

# Houston Grows

Urban Harvest teaches classes, features a farmers market, and creates gardens in schools and communities throughout the city. By **Gary D. Ford**, photography **Meg McKinney**



With faith in Houston soil and weather, children and adults of 12 congregations tend Braes Interfaith Community Garden.

**Fruit for the New Year**

Although Houston's winter weather sometimes flirts with freezing temperatures, citrus still grows great here. That's why Urban Harvest's annual Fruit Tree Sale, the third Saturday in January, draws so many. In four hours, buyers snap up 6,000 fruit trees. "Every year some trees can produce between 600 and 1,000 fruits that taste wonderful," says Ray Sher, volunteer chairman of the sale, which is held at Emerson Unitarian Church.



LEFT: Bread, vegetables, fruits, and more fill vendor booths at Bayou City Farmers Market. ABOVE: Eggplant is just one of many kinds of produce you will find. RIGHT: Many home gardeners sell their surplus bounty at the market, which is open 8 a.m. to noon every Saturday, rain or shine.



**Urban Harvest Classroom**

Most classes at Urban Harvest are scheduled in the evenings and on Saturdays at the former Anson Jones Elementary School at 2311 Canal Street. Bayou City Farmers Market is located in the back parking lot at 3000 Richmond Avenue, between Kirby and Buffalo Speedway. It is open 8 a.m. to noon every Saturday. Visit [www.urbanharvest.org](http://www.urbanharvest.org), or call (713) 880-5540.



ABOVE: Schoolchildren at Herod Elementary School dig in the garden and learn about cycles of growth.

For a city blessed twice with tomatoes each year, Houston must be full of gardens. Well, it's getting there.

Neighbors tend community gardens. Donation gardens nourish the hungry. Children learn to distinguish corn from beans in schoolyard plots. Homeowners carve gardens from backyard carpets of St. Augustine grass. Others, limited by space and time, raise a container or two of tomatoes or herbs and shop at Bayou City Farmers Market.

"How Green is my Houston?" a resident might ask. It's Greener since Dr. Bob Randall, a volunteer for the former Houston Hunger Coalition, founded Urban Harvest more than a decade ago. Today its staff of 13 offers expertise in organic gardening, beginning with one very important lesson about Houston's dirt. It needs some help.

"It's clay gumbo," says Kara Masharani, outreach coordinator of the nonprofit organization. "One of

the first lessons we teach is to use raised beds."

Giving that gumbo a hand up, Houstonians watch their gardens flourish in the greenhouse climate we otherwise know as muggy Houston weather.

**Sweet Potato Teachers** Knowledge itself fertilizes many of these gardens. Urban Harvest classes—held at its headquarters in the former Anson Jones Elementary School in Houston's East End—include Growing Organic Vegetables, Starting Your Own Plants in Containers, and Sell What You Grow at a Farmers Market. Some students inevitably sell at Bayou City Farmers Market, which Urban Harvest founded.

Elsewhere, some of the city's most enthusiastic gardeners are the youngest. Since it began, Urban Harvest has worked with 50 schools that turn a portion of school grounds into outdoor classrooms.

Sweet potatoes are among the best teachers for schoolchildren who think food begins in the frozen

food aisle at the grocery store. Youngsters plant the potatoes in spring and return to harvest them when school starts in fall, while learning that soil, sun, rain, and time grow good things to eat.

Carol Burton and Michael Godoy oversee Urban Harvest's After School Program in 19 Houston schools. More than just digging in the dirt, garden activities combine math, science, nutrition, exercise, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Kids and parents love it.

"At the farmers market, a parent came up to me and said, 'I thought this was a nothing program, but it has been the best thing for my child. It's the only thing she wants to talk about when she gets home,'" Carol says.

**Greening Vacant Lots** Some of those youngsters may go home to gardens that flourish near their homes. Neighbors work plots in these community gardens for their own tables and to

donate to others. At the 17th Street Garden, one of the plots is handicap accessible. Meredith Gardens turned a vacant lot Green with organic fruits and vegetables in graceful, curved beds.

Other new growing areas heal the blemishes of abandoned lots in underserved Houston neighborhoods. The City of Houston provides the funding to break up concrete and prepare the soil. Then Urban Harvest works with community residents to help them turn eyesores into eye-popping gardens. So far, three vacant-lot gardens flourish.

Houston, says Urban Harvest volunteer Ray Sher, looks Greener and eats healthier these days. "All around me are gardens," he says. "I think Urban Harvest had a great deal to do with that. Thousands come through those classes that are jam-packed. This has an enormous impact near their homes."

All can experience that at Bayou City Farmers Market, where this year's second crop of tomatoes will arrive during Houston's long, warm fall. ●