners

by: Shari Cohen

Live music playing, the rumble of animated chatter, the scents of sweet corn roasting on a grill ...

It is a Saturday morning at Michigan's Ypsilanti Farmer's Market and the festivities are already in full swing.

Shoppers browse the restored 19th century Freight building in Depot Town, an area of antique shops and restaurants located next to the railroad tracks along the Huron River. Inside and outside the massive brick building, vendors offer a colorful array of edibles: yellow peppers, red cherries and purple eggplant are piled up in bushel baskets on display. Passers-by can also sample fresh baked breads, jams and honey.



Bill Jones, 12, at the market



Carlietta Turner, 14, and Haley Stumbo, 8, at their stand.

Standing behind a table filled with fresh bunches of the herbs mint and oregano, fourteen-year-old Carlietta Turner draws people to her stand. "Can't get any fresher," she calls, holding out a handful of organic tomatoes. "Everything you see is grown naturally," she boasts. "No chemicals."

Down the row another young voice announces, "Fresh flowers! Swiss Chard! Stop in and visit my booth!"

It is the last Saturday of the month in Ypsilanti, a community of 24,000 in Southeastern Michigan. Throughout the market are children—some as young as six—and teenagers joining in, sharing what they know about their products.

### An Idea Sprouts

The farmer's market is a special part of weekend life in Ypsilanti. "It's an experience," explains Paula Fields, recreation project coordinator for the city, "One of the few safe places where families can meet." Then she adds, "It feels like you have stepped back in time when the world was a different place."

Fields felt the market could be more than just a place to shop for produce, and that it would be a great idea to get young people involved in the experience. Kids could learn about nutrition, marketing and business. They could practice communication skills with customers.

But Fields thought the most important aspect of bringing children into the market as vendors would be to bring the generations together. "It would be a great way to get the older generation and the younger ones to work together," she said. "A place where both could share ideas and learn from each other."

In November of 2001, Fields got busy. First she discussed the idea with Amanda Edmonds, who was on the board of directors of the American Community Gardening Association. It was a good choice—as a high school student, Edmonds had helped build a vegetable garden at her former elementary school. When she moved to Ypsilanti, it was with the goal of increasing the number of gardens in the area.

Edmonds also ran the Perry Learning Garden, a community youth garden that she built close to a neighborhood school. There, she could see first hand just how much kids enjoyed being part of the gardening process. Edmonds believed that having kids participate in the farmer's market would be a perfect next step—after growing their produce, the kids could bring it to market, learn how to display it, price it, and promote it.

Thus the Roots and Shoots Youth Oriented Garden Project was born. The plan would be for the young people to join with the regular vendors, and sell their arts, crafts and garden vegetables. "It will be a great place for them to gain experience and take pride in learning how the market works," Amanda said. "And it would give the kids a chance to earn some spending money."

### **Making it Happen**

The two women put together a flyer advertising classes in nutrition and how to grow your own vegetables, which they had disseminated through the local schools. The cost to participants was kept as low as possible—just the kids' time, and a one-time \$8 set-up fee for participating in the market. Two growing sites were designated: one at the Perry Garden, and the second on a patch of land near the Freighthouse Farmer's Market.



Ashley Jones, 10,  
in the Perry  
Learning Garden

Working with a grant from the National Gardening Association in Vermont, they were able to purchase needed supplies such as gloves, tools and packages of seeds.

The first children on board were from the Perry Learning Garden. In May, 2002, they took their first products—flowers and herbs—to the market. Edmonds watched as the kids went to work. She saw that as the market day advanced, so too did the children's satisfaction. The children blossomed and grew more confident as they dealt with the buyers.

Later in the growing season, the young gardeners were able to offer more: spinach, lettuce, tomatoes, Swiss chard and other vegetables.

### **Lessons for Life**

The program has developed into a hands-on learning experience, where the kids explore different aspects of the agricultural process and learn more about running a business. Now in its second year, it has become a true educational opportunity, the women say. By adding up orders, making change, and calculating the day's "take", the children develop math skills. They also learn about how to display their items, and about mark-ups, mark-downs and profits.



Nakeya Jones, 11, and Bill  
Jones, 12, with a potential  
customer.

As the selling season progresses, Edmonds and Fields say, the children begin to think in terms of process. They ask questions: Which items will be in demand for summer months or in the fall? What is organic produce and why are more people asking for it?

"Will it be okay to plant spinach seeds next to the tomatoes?" Carlietta asked Edmonds. Carlietta had read about cross-pollination and expressed concern about the position of the plants. "No need to worry," Edmonds explained. "They will not cross into a mutant plant."

Farmer Norris Stephens, a longtime market vendor, has helped the students with pricing and packaging of their sales. "I told the kids they could get more money for their produce because it was organic," he said. Stephens, who has been a

market vendor for over twelve years, says, "It's on-the-job training, pure and simple. The kids learn how to use communication skills, which is vital. They are able to talk with customers, advising them about what items they have for sale. We need to encourage young people to get involved. It is our hope to nurture a lifelong interest in agriculture."

### **Plans for Growth**

Fields and Edmonds are watching their program grow and mature. The young participants are learning about soil quality, bulbs and seeds, mulch, the effects of sun, shade and water on their plants. "They have to know about insects," Fields says. "The good and bad—such as slugs and snails—and whether they are harmful or beneficial to the product they are growing. The children learn how to make insect repellent without having to use poison."

"We are thinking always about new marketing ideas," Edmonds says. "We may buy seeds in bulk and package them to sell. Or seed starting kits." Edmonds recently trained as a 4-H leader so the children in the program could join 4-H "and start being part of something more."

Fields is currently proposing a partnership with the Boy Scouts of America. "They would demonstrate how to make bird houses and then sell the kits at the market," she says. "Help would come from one of the vendors who does woodcraft."

The two founders are also hoping to find a source for a grant that would allow them to build a greenhouse for year-round growing.

### **A Bumper Crop of Benefits**

All those involved are realizing benefits from the Roots and Shoots program. The mentors realize they are teaching lifelong skills. "It's a great feeling to see a young person start something, like planting a garden and see it through to the end," says Norris Stephens.

Taking a break from her stand, Carlietta likes to wander through the market. Besides produce, there are crafts, kettle corn, painters and jewelry makers. And the aroma of Paula Fields' homemade chicken and dumplings simmering. "The market is a fun place," Carlietta says. "You get to meet all kinds of people and see what they are selling. I'm always learning something."

Edmonds agrees. "It's a place where young people can improve their self esteem by doing something positive. By helping a garden grow, they themselves can grow...improving their lives in their own families and in their community."

### **Resources:**

- [Find Farmers' Markets in your state.](#)
- [U.S. Department of Agriculture's Kids Page](#)
- [Youth Garden Grants](#)
- [Agriculture in the Classroom](#)