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## A YEAR-ROUND URBAN HARVEST



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ReVision Farm grows fruits, vegetables and healthy families - in metropolitan Boston of all places!

Jennifer Weeks

ON ONE ACRE of growing space in the diverse working-class Boston neighborhood of Dorchester, Massachusetts, ReVision Farm sustains its surrounding community in many ways. The farm's three reclaimed urban lots produce thousands of pounds of fruits and vegetables each year, along with seedlings for urban gardeners. And homeless young women who live with their children at the adjoining shelter, ReVision House, work at the farm, learning skills as they grow food for residents and neighbors. Within a small space, the farm project promotes three interconnected goals: food security, local economic development, and job training and education.

ReVision House was founded in 1990 as a shelter for unwed teen mothers. The home now serves women up to about age 32 with children. Twenty-two families at a time, headed by women who typically have annual incomes below \$7,000 and lack high school diplomas, now live in two adjoining buildings on a Dorchester side street. The shelter offers on-site educational training in money management, household budgeting, child care, health and nutrition, domestic violence, substance abuse, and stress management. It also refers residents to local service providers and helps them find affordable housing. In the shelter's early years, staff proposed developing an urban farm as a way to use vacant land on the street, improve nutrition at the shelter (local stores offer only limited quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables), and build ties with the surrounding community. Today, ReVision Farm's main half-acre lot directly across from the shelter is marked by brightly painted gates and houses two solar greenhouses, composting and vermiculture bins, beehives, and terraced growing beds. The site, which previously held four houses that were centers for crime and drug activity, was covered with one to three feet of compost and subsoil to provide a clean growing medium.

ReVision House residents are required to have jobs or be in a job training program, and working at ReVision Farm is one training option. Typically, four "interns" from the shelter at a time work at the farm, initially learning about organic gardening, aquaculture, and greenhouse management, and moving into marketing and community relations as they develop confidence and social skills.

All of ReVision Farm's growing is done organically. Constant tilling helps to maintain soil health, a particular challenge for urban farming because of potential contamination from air emissions and water runoff. Gardeners use their own compost, which they produce from raw materials including wood chips from city landowners, horse manure from the Boston Police Department, and manure from the nearby Franklin Park Zoo.

In summer, the gardeners plant produce that thrives in hot conditions (Boston summer temperatures often range above 90 degrees), such as eggplant, peppers, squash, tomatoes, and cucumbers, suspending wires from hoops that support the greenhouse and climbing vines. Outside, raspberry bushes arch along the north wall behind raised beds of collard greens. During colder months, the farm grows mesclun salad mix in a heated greenhouse. The farm uses crop rotation and plants cover crops in winter to prevent erosion. To maximize production in a limited space, gardeners use techniques such as succession planting (sowing the same crop at intervals a few weeks apart to assure a steady harvest) and intercropping short- and long-season plants to save space and keep soil nourished and protected.

### FARM STAND AND RETAIL OUTLETS

In addition to its own farm stand, ReVision Farm markets its products at a number of outlets. It sends produce to the Milton Farmer's Market and to Icarus, an upscale restaurant in Boston's South End, and sells attractively-labeled tubs of pesto and jars of honey at a Whole Foods store near Symphony Hall. The farm recently began offering Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscriptions in a joint initiative with Drumlin Farm, a working farm and wildlife sanctuary operated by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in suburban Lincoln, Massachusetts. CSA shareholders pay a seasonal fee (prorated for low-income members) and receive regular deliveries of whatever is fresh from the garden (see box). These "enterprise marketing" initiatives help the farm to cover its operating costs. They also give farm interns business-relevant experience, and let them take pride in selling the fruits of their labors at healthy prices. (ReVision Farm honey sells locally for up to \$8 per

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jar.)

According to urban farm development manager Lauri Webster, producing food both for shelter residents and for sale can be challenging, especially given the mix of nationalities and urban versus rural backgrounds at the shelter. ReVision House residents comprise a diverse and changing mix: many women are African-Americans or ethnic Puerto Ricans from nearby Boston neighborhoods, while others come from countries including Somalia, Haiti, Guatemala, and Colombia. Some of the farm's crops, such as tomatillos and calaloo (vegetable amaranth, a spinach-like green that is a popular ingredient in Caribbean cooking) reflect the ethnic mix at ReVision House.

"At the shelter, we see food insecurity up close, so we want residents to learn about choosing and preparing healthy meals," says Webster. "But what sells here isn't always what sells at the Milton farmer's market. We try to grow the staples that are popular in this area - carrots, tomatoes, peppers, onions, collards - but we also grow cherry tomatoes, raspberries, and other things that we can offer to outside buyers."

#### COMMUNITY LUNCHESES

Every Wednesday, ReVision House residents are invited to community lunches that are prepared by residents using the latest crops from the gardens (and often recipes from their home country) and reflecting weekly themes from soul food to stir-frying. The lunches help to build relationships among residents and provide a chance to try new foods in a friendly setting. "I had never eaten half of the things that we grow here until I tried them at the Wednesday lunches," says Rosetta, a former resident who is now assistant manager of ReVision Farm and supervises farm interns.

The farm's aquaculture project, which operates in a three-story solar greenhouse on the back porches of one shelter building, raises tilapia fish - a fast-growing, high-quality protein source - together with hydroponic herbs, which are one source of the farm's packaged pesto. The system pumps refuse water from the fish tanks first through bins full of plastic bioballs that aerate and de-gas the water, then through beds of herb seedlings that draw their nutrients from it. Working with aquaculture gives interns experience with water testing and related concepts such as dissolved oxygen and pH values.

Not every ReVision House resident is eager to dig into the vegetable gardens or plunge their hands into fish tanks, Lauri Webster acknowledges. "People respond to the whole farming concept very differently depending on whether they've had some exposure to agriculture or fishing. Women from rural backgrounds are usually more receptive at the outset." Many warm to the opportunity, though.

In mid-2005, ReVision House merged with Victory Programs, a larger organization that provides support to individuals and families who are affected by alcoholism and addiction, including residential addiction treatment and transitional housing services. Victory Programs plan to maintain all of ReVision House's current programs, including the urban farm: "Our mission of restoring hope, reuniting families and bolstering Massachusetts' communities is aligned with ReVision House and we look forward to a meaningful and prosperous relationship with this important organization," said Victory Programs' president and executive director, Jonathan Scott, when the merger was announced.

#### JOB TRAINING

And growth is on the horizon. ReVision Farm will expand soon as part of Olmsted Green, a 42-acre planned mixed-use, mixed-income community that is scheduled to be built on the former Boston State Hospital site adjoining the Mattapan, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain neighborhoods. The land, which was once a 250-acre campus in the Mattapan/Dorchester area, lies within Boston's "Emerald Necklace" system of parks designed by landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted Green will include both market-rate and affordable housing (for which the developers plan to use green building techniques), facilities including a job training center and a community athletic facility, and additional land for ReVision Farm, doubling its current size.

This expansion will both enable and require ReVision Farm staff to formalize the job training component of their programs, in order to make a larger farming operation economically sustainable. The larger farm, which is expected to train about 12 interns at a time and serve all of Victory Programs' clients, will feature greenhouses, a farm stand, aquaponic and hydroponic technologies, and a commercial kitchen where interns can train for work in the food service industry. Construction of Olmsted Green is scheduled to start in the spring of 2006, so within several years, residents at Olmsted Green may be able to see where their lunch was grown and talk with the gardeners who raised it, all within Boston city limits.

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