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CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN
Member Magazine and Program Guide

A new life takes root through
Windy City Harvest

Fernando Orozco, Urban Agriculture Professional

The Kraft Corporate Campus Garden where Fernando Orozco is a grower and crew leader is a world away from the plot where he first learned to care for plants. He was 19, an inmate in the Cook County Sheriff's alternative sentencing facility. Windy City Harvest, the Chicago Botanic Garden's urban agriculture education and jobs-training initiative, ran the jail garden.

That was just two years ago.

"I never thought I'd have a job like this where I have my own site and, not only that, the responsibility of caring for a crew of other guys," Orozco said, taking a break from work in the 8,000-square-foot fruit and vegetable garden on the Northfield, Illinois, campus of Kraft Foods. Designed, installed, and maintained by the Garden's Windy City Harvest program since 2011, the flourishing three-season garden is the result of an innovative partnership between a botanic garden and a major corporation.

Orozco's story is a fulfillment of the Garden's mission to cultivate the power of plants to sustain and enrich life. In Orozco's case, the life is his and those of the "guys" for whom he now is a role model—young men ages 17 to 21 in the Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice system.





Fernando Orozco and his Windy City Harvest crew keep the Kraft Foods Garden flourishing.

A crew of three began work at the Kraft site in July as part of a 13-week stint in Windy City Harvest Corps, the same educational and transitional jobs program that once provided work to Orozco. The team planned to grow enough tomatoes, peppers, lettuces, and other produce to fill 55 boxes a week for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program. Other crops included cherries, pears, raspberries, radishes, beets, swiss chard, and watermelon, made pretty with plantings of scarlet runner beans and fire-cracker flower, all grown in full view of Kraft employees as they work out in the company gym.

"You hear a lot about programs and how they change people's lives," said Angela Mason, director of Windy City Harvest. "But it's more about the person who wants to make those changes." Orozco, emphatically, did; he was eager to take a new path in his life.

"I was around guys who had been going to jail their whole lives," he remembered. Not all Corps recruits decide the hard work of farming is for them, or have the discipline to succeed. Orozco worked hard, found he liked it, and ultimately discovered "a passion."

He went on to complete the nine-month Windy City Harvest Apprenticeship program, earned a certificate in safe and sustainable urban agriculture, and interned at locations that included the Chicago home garden of restaurateur Rick Bayless. "[Fernando] was thrilled and delighted to learn that one could identify nutrient deficiencies in a plant by studying its leaves and growth pattern," Bayless's head gardener Bill Shores recalled. "It is this curiosity and openness to new information that makes a skilled grower."

A keen and attentive observer, Orozco also is noted for his compassionate nature. There was the winter day that he

and Ben Jaffe, his supervisor on a Windy City Harvest work-study crew, found some baby rabbits inside a hoop-house (similar to a greenhouse). Orozco put them in a box with food and water. "Essentially it was to keep them alive, even though this was not the best thing in terms of raising full-grown rabbits that would come back and eat our greens," Jaffe recalled. "That said a lot to me about how Fernando generally looks at the world."

Orozco is among the Windy City Harvest Apprenticeship graduates professionalizing the urban agriculture movement and defining what a job in it looks like. Originally from Cicero, he lives in Chicago with his mother and sister Veronica, who witnessed her brother's comeback. "We take a lot of pride in what he does," she said. "We talk about it constantly."

"We take a lot of pride in what he does. We talk about it constantly." —Veronica Orozco

Orozco readily admits to a past that he now is eager to put behind him as a working professional. "Just because they're checking that

box that says 'felony offense' doesn't necessarily mean that they're bad people. They just need someone to give them a chance and support them through those changes," Mason said. Orozco now does that for the former juvenile offenders working with him. "I'm not the smartest person in the world," Orozco said he tells them, "but I saw an opportunity and I took it, and the same opportunity is happening to you guys. Are you going to take advantage?"

Orozco hopes to run his own farm some day. "But, for now, I'd be happy if I were here, doing the same thing, just perfecting the craft, growing food and helping people, growing people," he said. "I can't ask for a better job."

For a listing of donors who make Windy City Harvest possible, see page 79.