

Green Horticulture in Washington D.C.

by Dawn Gifford

In 2004, D.C. Greenworks' (DCG)— a non-profit that seeks to resolve urban environmental and economic problems by fostering local expertise, job training, and community stewardship—joined forces with the Coalition for the Homeless and the 14th and U Main Street Initiative to form the *Green Team*, a group of men and women charged with maintaining clean, green, and safe streets in the Shaw commercial corridor of Washington DC. In addition to handling litter and graffiti removal, the *Green Team* is also responsible for tree box landscaping and maintenance and provides employment and training opportunities for Shaw's homeless population. By creating a well-maintained commercial district, it has stimulated investment in vacant properties and supports tourism by disseminating heritage and hospitality information about the neighborhood and its attractions.

D.C. Greenworks' Green Collar Job Training programs are a successful marriage of ecology and economy, a living demonstration of how employment and natural resource conservation can support and sustain one another. Its programs address the need for both, clean and green communities, and for education, job training, and employment. Greenworks offers horticultural, arboricultural, and low-impact development training programs to meet the needs of volunteer service corps, parks departments, nurseries, and landscaping businesses.

Washington D.C. is among a growing number of cities that are beginning to explore the viability of an urban green infrastructure as an ecological resource. The Trans-Agency Resources for Environmental and Economic Sustainability (T.R.E.E.S) Project in Los Angeles, for example, estimates that it could create more than 50,000 jobs in environmental infrastructure management. Effective urban ecosystem management can create thousands of jobs and save millions of dollars for communities around the country. In fact, research shows that communities that actively protect their environment have higher rates of job growth, fairer taxes, lower energy costs, better than average public health, a more equitable distribution of wealth,

greater democratic participation, and a better quality of life overall. (See <http://www.treepeople.org/trees/>)

D.C. Greenworks offers training for jobs in landscaping, tree service, low-impact development, park maintenance, and nurseries. With every training program, we work directly with employers, social services, and youth advocacy agencies to find viable placements for its graduates. Since 2000, we have partnered with the Earth Conservation Corps, the DC Department of Parks and Recreation, Covenant House Washington, and the Coalition for the Homeless, among others, to place over 80 people in good jobs.

Programs that Adapt to Communities

All of D.C. Greenworks' programs strive to be mindful of and relevant to the lives of the poor, multi-ethnic, urban communities they serve. Whether hiring urban youth to build a greenroof in a wealthy suburb, or presenting a tree care workshop in a gentrifying neighborhood, or designing a job-training program for the homeless, D.C. Greenworks looks a little different in each community.

In striving to understand the historical economic and cultural contexts for the attitudes and aspirations of each community, DC Greenworks has learned that



each cultural group has its unique way of relating to the shared environment. People who have lived most of their lives within concrete-and-asphalt inner city neighborhoods are more likely to give low priority to issues of access and care of green spaces. The organization also recognizes that race and class can, and do inhibit job opportunities for inner city residents. Not owning a car, for example, can present a major obstacle to getting landscaping and construction jobs, most of which are based in the suburbs.

Using the Art of Applied Science

Green education works best when program participants are involved in hands-on projects. Such an approach is well suited for people who have an interest in green skills, but to whom existing horticultural programs may be unavailable, inaccessible, or delivered in inappropriate formats. Inner-city residents tend to not have easy access to transportation or computers and often lack well-developed literacy skills. For such a population, hands-on learning—in effect, applied science—is far more effective and enjoyable.

Teaching skills in an applied context puts a greater burden on the instructor because the classes are harder to organize. Typically, they involve a lot more site-assessment and project planning, in addition to needing resources, such as trees, plants, tools, and mulch, to create a lasting and beautiful product.

Fortunately for D.C. Greenworks, the city has a chronic shortage of landscaping and tree-planting

services. The Urban Forestry Administration and the Department of Parks and Recreation have a huge backlog of requests for tree planting and pruning, dead tree removal, and stump grinding. In fulfilling these needs, D.C. Greenworks finds an expedient way to provide on-the-job training for its program participants.

