

The New York Times®
Reprints

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

July 12, 2010

Field Report: A Michigan Teen Farms Her Backyard

By CHRISTINE MUHLKE

Lawn mowing and baby-sitting are standard summer jobs for the enterprising teenager. Alexandra Reau, who is 14, combines a little bit of each: last year, she asked her dad to dig up a half acre of their lawn in rural Petersburg, Mich., so she could farm. Now in its second season, her Garden to Go C.S.A. (community-supported agriculture) grows for 14 members, who pay \$100 to \$175 for two months of just-picked vegetables and herbs. While her peers are hanging out at Molly's Mystic Freeze and working out the moves to that [Miley Cyrus](#) video, she's flicking potato-beetle larvae off of leaves in her V-neck T-shirt and denim capris, a barrette keeping her hair out of her demurely made-up eyes. Who says the face of American farming is a 57-year-old man with a John Deere cap?

"Let's see," says Reau, a quiet honor student who's a little taken aback to find a New Yorker in giant sunglasses asking her questions in the plot next to her tidy white-brick ranch house on a June afternoon. "Those are carrots, spinach, beets, kale, watermelon, squash, zucchini, peppers, lots of [tomatoes](#) . . . um . . . corn, radishes, lettuce, beans, onions, garlic." The weeds that sprung up during her recent class trip to Washington, D.C., are taunting her as we talk. When I tell her that people pay \$4 a bunch for the purslane that's growing into the burlap coffee sacks she has laid down along the rows for quick weeding — she flips them over to uproot any invaders, kind of like waxing your garden — you can see her 4-H wheels turning. (She's been a member for half her life.)

Reau lives in an agricultural area — on the last day of school, seniors are allowed to ride their four-wheelers or tractors — but her great-grandparents were the last generation to farm this

land. Her parents breed Suffolk sheep on the side: her father, Mark, is a carpenter, and her mother, Brenda, is the director of [Michigan State University's](#) extension in Monroe County. Alexandra became interested in gardening after participating in the Monroe County Youth Farm Stand Project, which Brenda started two years ago to help disadvantaged youth learn about nutrition.

"I wanted to have my own farm stand out in my front yard," Alexandra says at the kitchen table, looking sideways at her mother while drinking a tall glass of chocolate milk from a nearby dairy. "My mom thought it wasn't the best idea because of the road we live on," which is narrow and fairly fast. "She'd been learning about the C.S.A. aspect, so she told me about it, and I really liked the idea. I liked that it was on my own schedule, so I could kind of pick what I wanted, 'cause it is still *my* summer," she adds, finally sounding like a teenager, "and I don't want to, like, you know, be busy *every single minute* of the day."

Reau entered her idea for Garden to Go in the Prima Civitas Foundation youth-inventors competition, and her business plan won \$300 in start-up money.

While we eat a colorful salad of spinach, strawberry and goat cheese (Reau's spinach and strawberries, local goat cheese), deviled eggs (bartered) and strawberry shortcake (local, good) in the Reaus' toile-curtained dining room, Brenda explains that a quarter of last year's members told her that they were attracted to Garden to Go because it was a young person's effort. "They want to support someone who is interested in working instead of being on the Internet all day!" Brenda says. "And growing food. . . ."

I reached one of Reau's customers, Mary Janicki of Sylvania, Ohio, on her pontoon boat. "I liked the idea that she was such a go-getter," said Janicki, who found Garden to Go through Reau's page on [Localharvest.org](#) last year. "I read that she won that award and was only 13 years old, and I thought, This is a young lady who's got it together!" Janicki has signed up for a second summer, because she appreciates the freshness of the produce as well as the idea of eating locally. "And that corn? Oh, my goodness!"

Following last year's success, with five members and a few standbys who came whenever extra vegetables were available, Reau's summer project has jumped the plot. Herbs and squash pop up in the flower beds edging the house; more tomatoes were started in a raised bed that her dad

improvised from a neighbor's recycled soybean seed bag; she grows flowers and peppers at her grandmother's house next door; more flowers are flourishing outside her two rabbit barns. (Reau has been a national champion rabbit breeder since she was 10; for the past four years, she's been packaging the manure in her dad's old plastic nail buckets and selling it as Bunny Honey.)

Asked which vegetable she's proudest of, Reau said potatoes. "Just because potatoes are something everyone eats: you don't think about that you grow them; you just eat them! And their skins aren't dry and icky like what you get at stores."

She's also curious about this summer's tomato experiment. Her neighbor, a World War II veteran named Leon Spaulding, says he was given tomato seeds by a German guard in a prison hospital. He's been growing them for 60 years, and last summer he gave some to Alexandra to add to her 13 varieties. While flipping through gardening catalogs this spring, she noticed a tomato called Old German, and now she and her neighbor are growing both Germans to compare.

"You gave him some San Marzano plants too, didn't you?" Brenda asks, turning to me. "On the Food Network, all the celebrity chefs talk about them being the premium tomato. So she has some of those too." (For each C.S.A. box, Brenda and Alexandra put together recipes tailored to the week's harvest, like minty green-bean salad or provincial tomatoes. During squash season, it's especially helpful.)

