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In the Stars



Jessica Edwards and Abby Dyke turn their passions into a thriving urban farm

By Shawndra Miller

»One day last winter, before Cosmic Gardens even existed, its founders sat indoors dreaming of farming. Having met when both worked at Pogue's Run Grocer, Jessica Edwards and Abby Dyke discovered shared passions for art, food and plants.

The friends bonded over a mutual wish to be outdoors as much as possible. "We were always enclosed, always behind windows," Dyke says. "We both just wanted to be outside so bad."

Fittingly, this conversation is taking place outdoors, as the two stand under a light drizzle in the middle of lavishly productive garden plots.

"When we're inside, we feel like we're wasting our time," Edwards explains.

Dyke picks an early strawberry and divides it in half to share. A few feet away, peas twine up a trellis, and a stone-bordered lettuce bed soaks up the rain. Wide rows of rich black dirt support plants ranging from purple peacock broccoli to white acorn squash. Honeybees sallying forth from two hives in the back of the lot find a wildly diverse range of food in the quarter-acre space.

Munching the fruit, Dyke remembers, “She asked me what I truly wanted, and I was like, ‘I want to grow things.’”

So they made a plan, and a new urban farming initiative was born. Cosmic Gardens encompasses several near-eastside Indy lots,

including each of their yards. Here at Dyke’s property, which she rents with her boyfriend, it’s her second year of converting her lawn into a haven for plants and bees. Their favored practice is to set cardboard right on the grass and heap high-quality soil called “Mark’s Mix,” sourced from Indiana Mulch and Stone, on top of that base. They eschew chemical inputs, preferring to support the plants with quality soil. They use natural pest control methods like hand picking and companion planting.

It’s clearly an approach that works: A few months into the growing season, there’s something green everywhere you look, and it isn’t grass.

“We don’t want to use resources for mowing,” Edwards explains.

A big part of the young women’s mission is to revitalize the neighborhood, where weedy lots and empty houses are a common sight. With the aid of each of their boyfriends and other helpers, they’ve begun farming two vacant lots through the city’s urban garden licensing program.

“A lot of our volunteers have been kids of the neighborhood, so far,” says Dyke. “They are the curious ones willing to come up to talk to strangers.” When the children ask if they can

help, the women immediately find a job that suits them, whether it's moving dirt, planting, transplanting or watering.

"I have a little girl named Allie who comes and waters, and although she can only carry the can a quarter full, it's still helpful, and she's really sweet," Edwards says.

At some point during high harvest time, Cosmic Gardens may run a more formal kids club. Working with children fits with their secondary goal of getting people to grow more of their own food because youths can lead the way at home and into the future.

Bending down to tug an errant weed, Edwards reports on something she's read: "No matter what," she says, "if a kid is given some kind of garden mentoring at some point in his life, even just for the smallest bit, no matter how long it takes, that kid will come back to gardening at some point."

Another way Cosmic Gardens supports home gardeners is through the build-a-garden project. Before the growing season even begins, the duo takes orders from would-be gardeners interested in receiving plant starts. Edwards and Dyke plant and tend the seedlings with care, using only rainwater or filtered city water for irrigation.

They offer medicinal herb starts as well as strawberries and garden vegetables. Nearly all are heirloom varieties. A gardener's preorder payment buys more than seeds; it funds the farm's building materials, soil, light bulbs and other supplies.

Since May, Cosmic Gardens also runs a small CSA. Subscribers benefit from their farming throughout the season, and each week they also receive a "forager's find" such as morel mushrooms, ramps or lambs quarters.

Cosmic Gardens also offers surplus seedlings and produce at the weekly Beech Grove Farmers Market on Sundays from noon to 4 p.m.

To meet them is to understand farming as a calling and a spiritual pursuit. They named their farm in deference to the cosmos, which has a deeper influence on plants than most people realize.

