

FROM BROWNFIELDS TO GREENFIELDS: PRODUCING FOOD IN NORTH AMERICAN CITIES

By Martin Bailkey & Joe Nasr

Across North America, a small number of city dwellers have, for decades, known the value of producing food within their own neighborhoods, rather than being totally reliant on the global food infrastructure. We know many of these people as community gardeners, diligently cultivating their small plots of urban soil and, in the process, bringing health to themselves and their communities. Simultaneously, many small farmers at the city's edge have been orienting their choice of crops, their methods of production, and their approach to marketing towards nearby urban centers. We have labeled these entrepreneurs market gardeners, recognizing that they have a role to play in the supply of the urban food market.

Today, what these two groups and others have pioneered is taking on new forms, and being practiced for additional social and economic reasons. These emerging patterns of urban agriculture - the growing, processing and distributing of food and other products through intensive plant cultivation and animal husbandry in and around cities - represent an opportunity to bring the food security movement directly into the heart of American cities and at the same time in the spaces that surround it.

The CFSC has made a commitment to further urban agriculture, as reflected in the formation of a Committee devoted to that activity. This commitment responds to three trends affecting many United States and Canadian cities. One is the persistence and expansion of a significant amount of vacant and underutilized land, especially in older industrial cities. The second is the continuing growth in the urban footprint, causing a steady loss of agricultural lands, which has been recently generating a backlash to this phenomenon. The third is an emerging interest in urban agriculture, in particular as an entrepreneurial activity, resulting from efforts to achieve greater community food security, better food quality, and more sustainable methods of food production.

Urban Agriculture

The increased interest in urban agriculture accompanies the increasing focus on bringing vacant parcels of land back to some productive use, and on fostering the ability of the parcels where agricultural activity has maintained itself to continue to do so. This interest is stimulated by the steady growth of community gardening, by greater concerns for more sustainable methods of food production, and by the

general interest in alternative food supply mechanisms, such as farmers markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms, that shorten the distance between producer and consumer. Within this broad category of urban agriculture are for-profit and non-profit business enterprises that produce and market food, fish, value-added food products, and non-edible produce, such as trees and ornamental plants. These are referred to as entrepreneurial urban agriculture projects, and are a special interest of the Urban Agriculture Committee.

This entrepreneurial approach expands upon the established community garden movement in North America, where, typically, city gardeners consume the food they produce, and have little or no interest in selling what they grow. A new trend is for urban-based non-profit organizations (and some private ventures) to use city sites to grow food and other products, such as fish, for local market sale.

These projects take different forms, and are initiated by non-profits with various community-based agendas. The benefits of urban agriculture that attract their attention include improving the appearance of blighted neighborhoods, small-scale local organizing around city farming, the generation of jobs and income for targeted segments of the inner-city

population, developing business skills and entrepreneurship within the community, and improving access to fresh, nutritious food.

'Greenfield' Urban Agriculture

The growth in the population of North American metropolitan areas has been dramatic since World War II. Yet this growth rate was dwarfed by the rate at which the surface covered by these metropolitan areas has expanded. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as sprawl, has come in particular at the expense of agricultural lands, including some of the richest ones on the continent.

While this trend of decreasing densities and increasing land consumption rates has been under way for a long time, it is only recently that a nationwide reaction

has emerged. This means a significant potential for protection for many acres of open space' (including agricultural lands), not only at the edge of metropolitan areas, but within them as well. This is going to be a significant opportunity for urban agriculture in the coming years. However, it also represents quite a challenge for its advocates, as new and better ways of using these lands will have to be found.

Fortunately, many innovations in what may be termed "greenfield urban agriculture" can be found from Quebec to Southern California. Some of these pertain to the selection of what is grown or raised, i.e., products that are adapted to production within urban areas; these range from mushrooms to herbs to rabbits. Related to the matter of selection is the techniques of production, from hydroponics to zero grazing. Other innovations concern the means of marketing the products; in addition to the above-mentioned CSAs and farmers markets, one can think of the likes of direct sale to restaurants and special 'locally produced' sections in supermarkets. The Urban Herbs program of the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) has increased sales of its honey, jams, salsa and vinegar through local markets by as much as 30 percent. So the challenge may not be how to invent new forms of urban agriculture, but rather how to 'scale up' the adoption of innovations that already exist.

