

# Homes & Gardens

## Can You Dig It?

Celebrating 40 years in the Washington Youth Garden

ARTICLE AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RINDY O'BRIEN

The founders of the oldest youth gardening program in the District are probably shaking their heads in wonderment as the US National Arboretum and the Friends of the National Arboretum's Washington Youth Garden celebrates 40 years of carrots, tomatoes, and so much more. The sign as you enter the garden "Can You Dig It?" certainly takes one back to the 1970s era when the garden was just getting started. Fast forward 40 years and the garden is now being touted by the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, as one of the great gardens in her Let's Move program. You can be sure the founders couldn't have predicted that in 2011 youth gardening would be part of the nation's mainstream.



### Garden Grows Leaders

The Washington Youth Garden has long provided a unique year-round environmental science and food education program for generations of youth and families throughout the Washington DC community. The current director of the program is an excellent example of its deep roots in the community. As a kid, Kaifa Anderson-Hall was one of the early gardening participants. The DC Department of Parks and Recreation program under Bill Hash helped many young people conquer their fear of spiders and ants and many of those young people went on to education and science careers. When the

city faced budget cuts in 1995, the Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA) increased its fundraising efforts and adopted the youth garden.

Kaifa kept coming back to visit the garden and when the program expanded to accommodate neighboring families, she and her daughter were first in line and became second generation youth gardeners. Kaifa soon was more than a volunteer and began studying under Kim Rush Lynch, Youth Garden director. Kim left to devote her time to her work as a health coach, food educator, and owner of Cultivating Health, knowing that Kaifa was the right



Kacie Warner stands preparing for a group of young students to spend an afternoon in the garden. Over 1500 young children will get a taste of summer and vegetables this summer through the urban vegetable demonstration garden.



The 40-year program has expanded to provide cooking lessons in the garden. Green beans and eggplant are lined up to be demonstrated to an incoming group of students.



person to shepherd the garden to its next phase.

Current staff at the garden, Christopher Turse, Garden Coordinator, Kacie Warner, Education Coordinator, Nadia Mercer, and Heriberto Diaz all think the half-acre of the youth garden is pretty good office space. As Kacie sums it up, “it sure beats [sitting in] a cubicle studying sustainable agriculture policy on K Street.” The 40-year old program has brought quite a variety of young people to the National Arboretum grounds and local school classrooms. The program has provided a testing ground for educational and nutritional programs aimed at urban children. A handbook that was published by the federal cooperative service and Texas A&M some years back was modeled off the lessons learned at the Washington Youth Garden.

This summer, Heriberto Diaz is drawing upon his knowledge and childhood gardening experience in his family gardens in Mexico. Heriberto is fulfilling an internship for the Northern Virginia Community College, and reports that he is learning a lot. “It is different here because we plant so many more things. Back home, it was mainly corn, squash and beans that we planted,” explained Heriberto. “I have to say that having the kids out in the garden,” he went on, “really livens things up, and I have learned a lot about children this summer.”

The program is year-round and goes into the classrooms in the winter months, then expands to give more than 1,500 young people a summer glimpse into urban gardens. Young college students get a chance to try out education, art, science, culinary, environmental, nutritional, and non-profit management skills serving as garden or education

coordinators and assistants.

### Combining cooking with the gardening

Probably one of the biggest changes that has occurred over the past 40 years of the program has been the switch from concentrating on planting vegetables to a more rounded program where the youth get exposed to the full circle of environmental elements that keeps the vegetables growing. This new approach also provides the children with a love and knowledge base for healthy eating. It is probably one

as part of the Growing Food – Growing Together program. It is an interactive family gardening, nutrition education and cooking program that takes place on Saturday mornings for fifteen weeks from May through August.

It was quite apparent that this woman’s life had been changed as a result of being a part of the program. For many of the 25 families in the program, the garden is a chance for parents to spend time with their own children out in nature and sharing in the joy of harvesting their own food. For many of the



Christopher Turse and Heriberto Diaz walking through the garden to the Nature Center’s seated area.

of the most holistic programs around because it provides kids with a complete story and there is a delicious result at the end.

The program goals are to educate urban city kids about the relationship between food, its origins, nutrition, and health. It connects children and adults to the natural world as a place of wonder, exploration, and a resource for their personal growth. The day I was visiting the garden, a woman had brought one of her work colleagues just to show him the place that meant so much to her. She had participated in the family gardening program the previous summer

parents, it is a way to connect the children to their cultures in their own back yards, even though the parents’ childhood backyard is a thousand miles away. A film that debuted in the 2011 Environmental Film Festival called, “A Community of Gardeners,” featured several of these families. The film was produced by Cintia Cabib, a local filmmaker, and showed how the green spaces are changing people’s lives and communities.

Chefs from across the city come out to the youth garden and into the classrooms that the Youth Garden serves in the winter to demonstrate healthy

eating. Chefs like “Chef T”, who is the President and Chef for Culinary Delights, loves the concept of bringing people back to eating nutritiously. Allison Sonsna, who is the Executive Chef of Fresh Start Catering, a part of the DC Central Kitchen, participates each summer at the garden. Extra vegetables produced at the Youth Garden often find their way to the Central Kitchen or Miriam’s Kitchen to help serve those in need.

### Birthday Party in the Garden

On September 17, there will be a 40th anniversary celebration in the garden on the National Arboretum grounds. The day will include fun activities for children and families, music, great food, and many former Youth Garden attendees will be present. Who would miss this exciting milestone event? The party is open to the public and whether it is your first visit or your 40th one, it is a date you want to circle on your calendar. Check out the blog or the Youth Garden website for more details as the date gets closer, [www.washingtonyouthgarden.org](http://www.washingtonyouthgarden.org)

The garden is operated as a non-profit organization, so if you would like to make a donation to help their green dreams along, donations can be made both online or by mail to Washington Youth Garden, 3501 New York Avenue, NE, Washington, DC, 20002. All donations are tax-deductible and your green dollar will be used to keep another 40 years of future gardeners in the dirt. I can dig that!

*Rindy O'Brien served as Director of the Friends of the National Arboretum and got to spend many a wonderful afternoon with children in the garden. If you can volunteer or donate, it is a great cause. For questions or thoughts, [rindyob@mac.com](mailto:rindyob@mac.com) ★*

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