“We call ourselves Cosmic Gardens because we practice biodynamic farming,” says Dyke. “So we try our absolute hardest to consult the stars before we actually plant, because we are knowledgeable that the moon is the water magnet. The moon draws water from the earth.” She explains that the moon’s location in a particular constellation determines optimum planting and harvesting times.

Rather than the traditional Farmer’s Almanac, biodynamic farmers consult the Stella Natura Calendar to guide their endeavors. “We refer to it on a daily basis,” says Dyke. “We plant by it, harvest by it, transplant by it.”

They are also conscious of the microbiology of the soil, in keeping with biodynamic practices. That’s why they don’t touch the plants with city water without first filtering it: Chlorinated water kills healthy soil bacteria.

Though there’s a steep learning curve to the art and science of biodynamics, Cosmic Gardens’ plantings respond to this level of attention. Exhibit A: flourishing tomato and pepper plants, transplanted on a “root day” to give maximum support to the root system. (The calendar enumerates specific days that are best for roots, flowers, fruits and leaves.)

“It would be really awesome if we could one day have a school where we actually teach other people about this,” says Dyke. “So far we’re just stumbling through the dark on our own, using the stars as our guide.”

Dyke is not a newcomer to growing things, however. Childhood summers spent helping her mother in a large kitchen garden laid the foundation for today’s vocation, even though she rejected everything about gardening and plants as a rebellious teen. “I hate plants!” she says she declared at 18. When she woke up

one day in her 20s and wanted to put in her own garden, she took a bit of a stealth approach.

“Last year I got starts from Amy Matthews (of South Circle Farm),” she says, “and when I picked them up, I told her, ‘Please don’t tell my mom.’” The warning was unnecessary, since Matthews doesn’t even know her mother. But Dyke felt the need to proceed cautiously in breaking the news to her mother.

How did her mother take it? She was “flabbergasted,” Dyke says, remembering when her mother finally saw her efforts. “She was like, ‘You grew all of these?’ ... I sort of snuck up behind her and (said), ‘Look, Mom, look what you taught me!’”

For her part, the 21-year-old Edwards grew up on military bases with zero exposure to agriculture. In art school, however, she once canned lawn mower clippings for a class project. Her quirky critique of Americans’ turf grass obsession didn’t make much sense to her classmates.

“My boyfriend had spent all day mowing,” she recalls, “so I canned it up and presented it on a shelf, all these jars of canned grass. My class was so confused. I was like, ‘You know mowing is kind of like harvesting. You don’t get it? I canned all this grass, if you want to eat it. I mean you spend so much time growing it, seeding it, watering it. ... What are you getting out of it?’”

In other words, “Grow Food, Not Lawns,” a movement these urban farmers have heartily embraced.

Their mission resonates with many, and in a short time they’ve gained a core group of volunteers to help with physical labor and behind-the-scenes tasks. Their support system includes a grant writer/social media expert and an architect interested in water catchment projects.

The grant writer, Annika Larsen, is a journalism student who happened to see one of Edwards' Instagram posts about the farm. She leapt at the chance to help with a cause that's dear to her heart. "I love the draw to bring local food to people and places that might not have access to it in abundance," she says. "I love how it connects the community to good food."

Her first task was to get Cosmic Gardens a tax ID number to enable grant applications. Now she's pursuing grants for season-extending hoop houses to allow the farm to continue to work year-round.

Though Cosmic Gardens has capped the number of lots for this year, the women hope to expand in future seasons. One of the vacant lots is located on an entire block of empty houses, and they'd love to stretch the boundaries of their farm to these adjacent properties and perhaps even purchase one of the houses to serve as a home base.

Their dream is to have enough volunteer help to farm numerous locations and potentially hand off the farming to the immediate neighbors at some point.

Noting there's no shortage of nearby available properties, Edwards says, "We feel like we've got a giant coloring book, and we're just going to start, page by page."

For more information, visit [cosmicgardens.farm](http://www.cosmicgardens.farm) (<http://www.cosmicgardens.farm>).

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