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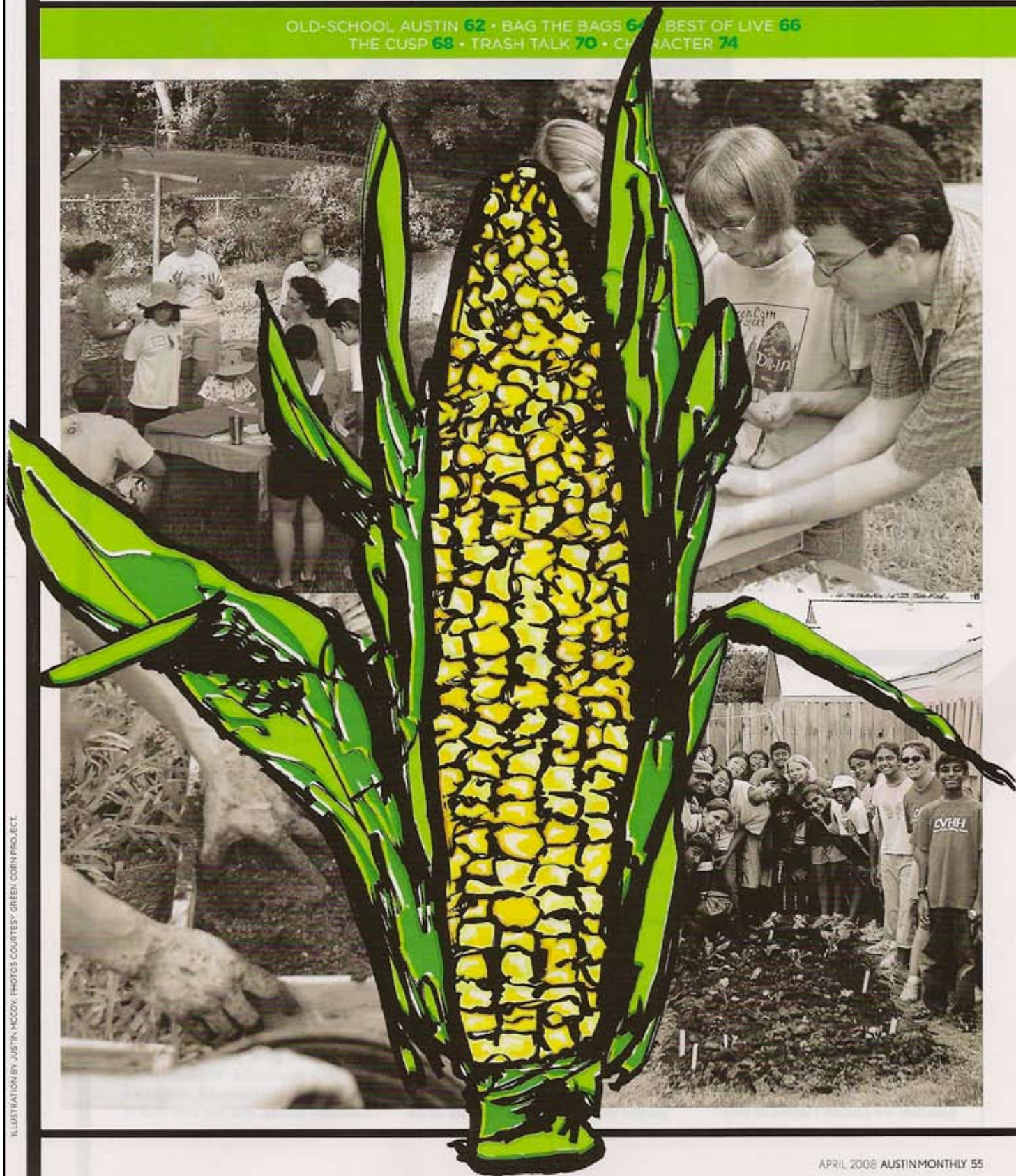


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Growing

Up

Organic gardening charity turns 10

by Rhonda Lashley

The average American meal travels 1,500 miles before it's served on a plate. But Green Corn Project is changing that here in Austin, yard by yard. Green Corn Project is not the latest Austin band; it's a nonprofit organization that's tackling two tough problems: hunger relief and conservation. Celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, the group has planted more than 130 organic gardens in local backyards, school yards and community centers.

