

The Philadelphia Orchard Project

Over the last fifty years, Philadelphia's population has decreased by an estimated 32 percent due to the loss of industrial and manufacturing jobs and the flight to the suburbs.¹ Left behind are at least 26,000 vacant residential structures and nearly 3,000 vacant commercial and industrial buildings, as well as numerous empty lots.² From this bleakness has sprung city wide reforms such as Mayor Street's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, as well as numerous non-profit and community development corporations. One main focus in urban renewal has been the greening of the urban center. Many non-profits are looking to establish urban agriculture as a functional, natural area in these blighted neighborhoods.

According to the Council on Agriculture, Science and Technology, urban agriculture is:

“A complex system encompassing a spectrum of interests, from a traditional core of activities associated with the production, processing, marketing, distribution, and consumption, to a multiplicity of other benefits and services that are less widely acknowledged and documented. These include recreation and leisure; economic vitality and business entrepreneurship, individual health and well-being; community health and well-being; landscape beautification; and environmental restoration and remediation.³”

Urban agriculture can take the form of aquaculture, backyard livestock, orchards and vineyards alongside roads and buildings, crops grown on rooftops and balconies, and community gardens in public parks. It is a crucial part of green design because it can mitigate environmental issues such as liquid and solid waste disposal, air quality, stormwater maintenance, the heat island effect, and food transportation, all while bolstering economic development and community revitalization. Considering that 80% of America's population resides in an urban or peri-urban location, and that food products typically travel 1,500-2,500 miles from farm to plate, it makes sense to invest in a

¹ Kaufman, J. and Bailkey, M., “Farming Inside Cities: Entrepreneurial Urban Agriculture in the United States,” Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2000

² Philadelphia Neighborhood Transformation Initiative <http://www.phila.gov/nti/>

³ North American Urban Agriculture Committee “Urban Agriculture and Community Food Security in the United States: Farming from the City Center to the Urban Fringe” Community Food Security Coalition, October 2003

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productive, intense system of urban livestock and food production.⁴ There are numerous examples within Philadelphia. These include farms such as the Weavers Way Co-op Farm, Greensgrow Farm, Mill Creek Farm, Philaberry Farm, the Roots Gardening Project, Philly Farms Mushrooms and non-profit organizations such as the Food Trust, the Urban Nutrition Initiative, and the Philadelphia Horticultural Society.

A relatively new non-profit is the Philadelphia Orchard Project. Paul Glover, the founder and director, wants to create thousands of acres of urban orchards, which will supply the surrounding neighborhoods with educational opportunities, jobs and fresh produce. These trees would provide outdoor meeting and play areas, cleaner, cooler air, and could eventually boost tourism. He sees energy efficient communal housing projects located within these orchards as the long-term goal of this project.⁵ This is not a unique idea, but one based on numerous examples throughout the country. Austin's Urban Orchard Project began in 1999 and has supported ten major plantings and many mini-orchards, as well as distributing 800 fruit and nut trees to individuals.⁶ The director of the program noted to the New York Times that since their plantings, crime and vandalism has decreased.⁷ Earthworks has planted 47 orchards throughout the greater Boston area varying in size from a couple trees to over one hundred.⁸

Urban orchards can take the form of a forest garden with casual maintenance and free picking or a neighborhood orchard garden, which is maintained and harvested by the community. With higher levels of organization, these orchards could become the location of a community center, a larger farm or a non-profit neighborhood business. Thus, the ownership of the fruit can belong to any passing stranger or a non-profit group, depending on the structure of the orchard. The reasons behind planting orchards as opposed to vegetable gardens are that trees declare the permanence of the project, they provide free and low-cost food, they are less labor intensive and they provide shade.

