

YOU CAN DIG IT, THEY CAN DIG IT, WE CAN DIG IT

Here in the Hudson Valley and across the country, thousands of vacant city lots, once breeding grounds for crime or illegal dumping sites, are being reclaimed by a new breed: **urban farmers** who cultivate fresh food, healthier communities and green, open space. Activists, environmentalists or just plain good folks, they're bringing people together and beautifying blighted neighborhoods while nourishing bodies and souls.

First Lady Michelle Obama's White House garden and a downturned economy may have sparked the nationwide interest in urban farming. In Orange County, Lloyd "Decora" Saniford planted the first seeds for growing community gardens when he launched "The People's Garden" on a vacant lot in Newburgh owned by Mount Saint Mary College, where he was a student.

Inspired by a 2008 article about Saniford and the 16 families who were growing their own vegetables, herbs, fruits and flowers, Jim Delaune, Executive Director of **Orange County Land Trust**, in Middletown, studied the benefits of community gardens: They not only make vacant urban land productive by providing healthful,



Fall Kill Community Garden

low-cost food, they engage city residents in land conservation and stewardship. Here was "an opportunity to reach out to a group of residents that the Land Trust, with its focus on protecting the county's farms and larger tracts of natural lands, had largely ignored," Delaune says.

Delaune encouraged his board of directors to support Saniford's project, as well as other new urban farmers who were interested in similar projects. The board agreed to donate

\$400 for tools, supplies and a shed. Last spring, the Land Trust led an effort to make additional improvements to The People's Garden and to reach out in other distressed areas in Newburgh, Middletown and Port Jervis. The group raised \$81,000 in grants and contributions for community garden projects and received organic seeds as well as volunteer work hours. More than 125 garden plots were made available to gardeners in the three cities.



The newly formed Urban Farmers League at La Vida Garden, Newburgh. That's Jim Delaune, Executive Director of Orange County Land Trust in the back row, second from right.

"La Vida Garden," in Newburgh, the first of the gardens to open, is coordinated by the recently formed **Urban Farmers League**, a youth-run organization of teens ranging in age from 13 to 17, who are dedicated to growing and distributing organic fruits and vegetables to low-income families and individuals and to educating the city's young people about the benefits of growing and eating locally grown food. The group holds workshops and events at the garden, including movie and open mic nights to allow "youth and community members to express themselves."

Across the river in Dutchess County, **The Green Teen Community Gardening Program** in Beacon, **The Poughkeepsie Farm Project** and the