

CHILDREN DISCOVER THEIR INNER FARMER

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JUDITH NEMES



On a blustery Saturday morning in mid-February, Phoenix Lozano reached into the basket on the Club Sprouts table at the Green City Market, grabbed a handful of micro greens grown by a local farmer and stuffed it into her mouth. “Mmm, I like to eat them just like that,” declares the six-year-old from suburban Westchester.

“I don’t like spicy foods, but I like trying lots of new things,” adds the spunky first-grader. Lozano signed up for the free Club Sprouts program and got the first hole punched in her new membership card after the tasting. About 30 kids enrolled as new members that day or came for a repeat visit to try the featured seasonal food, says Andrea Moore, a volunteer at the market’s winter home in the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum.

Last summer, some 650 kids joined the Green City Market’s new program, which encourages children to taste fresh vegetables and other local fare sold by the market’s vendors, says Portia Belloc Lowndes, a board member and co-chair of Club Sprouts, which was launched last summer. The weekly food tasting is only one slice of the

program’s three features: Grow, Taste, Cook.

“We want to introduce local foods and teach sustainability to kids in an interactive way — not to lecture or preach,” says Belloc Lowndes, who also is executive director of Heritage Prairie Market & Farm, an Elburn, Illinois producer that sells its goods at Green City Market. “Sometimes the parents are tasting things for the first time too.”

Since Green City Market’s debut a decade ago, there has always been a children’s educational component to the non-profit market’s mission, though much less ambitious than the one in place now, she says. With growing mainstream interest in the green movement and a loyal following of market shoppers, board members believed the time was right to engage families in a more elaborate way.

When the market moves outdoors in May near the southern tip of Lincoln Park, you can find the tasting table under a tent next to the information booth. Some weeks, the taste offerings from market vendors are pretty tame: apples or peaches. Other times, the samples

are more daring: radishes, pea tendrils, even elk jerky.

“Some kids will hold their nose and taste something or they’ll just spit it out,” she admits. “But some kids are surprised and just love these new things.” When they’ve tried eight new foods, members earn an apron, t-shirt or baseball cap emblazoned with the logo: “I’ve got good taste.”

The cooking segment of Club Sprouts can be found on a tent-covered stretch of grass at the market when the vendors move outdoors. There, notable local chefs demonstrate kid-friendly recipes that budding young cooks can whip up at home with ingredients from the market’s bounty.

Martial Noguier, executive chef at Cafe des Architectes, was among those who participated last summer. He brought along his four-year-old son to help create granola yogurt parfaits with strawberries and honey from the market. Chefs slated to wow the young foodies this season include Tony Mantuano from Cafe Spiaggia and Sarah Stegner from Prairie Grass Cafe.

In the third segment of the program, kids are encouraged to dig in as farmers at the Edible Gardens in the Zoo, two vegetable patches that volunteers created at the nearby farm in the Lincoln Park Zoo.

Pick any busy Saturday last summer and the Edible Gardens had about 300 visitors, mostly kids and their families, recalls Jeanne Pinsof Nolan, a veteran gardener who designed and installed the 5,000 square-foot garden and smaller heirloom patch at the zoo’s entrance. Both are run as a partnership between the zoo and Green City Market.

“Every child who enters the garden gets to plant, harvest or weed, depending on what’s going on that week,” explains Pinsof Nolan, who also owns The Organic Gardener, Ltd., a Glencoe-based gardening business. “The idea is for them to get their hands dirty while they’re learning the values of fresh, organic, local food.”

In late March, fallow rows of fresh earth lay waiting to swallow the young seedlings that will ultimately grow into a tangle of green



and bursts of bright-colored veggies by mid-summer. At the height of the season, there will be a riot of produce pushing up through the ground: heirloom tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, eggplants, and edamame. You can also look for blue potatoes, purple carrots and pink-striped beets.

“A lot of the city kids who come to the garden, regardless of economic and social background, suffer from a lack of exposure to fresh food,” observes Pinsof Nolan. “They may know carrots from the supermarket, but pulling a purple carrot from the ground is a really wild experience for them.”

The Edible Gardens are also open to pint-sized farmers on Wednesdays and Thursdays from mid-March through Thanksgiving. Local schools have been taking advantage of free field trips that are designed to introduce hands-on gardening to students. This

year, market organizers hope to coordinate more elements of the Sprouts program by directing students visiting the farm on Wednesdays to go for a tasting at the market across the street.

And now that First Lady Michelle Obama planted a vegetable garden on the South Lawn of the White House this spring, there could be a trickle down effect of even greater interest among kids in city farming and fresh, local food, hopes Sara Gasbarra, who is overseeing the Club Sprouts program this year.

“If the first family plants a garden, it might inspire other families who never thought they could do it,” she says, adding, “with a scarcity of land in the city for planting, families can always come work in our garden.”

Judith Nemes is a Chicago-based freelance writer and photographer who covers the green movement and general business matters. She’s written green stories for the Chicago Tribune, GreenBiz.com. Judith also teaches journalism at Columbia College Chicago, where, next fall, she’ll begin teaching a new class on reporting about green issues and urban sustainability.