

PLANTING A SEED

By planting green playgrounds all across Washington, D.C.,
Rebecca Lemos-Otero is inspiring a new generation of gardeners.



BRIGHT SPOT

In D.C.'s Shaw neighborhood, Rebecca's organization, City Blossoms, turned an empty parcel of land into a community gathering space that offers free children's programs. Colorful handmade signage and recycled materials are hallmarks of the group's gardens.

Rebecca Lemos-Otero was working as an after-school counselor at a Washington, D.C., community center when she was tapped to manage a small vegetable plot with the kids. "We were so excited about our first tomato plant that we named it Michael Jackson," she says. "For kids who had little access to nature, gardening felt like magic."

That sense of wonder eventually led to her founding City Blossoms, a nonprofit organization that creates gardens for schools and neighborhoods in low-income areas (cityblossoms.org). Since 2004 she and her staff have helped install more than 50 plots in and

around D.C., while also advising organizations like The Nature Conservancy on gardens throughout the country. "Having a lively green space in an urban area can be huge," she says. "It creates a way for kids to be outside doing something productive and beautiful."

She has also seen how the harvest can go beyond crops. Through City Blossoms' educational programs, youth learn about nutrition and activism and gain job skills through gardening. Not that Rebecca loses sight of the fact that these are spaces for kids. "I don't think children's gardens should be precious," she says. "Kids should be able to throw a seed anywhere they want and see what pops up."

In gardens for young kids, Rebecca recommends planting snackable vegetables like tomatoes and snap peas, plus dill and fennel for attracting swallowtail caterpillars. She also encourages them to plant greens like mustard, which are easy to grow and pretty. (If kids won't eat them, the parents will.)



Plant your plate
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“AT OUR HIGH SCHOOL GARDENS, TEENS GET TO BE THE EXPERTS. THEY DECIDE WHAT TO PLANT AND WHAT TO DO WITH THE HARVEST.” *REBECCA LEMOS-OTERO*



Four years ago Rebecca and her team started a teen program called Mighty Greens. “The idea was to reel in high schoolers who weren’t into gardening by letting them make it a business,” she says. Seniors like Ta’jhaun Brown, far left, and Kameela Owens, left, staff one of the high school gardens with classmates. In addition to selling seedlings, CSA boxes, and products like herb salts, they donate a portion of the harvest to local food banks.

“WE ENCOURAGE KIDS TO DECORATE THE GARDEN LIKE IT’S THEIR ROOM.” REBECCA LEMOS-OTERO



At a garden planted by City Blossoms at Eastern High School in D.C., students plant the 18 beds tightly for maximum production and work in the garden from March through November.

PORTRAITS OF GARDENERS TAKEN BY A CLASSMATE LINE THE WALLS.

GIVING BACK WITH Style

At innovative garden programs across the country, kids and teens learn by digging in the soil.

1 COMMUNITY GROUNDWORKS *Madison, WI*
This nonprofit has roots throughout the city. It teaches gardening, nutrition, and entrepreneurship at its two gardens, while also building green spaces for elementary and high schools. communitygroundworks.org

2 GROW DAT YOUTH FARM *New Orleans*
Teens learn both job skills and sustainable gardening at this 2-acre farm in City Park as they grow vegetables and fruits, lead farm tours, and manage a farm stand and CSA business. growdatyouthfarm.org

3 GROWING COLORADO KIDS *Commerce City, CO*
This 5-acre farm was founded to fight hunger and create community among newly resettled refugee children. Kids tend to vegetables, chickens, and bees—and then take fresh food home with them. growingcolorado.org ■