

Greening Up the Asphalt

After taking a look around her West Side neighborhood of Austin and seeing the underemployment, poverty, crime, and drug problems, LaDonna Redmond, president of the Institute for Community Resource Development, decided to look for funding and support to bring the green back to her neighborhood.

Last October, Redmond attended the three-day Illinois Food Summit sponsored by the Chicago Community Trust to learn more about food security. In the back of her mind grew an idea that her two-year-old organization could acquire vacant lots in her neighborhood and turn them into lush, productive vegetable gardens utilizing local residents who were unemployed.

"We need to better understand urban agriculture," said Redmond. "Our reliance on industrial agriculture isn't going to work. This way it connects people back to land and healthy ways of eating. Developing the resources in this community appropriately could lead to economic revitalization."

Through networking at the Food Summit, she heard about the University of Illinois Extension at Urbana's Chicago Fresh Project. The Project started the community gardens for the male detainees in the drug and alcohol program at the Cook County Jail. Redmond, with the help of her husband and the other members of her community organization, submitted a request for proposal, which the University of Illinois Extension accepted.

The Chicago Fresh Project's goal is to encourage partnerships between organizations who want to implement urban farm projects and link retailers who want access to locally grown food. The presence of profitable agricultural businesses can provide opportunities for economic stimulus in targeted communities. There is a market and need for quality specialized and organically grown produce in Chicago's retail and restaurant industry. Production of local foods will allow diverse populations access to specialized fresh food choices. The Extension provides community garden projects with assistance in soil management and crop production, community and economic development, youth and adult leadership, small business management, sustainability and strategic planning, consumer health and nutrition, model programs and research data, and conservation and environmental land use.

The Extension began the urban gardening project after a specialist in farming vegetables suggested to them that restaurants in the city were looking for fresh, locally grown produce rather than using long-distance, low-quality produce.

Working with an initial grant of \$10,000 from the Chicago Community Trust and generous donations of tools and expertise from the Extension, two empty lots, one at 4419 Fulton and the West End lot at 201-211 N. Kenneth, were acquired by the Extension. The Fulton plot has undergone all the environmental tests, and groundbreaking began May 7 to clean the lot. Seeding began in mid-May. The West End lot was environmentally tested in May.

Redmond plans to hire a few neighbors, currently without work, who have expressed interest. She would like to pay them \$10 an hour. Five people will be hired for the crop team to join Redmond's husband, Tracey, who will act as head farmer. Tracey Redmond, a thirty-year resident of the neighborhood, began farming in his family's backyard garden. The Extension will train the crop team with their master gardener's program, the same program used to train the detainees in the Cook County project.

Produce grown in the Austin neighborhood will be sent to local Chicago restaurants; local WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) programs; and soup kitchens such as Inspiration Café. If the Austin pilot program works, the Extension will expand the project to other areas of the city.

The Austin community garden project is also receiving assistance from the Anti-Hunger Federation, ACCIÓN Chicago, Heifer Foundation, and Hull House.

— Alexis Maislen