

A girl picks chocolate mint from a plot at Alice's Garden.

GROWING A COMMUNITY

Urban farmer inspires a neighborhood to reconnect with agriculture. **BY LEAH WYNALEK**

Among cherry trees and plentiful plots of squash, guests in Alice's Garden practice yoga, try African drumming and take part in reading circles. The two-acre urban farm located in Milwaukee encourages inner-city residents to embrace their cultural roots while growing their own food.

"People come into the garden and say that the inside of this fence represents what the outside of Milwaukee should feel and look like as far as all of the cultures that intersect," says Venice Williams, the garden's director. "People share their knowledge, their food and their life journey."

The daughter of a chef and a grocery store manager, Venice grew up around fresh food and learned to tend a garden from her grandmothers. It's a life skill she passes on



in cooking classes and an herbal apprentice track where students grow

plants such as lemon balm and lovage. In another program, a demonstration slave garden and a master's kitchen garden show the difference between what slaves might be able to raise for themselves and the high status food they grew for the owners.

"There are lots of people in the African-American community who I do have to encourage to come back to gardening because of the burdened history between black people and the land," she says. "But I tell them that until you grow food again, you're enslaved in a different way, and it doesn't matter what color you are because you're dependent on someone else to do the one thing everyone has to do every single day, and that's eat."

Now there's a waiting list for plots, showing just how valuable the space is to the neighborhood. "Farming and gardening are an invitation for the entire family to connect and grow together," Venice says. "We owe it to our children and our grandchildren to make sure they're connected to the earth and know where food comes from."

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