

Citing Philadelphia and Urban Agriculture

Urban agriculture is the practice of agriculture within or near the surrounding boundaries of cities. The Council on Agriculture, Science and technology (CAST) defines urban agriculture as “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”, which incorporates the use of resources and its affect on humans.¹ Practices can include crops, livestock, fisheries, and forestry that take place on private or public lands or river banks. Less widely concerned issues such as 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 are beginning to gain attention though. Urban agriculture can benefit the city in two ways: it can provide delicious fresh local food, which provides food security and safety and it can improve the natural green value of the city, which promotes the overall health.

Advantages of Urban Agriculture:

Philadelphia is facing an increase of blight, which leaves over 31,000 properties vacant.² On a daily basis, citizens abandon buildings, leaving them to rot as a pile of concrete. As the number of vacant lots increase, the value of city blocks decrease. Although it may not be the biggest contributor to blight, the loss of the local economy is surely a great factor. As land values and expenses increase, many independent family businesses tragically go out of business. They lose customers to huge chains such as Wal-Mart or cookie-cutter restaurants. The same falls true for small to medium size farmers who live on the corridor of Philadelphia, and provide vegetation to local businesses. Once they lose their customers, they have no choice to sell their farm to developers. Developed farmland intensifies the problem of urban sprawl and takes away the potential green from the city and its surrounding areas.

Urban agriculture has the potential to improve the greenness in a city in three ways: it can improve the local economy, energy efficiency, and decrease the amount of vacant lots. The USDA estimated that fruits and vegetables travel on average 1,500 to 2,500 miles from farm to table.³

¹ Smit, J., A. Ratta, and J. Nasr. “Urban Agriculture: Food, Jobs, and Sustainable Cities. United Nations Development Program. New York. 1996., 6

² Philadelphia Committee to End Homelessness, *2010 Plan to End Homelessness*
<http://www.pceh.org/images/2010plan.pdf>

³ <http://www.foodroutes.org/buylocal.jsp>

States like California and Florida ship their produce across country.⁴ Thus, consumers perceive agricultural production more as a national trade rather than a local trade. For cities who import, it does not strengthen the local economy. The American Farmland Trust states that the American economy is making it harder for new small to medium size farmers to begin or continue farm production. Other than the crops that require a specific climate, cities should consume the local vegetation. The cross-country transportation is a waste of energy and unnecessary increase in emissions.

In order to gather support for local and urbanized agriculture, the city needs to get the community involved. Farm markets and community supported agriculture are two ways to elevate the importance of preserving farmland. According to the White Dog Café Foundation, local markets help to “create, strengthen and connect locally owned businesses and farms committed to working in harmony in natural systems, providing meaningful living wage jobs, and supporting healthy community life.”⁵ Therefore, community members not only establish a new relationship with the farming community, but the general community and other members. It creates a sense of pride and companionship, especially when members see each other at the markets or pick up days on a regular basis. Individuals become active within their neighborhood, which can lead to the slowing or reversal of blight.

A great example of how small to medium farms can improve the greening of a city can be cited from Dr. Elkins’s in Coatesville. Elkins raises cattle for consumption in the Philadelphia region. The quality of the land Elkins farms is very high in terms of urban agriculture.⁶ Dr. Elkins sells cattle to local restaurants such as the White Dog Café. The collaboration of White Dog and Elkins prevent the possibility of 1,000s of excess miles of transportation to import cattle into Philadelphia. Also, Dr. Elkins is working towards a land easement to protect his land from development. He believes at one point in the future, Coatesville will become just another neighborhood located in Philadelphia. However, the most important contribution of Elkins is that he promotes the local economy with local



<http://www.buckrunfarm.com/doctor.html>

⁴ <http://www.foodroutes.org/buylocal.jsp>

⁵ White Dog Foundation. “White Dog Community Enterprises: Cultivating Our local Living Economy.”

www.whitedogcafe.foundation.org.

October 16, 2007.