Combating Green Stereotypes

The Greenworks educational program is constantly striving to overcome two contradictory stereotypes: (1) Protection of the environment is largely the prerogative of wealthy white communities (granted, they make up a majority of the volunteer-based environmental organizations); and (2) Taking care of the environment is actually an unimportant and menial job requiring no special knowledge.

Urban forests, parks, and private green land are a crucial part of what makes a city livable. In spite of that, jobs in the green industry tend to be underpaid and undervalued, utilizing unskilled (and often undocumented) labor, which leads to a low standard of for worker safety and poor work product, further exacerbating the social, environmental, and economic problems in urban areas.

In Washington D.C., one often sees trees that are planted and mulched too deeply, or pruned poorly by untrained workers wearing little or no safety gear. As a result, the average lifespan of a tree in D.C. is seven years, costing the city millions in complaint management, disease treatment, tree removal, and replanting.

Moreover, the city's air quality may soon fail to



meet federally mandated standards. As a result, D.C. may lose over \$115 million per year in Federal Highway Administration funds, which currently pay for road repairs and other transportation infrastructure expenses. In 2002, the District reported 31 days of poor air quality, and currently boasts the highest asthma rate in the nation. More than one in 20 D.C. residents suffer from asthma, including over 10,000 children, a rate that far surpasses the national average of one in 50.

That trees greatly reduce flooding by allowing rain to seep naturally into the ground is a well-known fact. 1973 to 1997 saw a 64 percent reduction in tree cover in DC, resulting in a 34 percent increase in storm water runoff. Since much of the runoff is collected in sewage pipes, the city has seen an increase in the number of sewer backups, sewer overflows into rivers, and basement floodings. The costs, in terms of property damage, worker productiv-

ity, healthcare, and clean up, are staggering.

Every day, thousands of working class people of all colors are charged with taking care of their local environment, whether it's mowing lawns, tending gardens, planting trees, or building greenroofs. While D.C. Greenworks supports and encourages these activities, especially those jobs that can provide a living wage such as certified arborists, greenroof builders, and landscape specialists. It recognizes the need for a more comprehensive and long term strategy for restoring and maintaining the urban environment. We hope to foster a paradigm shift, where care of the environment and use of knowledge-dependent best practices—regular and preventive maintenance, arboriculture, organic cultivation practices, integrated pest management, and low-impact development—becomes the norm, and jobs in the field are valued and well compensated.

Photos: DC Greenworks students in action.

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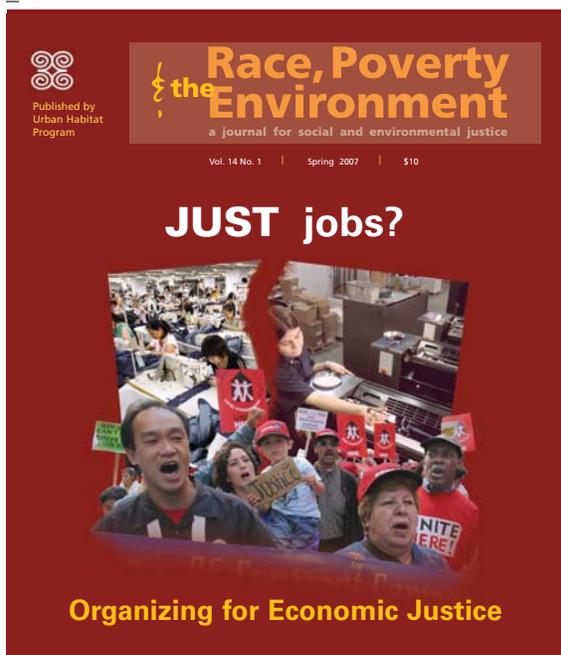
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