

Food Trust Matches Farmers

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In addition to Corboy, two fulltime workers plan, build, plant, tend, and harvest there throughout the normal growing season and beyond.

Higher temperatures in the city along with two greenhouses and a high tunnel constructed on the site extend the period for plants to grow. In the first week of January, Corboy reported that the spinach was still being harvested. The tomatoes quit producing around Christmas, she said.

Fresh produce from Greensgrow is sold directly to restaurants in downtown Philadelphia. "The entire delivery route is less than 10 miles," Corboy said.

Greensgrow also serves to connect urban neighbors with agriculture. According to Corboy, about 2,000 people toured the site in 2001.

"This is a way for people in the city to actually see food being grown," she said, noting that many of the visitors are kids.

"I want them to understand what I'm doing. Maybe they want to become a farmer," she said.

While Greensgrow has received some funding from several local foundations and the USDA for new projects, the ultimate goal of the operation is to turn a profit by innovation and "all the things that a regular small farm does to survive."

Corboy and the other

workers build raised soil beds out of a mixture of clean fill, compost, "spent" mushroom soil, and horse manure — happily provided by the managers of the stables downtown that house the city's numerous carriage horses.

Their first raised beds had water retention problems, according to Corboy.

"We were having a terrible time (from lack of drainage)," she said.

Mat Brener, an agricultural engineer with a special interest in urban ag, suggested rebuilding the beds with a drainage system. He helped secure a grant from the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) arm of the USDA to work on it.

Brener's drainage project involved installing perforated PVC pipe surrounded by crushed stone under the 15 inches of soil in the raised bed.

Although the original soil may still be contaminated with heavy metals from a galvanized steel plant that used to operate there before it was closed down in the 1970s, Greensgrow has developed, and continues to develop, ways to grow safe food on the site.

The beds were constructed on existing concrete pads, which serve as a barrier from the contaminated soil underneath. In areas without a concrete base, a plastic fabric is laid on top of the crushed stones before the beds are built on top of them.

Corboy has sent leaf samples from plants grown on the site to Penn State to have them tested for heavy metal content. The tests have shown no harmful substances in the plant tissues, she said.

Rural Connections

Corboy, a former chef, hopes that a working partnership between Greensgrow and the Philadelphia Fair Food Project will result in the development of marketing cooperatives consisting of rural and urban farmers.

This Neighborhood Urban Ag Cooperative (NUAC) mission is to train people to become urban farmers and to link rural producers of fruits, vegetables, meats and other farm commodities with their urban counterparts.

Such a cooperative would enhance the marketing power of both groups, Corboy said. Rural producers would help supply a complete line of farm fresh, healthy foods to city markets, while their



Fresh commerce at Clark Park Farmers' Market at 43rd and Baltimore Streets in West Philadelphia.

urban partners would provide easier connections to those markets and a greater awareness of food trends.

The city's potential is great for other projects similar to Greensgrow, according to Corboy. The local New Kensington community development corporation alone has 72 abandoned industrial sites that could possibly be turned into farms, with many other such brownfields existing throughout the city, she pointed out.

Corboy envisions a smorgasboard of urban farms offering a variety of fresh produce and community supported agriculture (CSA) shares to people from the neighborhood. Some of those farms could specialize in ethnic foods suitable to their location.

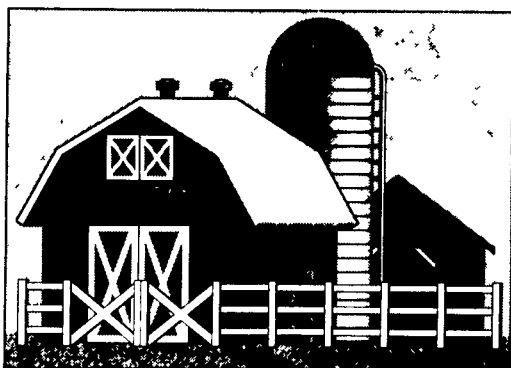
All of this would help "give people in the city some say and some control of their own food production," she said.

"We see our advocacy role as getting city and state to recognize this is a good use for abandoned land."

Corboy acknowledged the help and support of Penn State on various projects including plasticulture and greenhouse tomato production.

She is looking for more urban ag enthusiasts.

"I don't want to be the only farmer in Philadelphia," she said.



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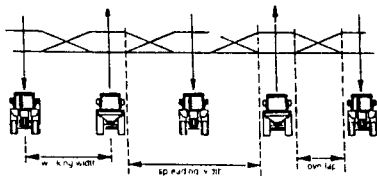
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