

The following excerpt is taken from the MySouthEnd.com online story called "A Sack of Greens" by Lauren DiTullio <http://www.mysouthend.com/index.php?ch=arts&sc=&sc2=news&sc3=&id=118441>



A Sack of Greens

by Lauren DiTullio
Contributing Writer
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Laurel Valchuis sits with a completed sack garden, which she built to demonstrate the process of landless gardening at the Boston Animal Rescue League on March 28. (Source:Lauren DiTullio)

Even in the city, Laurel Valchuis shows how fresh foods are at everyone's fingertips.

In 2007, Laurel Valchuis was inspired to volunteer with the Global Service Corps, a service-learning program in which participants learn the ins and outs of sustainable agriculture practices.

Placed in Tanzania, Africa, Valchuis was tasked with helping HIV/AIDS patients for several weeks. Her work brought her into contact with patients who had severely limited food sources and were too weak to farm.

It was here she was introduced to a method of gardening she had never encountered before: sack gardening. For those Tanzanians without the strength to tend to a garden plot (if they were lucky enough to have land), a sack garden was a viable option. A vertical sack of soil and gravel in which vegetables and fruits can be planted, a sack garden only requires two square feet of space and minimal physical exertion.

As Valchuis and other volunteers helped Tanzanian peoples to construct these gardens, she had the opportunity to see the health benefits of fresh, organic vegetables firsthand.

"The typical diet is a kind of paste prepared from whatever is available in these remote places," Valchuis explained of the typical Tanzanian diet in a recent interview. "...[I]t's not very nutritious. Their life spans were drastically shortened because they were not getting the nutrients that they needed." Sack gardening could provide those nutrients.

When Valchuis moved to the South End a few years later, she found another reason to turn to sack gardening. After learning the waiting list for a garden plot was five years long, Valchuis built a sack garden outside of her apartment.



The garden begins as a rolled down burlap sack, built from the bottom by adding soil and a central core of gravel through which water reaches the roots of the garden's many plants. Sticks are added soon after to support the bag's structure. (Source:Lauren DiTullio)

For each, his own

Sack gardens, Valchuis found, can utilize the vertical space afforded by city porches and patios. An entire garden of fruits and vegetables can be constructed with just a few organic, local materials: a burlap sack, gravel, soil, a recycled yogurt container or other cylindrical structure, sticks (for structure support), and seedlings (60 seedlings will yield, roughly, 20 plants).

In just one sack, a variety of plants can be sustained. In the spacious top area of the sack, in the opening, cherry tomato plants and miniature eggplants can flourish. In holes cut into the side of the sack, shade-loving plants like lettuces also prosper. And at the end of the season, it can all be taken down and composted.

Valchuis' interest in nutrition, and therefore the fresh fruits and vegetables to be had through gardening, became apparent in her childhood, which she spent in various parts of Massachusetts. Her interest in the bigger picture of sustainable living through agriculture "came out later in life," though. In addition to practicing sustainable tenets in sack gardening, she now works for an agribusiness consulting firm called HighQuest Partners, the mission of which is to "help satisfy the world's growing need for agriculturally-based resources, commodities and food by providing information, cultivating relationships, and supporting [their] clients."

After several successful seasons of gardening in a sack on her porch, Valchuis has recently branched out, giving her friends burlap sacks for Christmas, and starting to teach the masses how to bring a little green to their homes. Her first workshop, hosted at the Animal Recue League of Boston (10 Chandler St.) near the end of March, was a major success.

To twenty attendees gathered around, Valchuis shared her enthusiasm for landless gardening, teaching everyone the basics, from how to construct the garden itself to where to find seedlings to plant in it. Her enthusiasm and expertise impressed attendees, many of whom asked questions, took notes and even shot video to preserve the details of Valchuis' demonstration.

"The goal of this project is to hopefully see these gardens all over the South End," Valchuis said of the workshop, the next of which will be held in Blackstone Square on Saturday, April 16. "I think people are getting really excited about it."

The draw of teaching landless gardening is twofold for Valchuis. On the one hand, she is interested in promoting healthy, sustainable living and eating habits. In addition, as someone who made a hobby of composting trash in her small South End residence, tapping maple trees in New Hampshire for syrup, and fostering puppies from the Animal Rescue League, Valchuis also hopes gardening helps people learn personal responsibility, and to take pride in their accomplishments.

"A lot of people take for granted where food comes from and how it's made," she said.

"Half the point of doing this ... is so people understand how vegetables grow, how difficult it can be, and how amazing it is that they feed off soil and sunshine and grow into something we can eat."

For more information on landless gardening visit landlessgarden.org. The next demonstration will be on Saturday, April 16 at 10 a.m. in Blackstone Square, hosted by the Blackstone/Franklin Square Neighborhood Association.

Because sack gardening materials can be hard to find, Valchuis hopes to facilitate the spread of landless gardening by obtaining the materials in bulk from her tried and true sources, and selling them to neighbors. If you're interested in purchasing sack gardening materials, you can contact Valchuis at landlessgardens@gmail.com.

Lauren DiTullio is a student in the School of Journalism at Northeastern University. Originally from Connecticut, she is happy to have landed in Boston, proud to be a Husky, and honored to be able to bring her lifelong passion for writing to the South End's vibrant community.

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