

# *In* SEASON

WHAT WE'RE LOVING, SHARING, AND CELEBRATING

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**Let's Grow!** *Jones Valley Teaching Farm is showing young people the power of food and sharing lessons that can last a lifetime* • *By* CAMERON BEALL

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Driving along I-20 through downtown Birmingham, you might be surprised to find a 3-acre city block of gardens—something that feels out of place against the urban skyline. Neatly planted plots and raised beds grow tall with rows of seasonal produce and blooms, peach trees sag with ripe fruit, and eager students are hands-on in the fields. This is Jones Valley Teaching Farm (JVTF), where food and education form the foundation and empowering young people is the mission.

▶ JVTF uses low-till and no-till practices (which both help minimize erosion) to grow more than 200 different crop varieties across eight farms.

“Jones Valley really raised me.... It was like my safe haven,” says Shun Mack, the farm’s education product manager. “I grew up in a very tough neighborhood, and home was not a good place, so this felt like an outlet. When I went there [as a student], I felt free, empowered, and curious. I felt all of these good things, so I just kept going.” Mack’s story with the nonprofit may be unique, but her sentiment (and the impact the organization had on her) isn’t.

What began in 2002 as an urban farm in the city’s Southside area has grown into a Birmingham changemaker, providing access to healthy food in underserved

neighborhoods and beyond. In 2007, the downtown farm and Center for Food Education were established, and the initiative has since expanded to include eight teaching farms on the campuses of elementary, middle, and high schools, where instructors collaborate with teachers to connect classroom lessons to farm-and-culinary activities. In 2025, JVTF reached more than 5,000 students, supported 32 community gardens, installed hydroponic farming systems in eight city schools, and distributed nearly 20,000 pounds of free produce from their two farm stands—one of which is at the Woodlawn High School Teaching Farm, where Mack first encountered JVTF 10 years ago.

**From Student to Steward**

Mack was sitting in literature class when she was approached about helping build the school’s teaching farm. At the time, the plot was no more than dirt and a dream in an area of the city that was considered a food desert. “I remember them asking me about who I was, what my goals and interests were...and telling me about this idea and how it was gonna do great things in the community,” she recalls.

She’d never grown anything, but a few months later, Mack found herself alongside a few classmates raising awareness for

▶ Typically open from March through November, the farm stands (with local support) provide free seasonal produce to residents.

*“Us being YOUNG, BLACK, and out on the FARM, we were really LOOKED DOWN UPON, but we saw VALUE in having a SKILL that NOBODY ELSE DID,” Mack says.*

the project, and in the spring of 2016, the 2-acre Woodlawn High School Teaching Farm officially opened. “I had no interest in getting dirty, but I tucked my dress pants in some boots and was out there farming. It was a whole new world, but once I started, I began to love it,” she says. “I remember the first time I put a seed in the ground. We just waited; we watered it and made sure it had plenty of sunlight and were out there weeding. Next thing we knew, we had a farm full of vegetables. These were things I had never seen.... To have these skills and to be able to teach other people felt very empowering.”

Her story has been intertwined with JVTf ever since. Mack worked as one of the organization’s first paid student interns and then as a full-time instructor at her former middle school. Now, in her current role, she oversees field trips and programming for Camp Grow, which draws kids from across the region for farm, science, art, and culinary activities.

Mack’s path is exactly what the non-profit hopes to enable for students who participate. “Being part of Jones Valley means having a community that wants to see you grow—one that not only loves young people but that also listens to them and is on their team, a community that gives them a voice and a say in how organizations like us operate,” she says. ●



► From Camp Grow (at right) to garden harvests, there are ample avenues for volunteering and giving. To learn more, visit [jvtf.org/get-involved](http://jvtf.org/get-involved).