

"We kind of joke that we have magic soil, because you look around, and every time somebody comes in here, they say, 'My gosh, it's gorgeous, so green, and so lush.' We put seeds in the ground, and they just thrive here. Whatever it is, it's working."

On a brilliant, sunny fall day, Johnson sits with a visitor on one of the farm's benches. An ear-piercing ambulance siren wails away nearby, drowning out virtually every other sound around. "You get the sounds of the city here, don't you," the visitor jokes. "Yes," Johnson laughs. "It is an urban farm."

Ironically, in an age when fertile soil and woodlands are all too often paved over for streets, houses and office buildings, the Urban Farm sits on what used to be a parking lot. Tucked away on MUSC's campus near the corner of Bee and President streets, it is dwarfed by new additions to the campus' physical footprint: the James B. Edwards College of Dental Medicine and the James Clyburn Research Center.

The plot of land upon which the farm sits served as the staging area for construction of the Clyburn complex. Once it was completed, discussions ensued over what to do with the lot. Of the five or so possible options, landscape architect Bill Eubanks' proposal for a small farm won out.

A university committee devised a plan to make the farm a living classroom, open to virtually everyone, to demonstrate the connection between nutritious food and good health. Those who took part in its growth could eventually walk away with its produce, paid for by their labor. "Typically, what we do is after each session, whatever needs to be harvested that day, everybody comes together and we put it all on the table and they divide it up," Johnson says.

"We don't sell any of the produce," she adds. "Our main priority is having the produce here for the educational sessions, for people to learn." None of the produce – mostly indigenous to South Carolina – is wasted. Much of it is donated to various charitable organizations in the community.

"We thought the farm needed to be – in keeping with our mission – a place where people could come together and learn and grow. We were brainstorming who we would want to target, and we said, 'Let's start out with our own people, we want to make sure we do this right,'" Johnson says. "But the thing that has been the most rewarding for me is that as each group comes in we get little stories, quotes, pictures. Everybody that walks out of here gets something out of it and a lot of times it's something different for each person. We had a gentleman in here – an MUSC employee – I'm not sure, I think he worked for the Physical Plant, and we overheard him saying, 'This is my best day at work, ever.' He had just discovered the farm – he walked in and joined a session."

Educational sessions are held continuously through the week for school groups and for the community. For school groups, especially, Johnson hopes children who can be inundated by technology pause to notice and appreciate the world around them.

"I grew up on a big, huge farm – 25 acres – and I never really thought about it," Johnson says "but there's a generation of kids now who probably have no idea what a tomato looks like on the vine. You know what I mean? Or even in its true form, for that matter."

For that reason and more, public educational sessions are staged on a continuing basis. Some even have cooking demonstrations. Recipes and nutritional information are available for virtually all the farm's produce.

"We want to make sure whatever they're harvesting, we want them to be able to use that information in real life," she says. "If they're not going to plant a garden, at least they'll know why it's important to eat kale, or what the nutritional value is, or how to cook it. A lot of people come in here and say, 'I have no idea what to do with that,' including me."


Johnson credits the farm's success to a talented and enthusiastic team of employees from various MUSC departments, including farm manager Robin Smith, coordinator Suzan Whelan and educators Mary Helpern and Jane Madden, whom you can find most any day on the premises. From the planning and cultivating to the public events and marketing. "Each member of our team has really stepped up and done a remarkable job," she says. "We all love to work with each other."

The Urban farm is riding a wave of success for now and most likely will for some time to come. Its central location is considered prime real estate, however, and eventually could be the site of a future addition to the university's 80 buildings. While its physical presence may not be permanent, its concept is, Johnson believes. "I'm not really concerned about it right now, but it's

not going to go away," she says.

In fact, it could evolve into several smaller "farms" scattered across campus, with different groups taking ownership of the various plots. Such a scenario may be more conducive to involving more people in outdoor activities. "One thing I've noticed is that people have a really hard time getting away from work when they're here. For the majority of people that really need this type of stuff, they're tied to a desk, and they're lucky if they get 30 minutes.

And then you've got the nurses. "They work 12-hour shifts, sometimes longer, and they get very few breaks. If it's not right there, they're not going to do it. This (present location) is a great spot, but it's not necessarily convenient to everyone," she explains.



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