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PENNY DE LOS SANTOS

FARMERS FROM THE CITY

Proof that the concrete jungle is a perfectly reasonable place to grow a garden.

BY STEFANIE ELLI

THE FIRST TIME I SEE COLIN MCCRATE '00, he is holding a turnip roughly the size of his head. It is a portrait of awkward pride. Awkward because most people have little interest in turnips—not even if it's big enough to take over their homes—and McCrate isn't the type to proselytize. Still, I can tell he's secretly dying to explain why this turnip is so special.

The story goes like this: A man McCrate met in Costa Rica recounted to him the legend of a behemoth heirloom turnip grown during his grandmother's youth. This was a turnip fit for the *Guinness Book of World Records*, yet no seed company or seed-saving organization had any record of its seeds, making its existence even more mythical. Then, one day, the man found a jar of the seeds sitting on a windowsill in his grandmother's house. Miraculously, the seeds were still viable. Even better, the man believed in sharing.

That was just the beginning.

As owner of Seattle Urban Farm Company (SUFC)—a business whose primary aim is to create sustainable backyard landscapes—countless fruits, vegetables, and

"I don't think I got into this line of work because I wanted to do people's gardening for them," admits Halm. "I wanted to see people getting excited about food on their own."

seeds have passed through McCrate's hands. I am here on this quiet Thursday afternoon at one of SUFC's sites—a modest one-story home in a middle-class neighborhood a few miles from the Space Needle—to learn how to plant onions, potatoes, and peas in a plot of land no bigger than a plastic baby pool. But McCrate and his business partner, Brad Halm '02, are here to teach me something beyond the basics. They want me to recognize the value of connecting with food in a more personal way—"It sort of makes eating a whole new experience when you know where your food comes from," says Halm. That's the lesson they bring to all their clients, even those who live smack dab in the middle of skyscrapers and ceaseless traffic. Turns out, it doesn't matter who you are or where you live. Everyone has the power to make something grow.

I am a bit skeptical, however, because I can't even grow weeds. The SUFC boys, who have won awards for transforming green spaces by installing ready-to-go vegetable gardens complete with clean soil, drip irrigation, and raised beds, can sense my hesitation. "I just don't understand how something so small can turn into this brilliant, vital thing," I say, looking down at the fragile stalk of green onion in my hand. McCrate smiles. He knows how.

He knows that the onion starts out weak, its verdant arms spindly and limp, but its roots are strong. It grabs hold of the soil with a dogged ferocity, pushing itself to become something more.

It's not unlike the shriveled pea he hands me later, which reminds me of a tiny green pearl. We bury dozens of them in the cold ground, along with a few pea plants the size of pencils, and McCrate says they will soon claw their way up the trellis he has installed, forming a beautiful curtain across the sky.

Although McCrate knew he wanted to be a part of something bigger than himself, the idea of growing food as a livelihood took some time to germinate. After spending much of his time at Denison on the Homestead, graduating with a degree in environmental science, he spent several years teaching himself about gardening before getting his hands dirty on a day-to-day basis. It was an opportunity to manage a garden in an environmental education center on Orcas Island that brought him to the West Coast. He was hooked from that point forward—on Washington state, and on gardening. He eventually moved to Poulsbo, just outside Seattle, and worked on an organic farm, where he honed his skills.

Somewhere along his journey, he got it into his head that it would be a good idea to help people build gardens in their backyards—even backyards in the heart of the city—but it seemed no one was interested in his ideas. In fact, when he mentioned it to his co-workers, they said no one would ever pay for such a service. Still, he decided to take a chance on his dreams and launched SUFC in January of 2007.

"When I decided to start the company, I didn't have anything to base it on," McCrate admits. "I couldn't find any other examples of people doing what I wanted to be doing, so I couldn't find anyone willing to go along with the idea. But then I called Brad, and was able to convince him to give this a shot."

Halm, who had been managing a community-supported agriculture program in Mifflintown, Pa., didn't need much convincing. "I thought Colin had a really good idea," he says, "I liked the idea of growing food in the city." So Halm moved to Washington, McCrate quit the landscaping job he had at the time, and the two dove right in.

Today, in that tiny backyard garden, it's Halm's turn to educate me on the ways of the tuber. He places several varieties of quartered potatoes in front of me.

"Make sure you keep enough room between them," he says, moving the wedges across the soil like checkers. "And don't put them all in a single row. It's best to alternate their location."

I don't see how any of this would matter. Then he tells me about their eyes. He explains how the tiny tubers can see through all that dirt and, like black, silty fireworks, begin to sprout, pushing through the deep belly of the earth out into the light. Potatoes, it seems, can still find their destiny, even in the darkness.

If potatoes can find their way out of the darkness, surely we can, too. At least that's what Halm and McCrate hope, and it's part of the reason they do what they do. Though most Americans are tempted by the easy way out—grabbing a bucket of chicken from the drive-through after work or tossing something unrecognizable into the microwave—McCrate and Halm contend that it's even easier to implement subtle changes in our daily lives that can profoundly affect our direct environment. McCrate and Halm encourage their clients to think about what they can do with the resources available to them. If given the choice, would you get the local, organic milk that's a bit more expensive, or the antibiotic-laced, factory-farmed milk that's on sale? Will you pass the farmers market on the way to the grocery chain because there's better parking closer to the door? Change is all about choice, and if Americans reconsidered some of our simplest choices, the SUFC boys argue, we could make a difference.

The benefits are staggering, and people's growing

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Halm (left in photo) and McCrate (right) credit much of their current success with their experience on the Homestead, and they believe in paying it forward by sticking close to those who come from Denison stock. They recently hired a new staff member—Dave Hughes '04—and recruited two interns for work last summer—John Murphy '10 and Chelsea Neill '09.

More internship opportunities are avilable for next year. Seasons run April through August. But just as you'd expect, every great education comes with a lot of hard work. SUFC puts out the following disclaimer: "The work can be physically demanding. During the height of the garden installation season, days are long and feel much longer. Expect to carry heavy loads and get very dirty. The work is enjoyable, but the physical aspect should not be underestimated." If interested, contact McCrate at (206) 816-9240 or colin@seattleurbanfarmco.com