With her drive, resourcefulness and sure touch with plants and animals, it's no wonder Reau won the state 4-H award for horticulture and crops in June: she's the poster girl for future farmers. She credits the youth-agriculture organization with improving her public speaking, while Garden to Go has helped her with people skills. "Cause I used to be, like, really shy and quiet. And I'm just more talkative now." Farming has also taught her patience. "It's a continual process," she says, sighing. "You have to keep working at it, and you can't just stop." Least favorite task, after weeding? Picking beans. "She kind of suckers her dad into helping," Brenda says with a wink.

Those beans are adding up: last summer Reau earned enough to buy a laptop. "This year I'm working toward a treadmill," she says. "It's a joint effort between me and my parents. The rest

will go into my college fund.”

“Plus the other purchase?” Brenda prods. “The phone upgrade? She has a *Droid*.”

Summer jobs, like summer romances, aren't meant to last forever: Reau says she would like to be an engineer, focusing on biosystems. Until she hangs up her gardening gloves, Alexandra Reau will have grown the most over vacation.

Recipe: Cold Pink Borscht in a Glass

1 1/2 pounds beets

2 garlic cloves, sliced

2 large shallots, sliced

1 bay leaf

1 teaspoon coriander seeds

3 cloves

1/8 teaspoon cayenne, or to taste

1 tablespoon sugar

2 tablespoons red-wine vinegar, or to taste

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 tablespoon salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

1 cup whole-milk yogurt

Chopped fresh dill or chives (optional).

1. Peel and slice the beets and put them in a large saucepan. Cover with 8 cups water and add

the garlic, shallots, bay leaf, coriander, cloves, cayenne, sugar, vinegar, oil and salt. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cook for 15 minutes, or until the beets are tender. Check the seasoning of the broth. It should be distinctly sweet, sour, peppery and flavorful. Correct the seasoning, adding salt and cayenne if necessary, and freshly ground pepper. Cool slightly.

2. Remove the bay leaf. Purée the soup well in a blender, then strain into a large bowl. Chill in the refrigerator or over ice until cold.

3. Just before serving, whisk in the yogurt. Taste and adjust the seasoning, adding a splash of vinegar if necessary. Thin with a little water to achieve the correct thickness - like a thin milkshake. To serve, pour into small water glasses. Garnish with freshly ground pepper and, if desired, fresh dill or chives. *Serves 6. Adapted from "A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes," by David Tanis.*

Recipe: Spinach Cake With Herb Salad

2 bunches spinach, about 2 pounds (can also use chard, mustard or turnip greens or nettles)

2 medium leeks

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 teaspoons salt

Freshly ground pepper

Whole nutmeg

2 cups whole milk

6 large eggs

Pinch of cayenne

A little Parmesan

Herb salad.

1. Cut the spinach into 1-inch-wide ribbons, discarding any tough stems. Swish the greens in a large basin of cold water, then lift them out into a colander. Repeat the process twice more, with fresh water each time.
2. Trim the leeks and peel off the tough outer layer. Cut into small dice. Fill a bowl with warm tap water and add the leeks. Agitate them with your hand. Let the dirt and sand settle in the bowl, then scoop the leeks from the water. Repeat twice more.
3. Melt the butter in a deep, heavy-bottomed pan over medium heat. Add the leeks, season with salt and pepper, and sauté, stirring occasionally, until they are tender but still green, about 5 minutes.
4. Turn up the heat and grate a little nutmeg over the leeks. Now add the drained spinach in layers, sprinkling each layer with a little salt. Cover tightly and let the spinach steam rapidly over the leeks, removing the lid to stir once or twice. When the spinach is just barely wilted, 2 minutes or less, turn out the contents of the pot onto a platter and let cool. Be sure to save any cooking juices.
5. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. When the spinach-leek mixture is cool, taste for seasoning and adjust - it should be highly seasoned. In a blender or food processor, purée the cooked vegetables with the milk and eggs in batches, adding a little more salt, pepper and a pinch of cayenne. Add any remaining cooking juices to one of the batches and whiz again.
6. Pour the soupy green batter into a buttered baking dish or a 9- or 10-inch deep-dish pie pan. Grate a scant 2 tablespoons Parmesan over the top and bake, uncovered, for 45 minutes, or until a knife inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool to room temperature, cut into wedges and serve with herb salad. *Serves 6. Adapted from "A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes," by David Tanis.*

Recipe: Herb Salad

8 handfuls baby arugula and baby lettuce leaves, about 3/4 pound

4 Belgian endive (optional)

2 cups mixed herbs such as chervil, parsley, basil, mint, tarragon and celery leaves from the center of the bunch

1 shallot, finely diced

Juice of 1/2 lemon

Salt and pepper, to taste

1/4 cup olive oil.

1. Wash and gently dry the lettuce and arugula. Trim the endive, if using; discard the outer leaves, and slice crosswise about 1-inch thick.
2. Wash and pull the herb leaves from their stems, tearing larger leaves into rough ribbons.
3. For the vinaigrette: macerate the shallot with the lemon juice and a little salt. Then whisk in the oil. Add a little freshly ground pepper.
4. Place the arugula, lettuce and herbs in a low, wide bowl. Sprinkle very lightly with salt and toss gently. Reserving some of the dressing, spoon two-thirds of it over the salad, then toss again to coat very lightly. Serve with a wedge of spinach cake on top, drizzled with a spoonful of vinaigrette. *Serves 6. Adapted from "A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes," by David Tanis.*