'Brownfield' Urban Agriculture

Chicago now has an estimated 70,000 vacant parcels of land. Philadelphia has 31,000, and in nearby Trenton, New Jersey, 900 acres - 18 percent of its total land area - is currently vacant. The large inventories of vacant land in American cities are the result of two widespread phenomena that occurred in the decades following World War II - shifts in settlement patterns centered around suburbanization, and shifts in employment patterns centered around deindustrialization. The loss of jobs and population hit many inner cities hard, and it has also begun to hit more recently the inner belt of suburbs. Typically, this resulted in the abandonment of industrial and residential structures. Absentee ownership, non-payment of taxes, or simple abandonment resulted in properties that underwent a steady decline in their condition until deemed unsafe for habitation. They were then boarded up, and eventually demolished and cleared, usually at city expense. Thus vacant parcels are the endpoints of a common sequence of abandonment and decline seen in many cities of the Northeast and the industrial Midwest.

Many vacant parcels are designated as "brownfields," containing some amount of soil contamination as a result of past use. The General Accounting Office estimates that

between 130,000 and 425,000 vacant industrial sites nationwide have some level of contamination. The redevelopment potential of brownfields has become more evident in recent years, and they are now the targets of attention by the public and private sectors. This has brought a new focus on vacant land in older neighborhoods within the urban core.

There are several reasons for the increased efforts to view entrepreneurial urban agriculture as a viable, albeit partial, solution to the vacant land problem in cities:

- More vacant land than ever is available in a large number of older cities, pressuring local governments to seek new ways to put these parcels back into productive use.
- Inner city neighborhoods benefit from the aesthetic, economic, and community-building benefits of city farming projects.
- Entrepreneurial urban agriculture can be a source of jobs for residents of inner city neighborhoods.
- There is an interest on the part of some local community garden organizations to follow SLUG's example and extend their scope to include entrepreneurial projects.

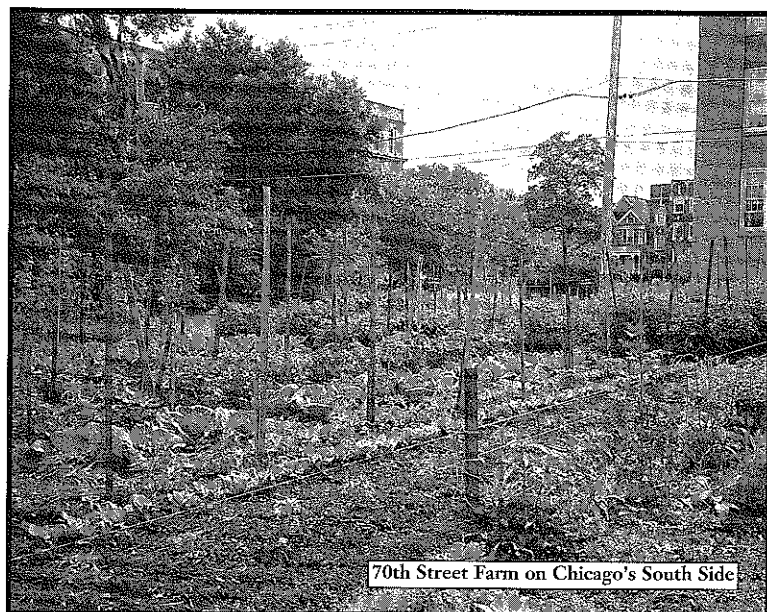
· There is greater interest among the general public in growing food organically for local consumption (the market share for organic food has doubled each year since 1990), and for improving nutrition in those urban areas of greatest need.

· Nationwide, greater attention is being given to establishing environmentally sustainable communities. Urban agriculture has the potential to reduce input into landfills through its organic methods (composting, recycling food products through animals, etc.).

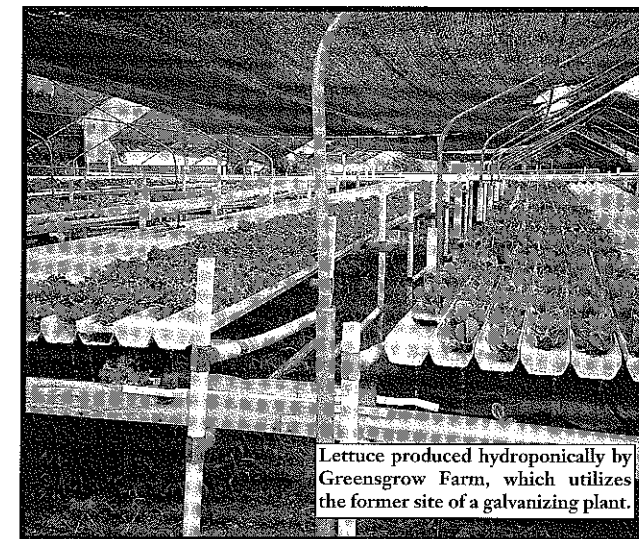
· The increased development of environmentally friendly "green businesses," many of them food-related.

