In 1993 a YouthBuild program was created in Portland, with the purpose of providing educational and leadership opportunities for very low-income youth who had dropped out of high school. Since its official incorporation in 1995, Portland YouthBuilders has become a model chapter within the YouthBuild USA network: In 2012, the organization was recognized for producing the highest performance outcomes among 300 YouthBuild programs nationwide. Such a tradition of success has tilled fertile grounds for some exciting new developments in the Lents neighborhood school.

Through a 16-month program of academics, vocational training, career coaching and individual counseling, Portland YouthBuilders annually provides 200 low-income young people between the ages of 17 and 24 with the skills necessary to reach their life goals. They have a garden-based nutrition education program which integrates the work of its other departments and give students firsthand experience of growing their own food. The mission of the organization, after all, is to empower young people to become self-sufficient, contributing members of the workforce and their community.

What could be a more fitting image of this mission than taking home one’s share in the harvest after a grueling day’s work on a construction site? Thanks to donations from Portland Nursery, the garden yields crops of kale, radishes, turnips, peas and broccoli. It’s hard to imagine that just a few months ago this 3200 square foot plot was awash with weeds and little else!

Portland YouthBuilders’ partnership with Portland Nursery began in 2006, as a result of the efforts of its former sustainability manager, Sid Klein. Klein pioneered the Fields to Forks program, a collaboration with Zenger Farm, through which students learned about sustainable agriculture, sold produce at the Lents International Farmers Market, and received meals prepared from their surplus veggies by guest chefs on a weekly basis. Sid’s departure in 2011 left YouthBuilders without the means to continue this program.

And yet the garden remained. Early weeding of the remaining garden beds turned up relics from days gone: potatoes, turnip plants. The herb spiral overgrown, now offers even greater abundance despite its past neglect. The staff and students at Portland YouthBuilders aren’t strangers to the redemptive power of a second chance, and have renewed their commitment to keep the garden thriving for many years to come. A clear, sunny day affords views of Mount Hood in the distance--fitting for a program where students advance through phases named after renowned mountains: from Hood, to Tahoma, then McKinley, and finally, Everest. At Portland YouthBuilders school garden, far beyond serving the basic nutritional needs of its students, every plant seems aglow with hope and potential, ready to launch the program to new heights.

<http://pybpdx.org/>