⁶ Visit with Dr. Elkins under class trip with David Harper. June, 2005.

produce.⁷ Many individuals go to White Dog because it uses nothing but local produce.⁸ White Dog hosts events with guest lectures that educate people on the value of local and urban agriculture and its social impacts on Philadelphia. For example, Michael Shuman, author of *Going Local*, stated at an event, “Going local means nurturing locally owned businesses, which use local resources sustainably, employ local workers at decent wages, and serve primarily local consumers. It means becoming more self-sufficient, and less dependent on imports.”⁹ Keeping business within Philadelphia keeps money within the city. Local businesses will continue to operate, slowing the spread of blight.

A green advantage of urban agriculture is that it can build on existing, neglected, or undeveloped landscapes. Many of these neighborhoods reflect negative characteristics of urban culture. However, by turning these lots into agricultural properties, it improves the community’s health on a social and economic dynamic. When citizens experience more food and social security, they experience improved mental health, less crime, health care costs, and improved city services. Philadelphia community gardeners listed recreation (21%), mental health (19%), physical health (17%), produce quality and nutrition (14%), spiritual reasons (10%), cost and convenience (7%), self-expression/self-fulfillment (7%), and other (5%) as reasons for community gardening or urban agriculture.¹⁰ The commitment to convert part of the 30,000 vacant lots can help turn eyesores of weedy, trash-ridden, and dangerous areas into beautiful and safe gardens that feed the surrounding the population.

Another advantage of using urban agriculture is that nearly everyone can take an active role because there are different types of urban farms. In general, farms can be divided into three categories 1) recreational farms which sell less than \$10,000 or more annually of high-value products and consist of less than 100 acres; 2) adaptive farms which sell \$10,000 or more annually of high-value products and are 100 to 200 acres in size; and 3) traditional farms which sell greater than \$10,000 annually of high-value products and are greater than 200 acres. Recreational farms make up 18 percent of metropolitan farms, adaptive farms account for 14 percent, and traditional farms account for 33 percent of all metropolitan farms.¹¹

⁷ Visit with Dr. Elkins under class trip with David Harper. June, 2007

⁸ White Dog Foundation

⁹ White Dog Foundation

¹⁰ Relf, D. (ed.). *The Role of Horticulture in Human Well Being and Social Development: A National Symposium* (proceedings). Portland, Oregon. Pp 93-105.

¹¹ Relf, D. (ed.). *The Role of Horticulture in Human Well Being and Social Development*. Portland, Oregon. Pp 93-105.

Challenges of Urban Agriculture:

Although urban agriculture can be an extremely beneficial tool to transform vacant lots to green usable properties, cities need to address many issues and challenges. The first issue is that people that are willing to invest into the agricultural production do not own many of the vacant lots.¹² The process of buying these lots may get complicated. For example, a 79 year old woman dies; her family has the right to inherit the property for the next three years if there is no will. One way to overcome these issues is for communities to develop inventories of properties that they could eventually transfer lots for agricultural use.¹³ This planning will avoid any miscommunication and limit the time to determine the status of a lot. Additionally, cities can use federal and state money from organizations like the American Farmland Trust to purchase land easements in order to secure urban and per-urban land parcels for agricultural purposes. Cities and investors can get creative in order to gain ownership of lands, but they must also raise money to cover start-up costs.

Start-up costs can be a tough obstacle, especially for people related to agriculture with limited income. Costs include: labor, site management, water, tools and equipment, rent and insurance, processing, packaging, and marketing materials.¹⁴ Without enough funding, one risks the possibility of not growing the vegetation properly. However, there is an opportunity to get creative and get the community involved. Many of the local businesses, banks, and residents are going to want to see the nearby vacant lots improved, and will be more willing to help or donate. Banks and government funded redevelopment plans, like the Neighborhood Initiative Transformation in Philadelphia, provide micro-credit to growers.¹⁵ Some farm businesses, nurseries, and seed companies can donate products. If the vacant lot is to be Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), individuals can donate money, equipment, labor, and other forms of support.

One of the biggest challenges urban agriculturists will face is the difficulty to market their locally-grown foods to grocery stores, restaurants, and institutions.¹⁶ These places most likely already purchase their produce from a large farm at a low price. Therefore, one has to change the buying trends in order to promote “Buy-local”. Within the last five years, business councils, nonprofits, and government agencies created an increased awareness due to “Buy-local”

¹² Smit, J., A. Ratta, and J. Nasr. “Urban Agriculture: Food, Jobs, and Sustainable Cities. United Nations Development Program. New York. 1996.