Volunteers work alongside people with limited access to nutritious food, showing them how to grow their own organic gardens and teaching them the benefits of homegrown food. "They're such a wonderful organization," says Lydia Cruz, who enjoyed the vegetables last fall from her first GCP garden. "We had veggies that we couldn't afford to buy."

It's easy to get excited about GCP while listening to its only paid staff member, Director Meagan O'Donnell. She's passionate about being part of the "local food movement." Even though people in the United States used to eat

fresh vegetables and fruits from their backyard gardens, they just don't think about growing their own food anymore, she points out. "It's forgotten knowledge," she says. But thanks to GCP volunteers, she adds, "I really feel like there's hope."

"Our gardeners are wonderful," she adds, referring to the garden recipients. Some are working families and others are individuals who are

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unable to work because of health problems. One of GCP's gardening couples had good jobs and were financially successful, O'Donnell explains. Then the husband developed a serious illness, and his wife had to

quit her job to take care of him. "If you're really sick, sometimes the only thing that gets you out of bed is your garden," O'Donnell says. In fact, several GCP gardeners are women who suffer from chronic illnesses.

GCP partners with Habitat for Humanity, so people who have new homes built for them often get vegetable gardens, too. The group has also planted about 25 gardens at local schools. "The teachers are all amazing," O'Donnell says. At the Discovery School in East Austin, where GCP helped plant a garden in spring 2006, the students made a big pizza at the end of the semester with an assortment of toppings that came from the vegetables they harvested.

Each spring and fall, about 150 GCP volunteers gather for Dig-In events. They go out in teams led by master gardeners to plant small, biointensive gardens in the yards of people who are at risk of hunger. This method of gardening was inspired by the group Ecology Action's Grow Biointensive program. The idea

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is to get a lot of food from a small area with minimal care. Most of the work is in the soil preparation, O'Donnell says. The gardens are approximately 4 by 12 feet and require little or no weeding. "It's very easy to maintain," says gardener Jennifer Brooks.

GCP provides everything needed for the gardens: organic compost, seeds and seedlings. Volunteers begin the process in January and July by planting seeds in small containers. They later transplant the seedlings into 4-inch pots that are used for the spring gardens. The choice of plants and their arrangement in the beds are carefully planned, like a puzzle. Cruz harvested kale, cauliflower, string beans, carrots, lettuce and onions, and is looking forward to the spring planting. "It was wonderful to see everything grow," she says. "I was very proud."

Brooks' first GCP garden was planted last spring and she later enjoyed fresh, organic tomatoes, green beans, bell pep-

pers, cilantro and other herbs. "The tomatoes were very successful," she says. In fact, Brooks grew enough vegetables to share with her neighbors. "It was wonderful," she says. When it was time to put in fall gardens, Brooks turned around and helped plant one for another recipient. "It's great to be able to give back, too," she says. It's not uncommon for gardeners to want to spread their newfound skills. Cruz, who had minimal gardening experience before GCP, says she would like to become a master gardener and lead Dig-In groups.

To handle existing gardens and tackle the waiting list, the group needs more mentors and Dig-In leaders to help with seasonal plantings. "That's our only limiting factor," O'Donnell says. Volunteers don't need gardening experience, just a willingness to learn and to establish relationships with the gardeners. GCP provides the training through biointensive gardening workshops in which participants learn to

"Building relationships is really important."

double dig, start seeds, compost and plant gardens. Once a garden is planted, a GCP mentor provides follow-up support and mentoring. "Building relationships is really important," O'Donnell says.

GCP volunteers help gardeners plant and maintain their gardens for two years, but O'Donnell admits they aren't firm with that cutoff. The success rate is about 80 percent, she says. One of the best recent developments with GCP is a collaboration with local churches, which have been calling and wanting to know more about hunger relief, O'Donnell says. Last fall, the organization put in its first garden at a church, where the produce benefited the church's emergency food pantry.

To celebrate its first decade, GCP is making T-shirts and working on a display garden at Zilker Park. O'Donnell is planning a benefit in the spring. But the group's biggest source of funding is the annual fall Cook Globally Grow Locally event at Boggy Creek Farm. Attendees get to sample locally grown organic food and watch demonstrations by local chefs.

In the meantime, anyone interested in "digging in" with GCP may call 249-3171 or go to greencornproject.org.