

# Grow Dat farm shares support local teens

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*Grow Dat Farm Shares, a form of community supported agriculture, includes a weekly farm stand and gives consumers a chance to invest in the farm (Topher Balfer, Mid-City Messenger).*

*By Topher Balfer*

*Special to MidCity Messenger*

It's not always possible to know where food has been before it ends up on your plate, but with the efforts of a local organization, New Orleanians could spend less time wondering and more time snacking.

Situated on a seven-acre plot in City Park is the Grow Dat Youth Farm, a place where New Orleans teens come together to grow, harvest and handle fresh, chemical-free produce.

The food grown there is passed directly from the hands of the youth into the hands of the customers, an act that Grow Dat founder and executive director Johanna Gilligan said is second to none and "much more fun than going to the grocery store."

“It can be hard to start new markets because the way people shop is very habitually ingrained in them,” Gilligan said. “But the farm offers an amazing place not just to get your food, but to get a chance to see young people and talk with them about growing food, to tour the farm itself and see all of the beneficial insects that have come to live there. It’s an experience kids are excited to have.”



*At Grow Dat Youth Farm, New Orleans teens grow, harvest and handle fresh, chemical-free produce (Topher Balfer, Mid-City Messenger).*

Grow Dat started off four years ago as a collaborative project between Tulane University and Clean Plate Projects, LLC. Since its inception, Grow Dat has produced over 25,000 pounds of food and employed over 100 youth, according to the organization’s 2014 annual review.

The farm’s young employees work after school and even on Saturdays for an intensive, 20-week core leadership program to bring about such results.

“There’s nothing like growing your own food to create a sense of your own capacity, what you can do, what you can do together, and how your efforts can and will lead to results,” Gilligan said.

Leo Gorman, Grow Dat farm manager, said that the youth spend half their time in the field and the other half in the community, developing skills like public speaking and participating in workshops focused on food justice, cooking, and health and wellness.

“Food and sustainable agriculture is the vehicle through which young people are really challenging themselves to do hard work, to work outside, and also developing interpersonal skills in a safe space,” Gorman said.

These sorts of activities, Gorman said, reach beyond the food system and affect the city positively.



*Grow Dat is located on 150 Zachary Taylor Drive in New Orleans City Park (Topher Balfer, Mid-City Messenger).*

The community effort was taken even further last year with the launch of Grow Dat Farm Shares, a form of community supported agriculture. This business model, which includes a weekly farm stand, lets consumers invest in the farm and its workers by purchasing a portion of the year’s harvest upfront.

For a one-time fee of \$500, investors are guaranteed a box of fresh produce weekly. According to the Grow Dat Farm Shares website, the box usually consists of a signature salad mix, arugula, kale, chard or collards, fresh herbs and whichever seasonal harvests are available that week.

Gilligan said this kind of model is beneficial for farms because it offers protection against disastrous situations, such as bad weather or crop failure.

“The Farm Shares is a great model because it takes out a lot of the market demand and risk element of farming, and it provides a really great amount of financial stability to farmers around the country,” Gilligan said.

Economic prosperity aside, Gilligan and Gorman emphasized that enabling and empowering the young adults is the most important part of the venture.

“They’re eager to be contributing members of society, and they’re excited to be earning money in a field that supports individual, community and environmental health,” Gilligan said about the farm’s youth. “It’s more than just having a job.”

The Grow Dat farm stand is open Saturdays from 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.