

# SCHOOLYARD ROOTS

UA students connect children and communities to their food sources by partnering with Schoolyard Roots.

BY ERIN MOSLEY | PHOTOS BY DYSEN NEEB, ALLIE NEWMAN AND KRISTEN WALLACE

**M**any children in Tuscaloosa-area schools live in food deserts – places where residents have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables – according to a study by University of Alabama anthropology professor Dr. David Meek in partnership with Schoolyard Roots, a nonprofit organization that operates school gardens in Tuscaloosa County.

Since its founding by a University of Alabama faculty member in 2010, Schoolyard Roots has partnered with the University and with service-learning classes across disciplines. UA students are the primary source of manpower for Schoolyard Roots, whose mission is to support healthy food choices and empower communities through food – with school gardens, farm stands and educational programs.

UA student Alec Rush worked with Schoolyard Roots as part of UH 120 Let's Grow and UH 405 Let's Grow

Leaders, Honors College courses in which students teach and facilitate lessons in elementary-school gardens. He says he enjoyed incorporating his biology major into lessons about plants and gardening. “The questions the kids ask are very interesting,” says Rush, a junior from Atlanta. “Biology and science all tie together in the garden, and it’s something I like introducing them to.”

**Schoolyard Roots operates school gardens in 10 schools in the Tuscaloosa City School District and the Tuscaloosa County School System. Approximately 3,855 children learn about healthy eating, community gardening and sustainability each year through weekly, garden-based lessons that connect classroom activities to the real world and meet Alabama’s Course of Study guidelines. During the 2016-17 academic year, 192 UA students dedicated 4,554 service hours to the organization.**

Twelve UA service-learning courses worked with Schoolyard Roots during the 2016-17 academic year. In addition to the two Let's Grow courses, they include **NEW 226 Organic Farming; SP 356 Advanced Grammar and Composition with Dr. Xabier Granja (see page 50); ART 131 3D Design, ART 222 Beginning Sculpture and ART 322/323/422 Advanced Sculpture with Dr. Craig Wedderspoon; NEW 211 Food for Thought with Dr. Catherine Roach; PHL 390 Social Justice in Practice with Dr. Rekha Nath; UH 120 Interpersonal Resiliency; MUS 490 Fund Raising for Nonprofit Organizations; and NHM 485 Supervised Practice in Dietetics Management and Communications.**

UA Student Engineers in Action helped build raised garden beds and several other projects in 2016-17. The UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility has provided Schoolyard Roots with a full-time post-graduate fellowship and a part-time post-graduate to assist in expanding service-learning initiatives. The Center for Community

UA student John Fazzini and Stella Pfau, program director for Schoolyard Roots, help kids at Crestmont Elementary School fill garden beds with soil.



As part of garden lessons, children learn tasty ways to prepare the foods they grow. BELOW: A Crestmont Elementary student waters young plants.



Based Partnerships and College of Community Health Sciences have supported the creation of Schoolyard Roots' annual evaluation system and presentations on research findings at national and international conferences.

Sculpture students, led by associate professor Craig Wedderspoon, designed and built benches and storage sheds at multiple school gardens. Brandt Deeds, a senior from Berkeley, Calif., majoring in sculpture, says his ART 322 sculpture class spent about four weeks designing and constructing the garden benches. “It’s very satisfying work,” Deeds says.

### Let's Grow courses

In class at UA, Let's Grow students learn about experiential education, food systems, child nutrition and the benefits and methods of garden education. They then use this knowledge while teaching and facilitating lessons in elementary-school gardens for three hours each week. UA students also help children operate farm stands where they





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Children prepare a recipe using vegetables they grew; Kids practice math and marketing skills by selling produce to members of their communities; UA students in sculpture classes constructed unique garden benches from cypress wood; Children at Flatwoods Elementary School advertise their farm stand; A Crestmont Elementary student adds plants to his school garden.

sell the produce they've grown to the community.

UH 405 Let's Grow Leaders gives UA students an opportunity to continue partnering with Schoolyard Roots in a leadership role.

Harris Bolus, a freshman from Birmingham, Ala., majoring in nutrition, says he enrolled in the UH 120 Let's Grow class because he was looking for a reason to garden. "I just really love plants – growing and identifying plants – and that ties into nutrition," says Bolus, who worked with kindergartners through third graders at The Alberta School of Performing Arts.

Bolus says his most memorable moment was when a girl in one of his classes asked if she could eat a cabbage flower. When he told her she could, the child grabbed a

handful and ate them. Her classmates followed. "It really got me thinking about how this class has encouraged them to eat vegetables," Bolus says.

Research by UA faculty and students shows children involved with Schoolyard Roots' school gardens are statistically more likely to eat vegetables in their school cafeteria or packed in a lunch box. The study also shows the kids make healthier food choices overall, have better plant knowledge, greater interest in learning and are more excited to go to school.

**During the 2016-17 school year, 46 UA students dedicated 1,337 hours to working with children through Let's Grow and Let's Grow Leaders.**

#### Organic Farming course

NEW 226 Organic Farming covers the basics of organic farming while addressing questions about organic versus industrial agriculture models in relation to

current environmental problems and solutions. Students work with Schoolyard Roots throughout the semester.

"Students are always really excited about this course," says Rashmi Grace, course instructor and education coordinator for Schoolyard Roots. "Most come with some previous interest in the subject matter, but some are totally new to the field. The course challenges them to think critically about our food system, but is also a venue for learning about and putting into practice the principles of organic farming."

Lisa Meister, a junior from Manhattan, Ill., double majoring in sculpture and sustainable development through New College, took the organic farming course and built garden sheds as part of a sculpture course. She helped maintain the University Place Elementary School garden and sold food at farmers' markets through the organic farming course. "We got to see the whole progression and how to manage an entire season worth of crops," she says.

Meister plans to join the Peace Corps and do work related to agricultural development or sustainability. "It gave me a more hands-on approach to my studies," she says of the organic farming course. "I learned this is something I would want to do."

**During the 2016-17 school year, 16 NEW 226 Organic Farming students spent 300 hours working on Schoolyard Roots projects.**



Lindsay Turner, executive director of Schoolyard Roots, says the nonprofit is expanding its community across the state. "It is our dream to one day have a garden at every school in Alabama," Turner says. "As we continue to provide resources such as our curriculum to schools statewide, we are thrilled that UA students fuel our programs in Tuscaloosa and enable this growth."

*For more information about UA service-learning opportunities with Schoolyard Roots, contact Lindsay Turner at [director@schoolyardroots.org](mailto:director@schoolyardroots.org). To learn more about Organic Farming or Let's Grow courses, contact Rashmi Grace at [rashmi@schoolyardroots.org](mailto:rashmi@schoolyardroots.org).*