Typically, project start-up funding for the reuse of vacant lands for farming is pieced together from an assortment of grants. The actual work is often accompanied by volunteer

(SEE FOOD ON PAGE 8)



70th Street Farm on Chicago's South Side



Lettuce produced hydroponically by Greensgrow Farm, which utilizes the former site of a galvanizing plant.

What Good is
Community Greening?

2. Community greening can help
feed people and save money.

What Good is
Community Greening?

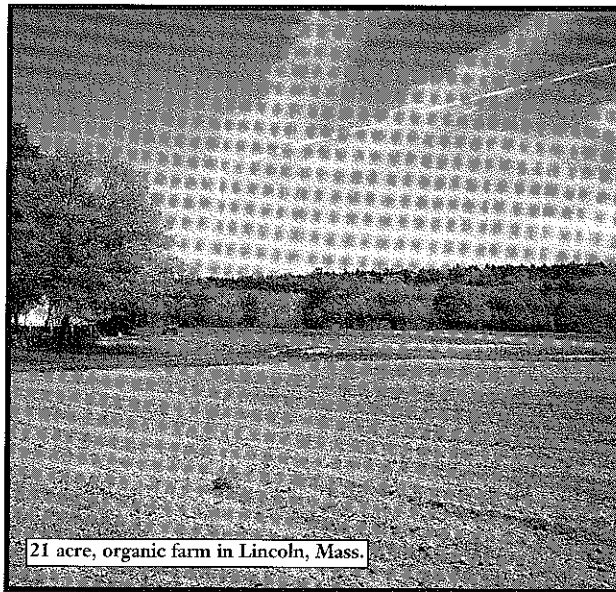
3. Community greening
promotes healthier
communities.

FOOD (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7)

labor and other forms of pro bono support. A handful of small government granting programs (such as the USDA Community Food Projects program (CFP), and the multi-agency Urban Resources Partnership model operating in different cities) support urban agriculture, but their effectiveness is limited by a shortage of funds to allocate. CFP project funding will only total \$2.5 million in the 2000 fiscal year.

The Role of CFSC

Entrepreneurial urban agriculture represents a logical link between the overabundance of urban vacant land and improved food security within inner-city neighborhoods. The CFSC hopes to raise the awareness level of entrepreneurial urban agriculture among federal, state and local government officials, local foundations and private sector funders that are in a position to give such ventures greater financial and policy support than they currently receive.



21 acre, organic farm in Lincoln, Mass.

The CFSC Urban Agriculture Committee recognized that there is much to be learned about the present status of commercial urban agriculture by documenting its current state of practice. So early in 1999, it decided to produce a policy paper directed towards federal agencies (such as HUD, USDA and EPA) positioned to provide greater support to city farming. This statement would, firstly, provide an operating definition of urban agriculture, secondly, describe the various forms of urban agriculture currently in practice, and finally present the results of recently-conducted research identifying the obstacles and opportunities for future activities.

The proposed statement would identify a critical mass of existing urban agriculture activities large enough to get the notice of potential funders. This would improve the likelihood of enlarging the pool of outside financial support needed for both start-up capital and ongoing operating needs. In delineating this critical mass, the study would aim to articulate the multiple benefits of urban agriculture to outside supporters with different objectives. These current and potential supporters, and the specific concerns of each that are addressed by urban agriculture, include:

- Local government - vacant land reuse, neighborhood revitalization
- Federal agencies - expanding a national "urban agenda" based on improving the quality of life in inner city neighborhoods

- Neighborhood organizations - improving neighborhood appearance, grassroots economic revitalization, creating jobs for local residents

- Food security/anti-hunger advocates - improving the quantity and quality of food available to inner city consumers

- Community development corporations (CDs) - providing an economically-viable supplement to their traditional emphasis on housing and small business development

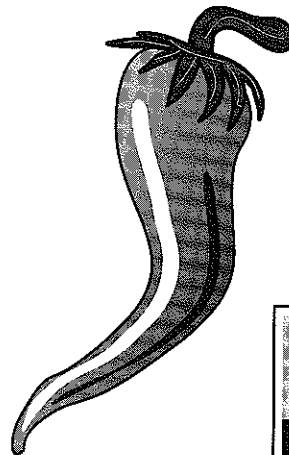
- Managers of welfare reform - creating welfare-to-work jobs, leading to greater self-sufficiency among individuals

- Proponents of sustainable development - promoting smaller-scale organic farming in a non-traditional venue, the urban neighborhood

Although the future of urban agriculture lies in what happens on the ground, based on the individual initiative of dedicated practitioners, the CFSC understands the importance of defining city farming as an issue of public policy as well. In this vein, we

plan to include urban agriculture initiatives as part of our federal policy agenda for the 2002 Farm Bill and beyond.

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What Good is
Community Greening?

4. Community greening helps people learn about civic participation.