

Gardner grows into urban farm mentor

Perhaps it was fate that 23 years ago, Reneldia Smith married a man whose last name was Gardner. At the time, though, she had never planted a seed.

“Here I was, a full-grown woman, and one day my husband planted some seeds in the backyard, and a cucumber grew.” Gardner’s eyes grew wide. “That just blew my mind. To actually see it come out of the ground, delicious, fresh smelling. I couldn’t believe it.”

Now Gardner is a grower at Windy City Harvest Youth Farm in Washington Park, where she mentors teens and impacts young lives in ways she never could have imagined.

“Reneldia is such a warm person and easy to be around. And that comes across every day in her work,” said Eliza Fournier, the Chicago Botanic Garden’s urban youth programs director. “The teenagers love her. She’s like a second mother to them and for some, a first mother. They trust her, confide in her, respect her.”

In fact, “they fight for my affections,” Gardner said. “I love working with the students. I get on their cases—and they still love me.

“I just speak to them with my heart. It’s unbelievable to be able to impact lives.”

Early in her career, Gardner worked in the healthcare industry and was eventually promoted to a management position. Then, after staying home to raise her children, she enrolled in the Windy City Harvest Apprenticeship class of 2010. In this hands-on, nine-month certificate program, Gardner learned about all aspects of urban farming.

After successfully completing that program, she enrolled in the summer internship portion of the class at the Garden’s Regenstein Fruit & Vegetable Garden. She was hired as a Windy City Harvest grower immediately after, and for the past five seasons Gardner has mentored more than 125 teens at the farm. She has grown more than 25,000 pounds of produce, much of which is distributed through farm stands in Washington Park.

“Sometimes when we make a delivery, people are actually taking the produce out of my hands,” Gardner said, describing how excited these customers are to purchase fresh vegetables.

Over the years, Fournier has watched Gardner blossom. “It’s great to see her grow within the program and to see her come so far, all the while managing to raise four sons, home school them, and send the older ones to college.”

After completing the 14-week Windy City Harvest business course and submitting a business plan, Gardner applied for and received a one-eighth acre plot at the Windy City Harvest incubator site. She started her own business, Sweet Pea and Friends, where she grows some food but mostly flowers, which is where her true gardening passions lie. She has created a thriving business selling to several local florists.

Her vision continues to grow. “I’m hoping to graduate to one-quarter acre,” she said.

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“I like to almost trick them into tasting. I’ll just eat the spinach right from the ground, and they just look at me. Then they try it—and they fall in love. It touches my heart.”

Reneldia Gardner at Legends South Farm in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago.