

Growing Excitement Among Youth

John and Ida Thurman, Hopkins Park, Illinois

Future Farming Families

Coordinator: Ida Thurman

Location: St. Anne, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$14,970

Grant Year: 2002

Project Number: FNC02-428

Ida and John Thurman are introducing a new generation of youth to farming through the Youth Garden Project. Included in the project is community service, much of it revolving around senior citizens.

When John and Ida Thurman moved to Hopkins Park, Illinois, cousins who moved there a year earlier told the Thurman's children not to let on that they lived on a farm or they would be teased. Sure enough, their kids were teased for being "too country." That's when the Thurmans decided something needed to be done about the lack of excitement about farming in the area, especially among young people.

"When we got here," Ida Thurman says, "the younger families weren't farming. It was only the old people."

But that is changing. Since that time, with the help of a SARE grant, the Thurmans have been hard at work educating young people about sustainable agriculture.

Ida Thurman grew up on a farm in Mississippi, where her grandmother—affectionately known as Big Momma—would often babysit her. It was in her grandmother's garden that Ida first gained an appreciation for another Big Momma of sorts—Mother Earth. Today, she and John operate L & R Farms in Hopkins Park, just outside of Kankakee. On this farm, they



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raised nine children who, as she puts it, have learned to "see harmony with life's processes on Mother Earth."

One of their family rules has always been that the children could not go out and play until they finished their chores. So when neighborhood kids would come over, they would help with the chores and then go play. That is where the idea for the project came from.

"We thought it would be great not only to educate our own children but the neighboring children as well about the importance of sustainable agriculture," Thurman says.

The SARE grant made it possible for them to expose youth and their families to horticulture through the Youth Garden Project. The Thurmans, along with fellow farmers, Herman Wallace and Leslie Wright, helped the youth develop several different gardens. Then Youth Captains recruited

Crew Members to prep, plant, weed, and harvest vegetables. Some of the youth also worked at farmer's markets in Kankakee, Joliet, and Chicago.

"The little ones really look up to Youth Captains and Crew Members as role models as they teach the little ones friendship, cooperation, sharing, and respect for themselves, others, and the natural world," Thurman says.

Another key component of the Youth Garden Project, says Thurman, is community service, much of which revolves around senior citizens. The kids deliver packages of vegetables to senior citizens in the community and they regularly visit the senior citizen center. The youth also constructed a senior garden outside of the center that the senior citizens help manage.

"The kids learn to care for something other than themselves," says Thurman.

The Thurmans are part of the Pembroke Farmers Cooperative, a co-op of largely African-American farmers. They grow an array of vegetables, such as peas, beans, corn, okra, tomatoes, greens, and watermelon, and they raise chickens, goats, cattle, ducks, geese, pigs, and guinea fowl.

Youth coming to their farm have learned about free-range poultry, pastured pork, rabbits, and vermicomposting, among other things. In addition, the kids assist with moving cattle from paddock to paddock, as well as taking care of the pigs and free-range poultry. Today, when the school bus passes by their land, the kids on board love to see the animals.

As Thurman puts it, "I see a growing excitement about farming that we didn't see when we came here."

By Jason Peterson