

Growing food and farming literacy

Urban Growers Collective (UGC) is built upon the foundation of Growing Power, an NGO and land trust established in Milwaukee in 1993. Growing Power operated its urban farming and education non-profit for 25 years before closing its doors in the fall of 2017. Will Allen, Growing Power's founder and CEO, inspired thousands of visitors annually – allowing people to see first-hand how local food centres can transform a community and inspire the “Good Food Revolution”.

The Growing Power Chicago branch was established in February 2002 to address the need for scalable food system models that were inclusive, impactful and economically viable. Through many partnerships – with the City of Chicago and Chicago Housing Authority, innovative projects such as the Fresh Moves Mobile Market, Grant Park Potager Farm, the South Chicago Farm and Incubator Farmers Program, and the Roosevelt Square Youth Farm and Altgeld Gardens Community Farm – the Chicago Office changed perceptions and policy regarding the viability of land tenure for food production, while addressing food insecurity and urban ecology as well as community development. After Growing Power closed, Chicago's leadership team, committed to continuing the legacy of Growing Power, formed UGC to build upon 15 years of successes creating thriving urban farms and training programmes in Chicago.

Urban Growers Collective programmes

UGC demonstrates, and supports communities in, developing community-based food systems where food is grown, prepared and distributed within home communities. In this way, vulnerable populations help themselves by learning how to provide for their own needs in a sustainable manner.

UGC operates seven urban farms on 11 acres of land predominantly located on Chicago's South Side. These farms are production-oriented, with staff integrating education, training, leadership development and food distribution. UGC grows over 7700 kg of produce a year and sells it through the Fresh Moves Mobile Market and at local farmers' markets. Each farm site “demonstrates” the capacity for both large volumes of production and the ecological and social impacts of farming in society.

UGC tackles food insecurity through a variety of programmes.

- **The Fresh Moves Mobile Market** uses converted buses as farmers' markets that travel to food-insecure neighbourhoods.
- **Farmers for Chicago's** job-readiness programme includes



Photo by Laurell Sims

the Youth Corps Program (for teens) and the READI programme (for adults) and trains over 250 teenagers annually and more than 30 formerly incarcerated adults through an 18-month programme.

- **Incubator Farmer Programme** provides land and technical assistance for new Chicago farmers.
- **Head-start Preschool Farm** serves over 150 pre-school children and their families.
- UGC also provides education to a larger audience through a series of agriculture, small business development, and equality-building **workshops**.

UGC's core values honour shared leadership and collective decision making; racial, economic, gender and LGBTQ equity; and employee well-being. Those involved have witnessed how these values lead to thoughtful, holistic programming and yield environments that nourish and create prosperity.

Youth Corps

Urban Growers Collective Youth Corps engages and employs over 250 youth annually throughout different urban farm sites. Teens come from across the city to participate in the programmes and receive a small stipend for their participation. They are eligible to participate when they turn 14 years old and have completed 8th grade, and can continue participating through their senior (final) year in high school (18-19 years old). Youth Corps has a very high retention rate and many teens elect to stay in the programmes for their entire high school tenure (4 years), often referring friends and family members to join. On average the programmes maintain 104% enrolment; 45% of participants are male and 55% female, with over 97% of teens identifying as people of colour. The farms serve as a safe space for teenagers to explore their interests, work collectively, share their talents and learn from one another. During their time spent on the farms, youth expand their understanding of many aspects of urban farming and community food system development.

Through hands-on instruction, teenagers learn the technical skills essential for farming in an urban environment. They grow organic vegetables, herbs and flowers and participate in all phases of farm production. They learn to produce compost and prepare growing beds, and how to identify, plant, harvest and market the vegetables growing at the farm. They also assist with general farm tasks, pest management, site beautification and infrastructure development. At many of the locations, youth also manage an on-site farm stand, increasing access to fresh, healthy, affordable produce for their community, and providing a window into the economic and entrepreneurial opportunities that exist within food system development. In addition to hands-on instruction at the farm, youth explore the science behind farming through several inquiry-based experiments, and take part in activities regarding nutrition, hunger, cooking, art, food justice and food politics. The programme aims both to serve as a job training experience and to encourage leadership development. Teenagers complete the programme with a comprehensive understanding of sustainable food system development and with the ability to connect and communicate how the skills they have gained at the farm translate to any career path they may follow.

The youth programme is currently structured into three terms throughout the year: spring, summer and fall. The spring programme is 10 weeks long for 8 hours a week, and teens can earn up to USD 325. During the spring semester teenagers help determine the crops they want to grow for the season and prepare the farm for planting. The summer programme is split into two different models: the Apprenticeship Programme in which teens work 16 hours a week for 6 weeks and can earn up to USD 420; and the Advanced Apprenticeship Programme in which teens work 20 hours a week for 7 weeks and can earn up to USD 725. During the summer they manage all aspects of farm production and harvest for farmers' markets and the Fresh Moves Mobile Market. In the fall and winter the programme is 10 weeks long for 4 hours a week and teens can earn up to USD 300. Teenagers transition to classroom-based learning and focus on developing food system literacy, culinary skills, college and career readiness and knowledge on micro-enterprise development through the creation of added-value products such as body scrubs, dried herbs, tea blends, flavoured salts and oils. Teens' earnings are dependent on the success of their business.

Community impact

UGC aims to build economic opportunity for youth and to mitigate food insecurity and the limited access to high quality, affordable and nutritionally-dense food, primarily on the South Side of Chicago. Over half a million people in Chicago experience food insecurity, with a disproportionate number residing on the south and the west side of the city. According to Chicago Magazine in March 2018, the South Side dominates the city's 35 worst communities for life expectancy, 75 per cent of which is caused by social and behavioural factors – including diabetes and cancer. As this is an organisation led by women and people of colour, food justice and healing are part of the mission in building

What youth say about Youth Corps

"Shout out to everybody for making me feel comfortable and helping me improve to be the best self I can be" – Jamila

"I enjoyed working at this programme because I spent time outside learning about plants. Programmes like this are important because youth can connect with their peers and learn about the food system" – Kayla

"Programmes like this are important because it teaches students about biodiversity and helps us to gain confidence" – Ricardo

"Working at the farm was a great experience, caring about something other than yourself. Programmes like this are important because farms provide for the community in a food desert" – Nicholas

market opportunities for farmers as well as providing education to the community, including youth.

Through its programming model UGC not only provides employment opportunities to teenagers, it also greatly increases the availability and accessibility of fresh, healthy, culturally appropriate food in three target areas: Altgeld Gardens, South Chicago and Roosevelt Square.

In addition to employment and community health benefits, UGC is able to provide a safe, structured environment for teenagers to feel ownership within their community. We tend to assume that all people have access to outdoor play in beautiful environments. In fact, real and perceived violence has greatly reduced access to outdoor play and learning for young people in Chicago, and has particularly impacted African American families.

Dealing with trauma from violence can be radically transformed by providing safe spaces and using art as therapy to process trauma, especially from the violence that so many of the participants encounter. UGC recognises that offering clients this opportunity is life-changing – greatly enhancing and creating a foundation that tends to the whole person, with impact beyond measure.

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More information

<https://urbangrowerscollective.org>