¹³ Smit

¹⁴ Smit

¹⁵ Philadelphia Committee to End Homelessness

¹⁶ Smit

campaigns.¹⁷ However, a local demand is needed in order to sell locally. A great way to develop this demand is to get other institutions involved. For example, school boards and health agencies can work with farms and other cooperatives to educate the local populations about the advantages of local produce. Universities and nonprofit organizations can provide data about consumer preferences and diet habits. Urban farms should produce vegetation that nearby neighborhoods desire.

Finally, urban agriculturists face three major logistical problems: the lack of knowledge and skills, seasonal limits, and lack of protection from crime and vandalism.¹⁸ Urban agricultural farms are located in or near city limits, which means that individuals are unlikely to have extensive knowledge and experience. However, through government or non-profit efforts, the gap between the city farmers and rural farmers can close by having rural farmers help train those involved with urban agriculture. City newspapers can feature editorial columns that highlight information about agricultural production and gardening. Yet, a major difficulty is the remediation of the soil. Abandoned lots are often polluted with sediments and lead. For example, Sayre High School, located on 58th and Walnut, could not start a garden properly because of lead pollution. However, the work of some University of Pennsylvania students helped to clean some areas of the garden. Nonetheless, larger lots will require professional cleanup on a more expensive scale.

The issues of seasonal limits and protection from crime and vandalism are interrelated. To get the best efficiency and use of an urban farm, the land needs to be used year round. However, in cities like Philadelphia, the weather does not permit this type of year-round use. If the lot looks to not used and has no green to it, it will look abandoned and attract crime. Cities can overcome these obstacles by using season extenders like greenhouses, hoop houses, cold frames, and the use of waste heat.¹⁹ Also, if some parts of the abandoned building are strong enough to remain standing, they can be converted for indoor agriculture such as mushrooms, fish, and seed s
be used for community kitchens. The important factor is to keep the lot in use so that there are eyes



<http://www.upenn.edu/secretary/inauguration/communit>

¹⁷ City Farmer, Philadelphia. "Urban Agriculture in Philadelphia"
www.cityfarmer.org/Phillyurbag9.html. October 20, 2007

¹⁸Smit

¹⁹ Smit

constantly watching the lot and improving the health of the block. As long as the lot remains in productive use, it should naturally repel crime.

Although Philadelphia has a strong challenge to convert over 30,000 vacant lots, some areas in the city show promise. One of the largest successes is Northern Liberties in North Philadelphia. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, this region employed thousands in its factories, breweries, and leather tanneries. Beginning in 1962, a majority of the factories were abandoned, leaving behind polluted, trash filled lots. In 1987, the EPA Region III's Superfund Removal Program removed over 1,000 drums and laboratory containers from the abandoned buildings.²⁰ Three years later, an investigation by the EPA revealed that PCBs were leaking and threatening the residents.

Beginning in the 1990s, residents of Northern Liberties demanded a change. They wanted to create a community park and garden on the site that would be more aesthetically appealing and protect them from the leaking pollutants.²¹ Cooperative relationships among neighborhoods, local schools, churches, businesses, and community organizations helped to transform this pollutant ridden area into gardens, a mural, a farmers market, and a bird sanctuary. The Northern Liberties Neighborhood Association, the current owner of the site, also received a grant from Philadelphia Urban Resources Partnership to help with tasks that required professional revitalization, such as PCB clean-up.²² Today, community members are able to actively get involved with green activities while their neighborhood's health and value increased.



http://www.epa.gov/reg3hwmd/bfs/fedpart_resource/pip_northlib.htm

Urban agriculture has the potential to transform vacant lots in the city, into efficient green areas that foster community health and safety. Clearly, an environmental tool, cities should look to use urban agriculture as a way to fight blight and other social problems. Through the work with the EPA, Northern Liberties is now a safer and cleaner neighborhood. Although financial support will be among the many challenges faced, these are challenges that can be overcome.

²⁰ Environmental Protection Agency. "Partnership in Progress: Northern Liberties Community Builds Partnerships, and Park."

http://www.epa.gov/reg3hwmd/bfs/fedpart_resource/pip_northlib.htm October 21, 2007.

²¹ EPA

²² EPA

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