⁴ North American Urban Agriculture Committee "Urban Agriculture and Community Food Security in the United States: Farming from the City Center to the Urban Fringe" Community Food Security Coalition, October 2003

⁵ Paul Glover, Interview via email, Oct 18th, 2007

⁶ Harris, S. "The Urban Orchard Project," Homegrown Texas, Sept/Oct 2002, <http://www.homegrowntexas.com/issues/SeptOct02/index.html>

⁷ McGurie, Victoria, "Replacing Neglect with Peach Trees," New York Times, Sept 2, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/realestate/02nati.html>

⁸ Earthworks, "Program Information," <http://www.earthworksboston.org/urbanorchards/UOprogram.htm>

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Urban Orchards can target the less desirable locations around the cities -- places where development is at a standstill. These are usually the neighborhoods where land is more plentiful and the community could benefit more from an orchard because of higher rates of unemployment, food insecurity, lower incomes, higher dietary problems and less access to fresh fruits. Additionally, these neighborhoods usually have small pockets of contiguous empty lots or single vacant lots within a row. This makes it harder for redevelopment, and easier for small-scale agriculture. Many studies have shown that vacant lots devalue the surrounding houses, and that the planting of trees and rehab of vacant lots can raise home value by 10-20%.⁹

The Philadelphia Orchard Project planted its first dozen trees near Snyder and S. 8th in South Philadelphia earlier this year. There are several more scheduled plantings in Kensington and Norris Square for the fall.¹⁰ These orchards will have apple and peach trees as well as boysenberry and blackberry bushes. The organization established a nursery in a community garden in Roxborough. The funding for this program has so far relied exclusively on monetary donations from private individuals and land donations from community organizations such as the United Communities Southeast Philadelphia. The Orchard Project also hopes to acquire permanent sites through the transfer of development rights. While TDR is normally used to protect larger swaths of land outside the city, this novel use could provide permanent, non-profit controlled, functioning green spaces within the city limits. Although the city government has been very supportive of the program, they have yet to be directly involved with plantings and/or site selection.

The Philadelphia Orchard Project works in conjunction with the Philadelphia Horticultural Society's "Philadelphia Green." Since 1974, this program has supported the development and ongoing care of community gardens, neighborhood parks and high-profile public green spaces through grants funded by profits from the Philadelphia Flower Show.¹¹ According to Philadelphia's coordinator for environmental and urban sustainability initiatives, funding for orchards around the city is part of the new

⁹ McGurie, Victoria, "Replacing Neglect with Peach Trees," New York Times, Sept 2, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/realestate/02nati.html>

¹⁰ Paul Glover, Interview via email, Oct 18th, 2007

¹¹ "PHS makes Philadelphia Green," Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, <http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/phlgreen/index.html>

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GreenPlan Philadelphia. The Orchard Project also partners with other urban agriculture/urban greening programs in Philadelphia such as the Fair Food Project, Farm to City, the Neighborhood Gardeners Association, Treevitalize and the Urban Tree Connection.

The benefits of this program are clear and numerous, but there remain some drawbacks. When planting on urban soil, contaminants can be a major issue. If not researched properly, the negative outcomes could weaken the support for farming in cities. As with other urban infrastructure, the trees and bushes could be subject to vandalism. I know from experience working on an urban farm that people will trespass and destroy the crops for no apparent reason. Also, rotting fruits could attract all sorts of pests, although these are usually found anyway on vacant lands because of illegal dumping. Most Americans seem to accept the idea of urban farming; after all, nearly 30% of our foodstuffs come from urban areas.¹² However, it seems like the state and federal government are mired in their support for large-scale industrial agriculture. Therefore, most of the money and land must be provided by charitable foundations, non-profits, private donations and possible some city funds.

The Philadelphia Orchard Project needs to concentrate on increasing the number of orchard sites and continued publicizing. They should work even more in depth with the numerous local tree planting programs to encourage the use of fruit trees along streets and for landscaping. They should also run classes about fruit tree maintenance and non-spray pesticide techniques, as well as fruit preservation programs to increase the lifespan of the harvest. Most importantly, these orchards could be a place where the municipal waste loop could be closed. Collected rain water or grey water systems could irrigate the saplings. Food scraps could be used for compost and shredded paper could be used in large scale mulching projects. All in all every city needs an organization like the Philadelphia Orchard Project. It makes complete sense to focus on the greening of blighted neighborhoods, and what better way to that then to include functionality into the planted trees.

¹² Smit, J. and Nasr, J. "Urban Agriculture for sustainable cities: using wastes and idle land and water bodies as resources," Environment and Urbanization, vol. 4, No.2, October 1992..

Paul Glover and volunteers in South Philadelphia¹³



Community resident volunteers to water on the weekends



Greensgrow Farm

¹³http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/realestate/02nati.html?_r=1&ref=yourmoney&oref=slogin

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Weaver's Way Farm

