

# New Roots Urban Farm: A Model of Sustainability

by Mary Hargadon

In urban life, food usually comes from far away. Mostly all the food bought by people who live in cities has been transported from rural areas. Although there are many reasons for the existence of the current food system, time and space are an issue when it comes to the availability of local food. The busy working life of most urbanites makes it difficult to find time for keeping vegetable gardens or livestock, and cities don't really leave room for growing your own food. Given these conditions, many are finding they are dissatisfied with the food system and feel that it is disconnected, unsustainable, and/or unethical.

The food system is disconnected because people miss the process of watching a seed transform to a vegetable and many even miss out on the process of cooking such vegetables at home and eating communally with others. Produce is instead bought at stores, with stickers that say names of different states or even different countries on them. In another example of this disconnectedness, many city kids grow up without much experience seeing food grow from the ground.

The system seems unsustainable in light of current gas prices that affect the cost of food trucked across the country. Food production seems unethical because of the working conditions and pay for those who grow, pick, and ship much of the produce in stores, and also the living conditions of the animals that provide meat and dairy. Many people want a new way of attaining produce and animal products but have few alternative options with the time and space available in urban life.

In cities across the world, many are creating urban farms to remedy this problem. The goal of farms built in the city is usually to provide food security in the surrounding community. A big benefit of urban farms is that they make food immediately available to city dwellers instead of importing it from other states or countries. Ideally, this not only saves resources but helps urbanites (especially people that are already struggling) to survive in case of a disaster or pending food crisis. Depending on the codes of each city, these farms can also raise animals such as chickens, goats, and bees. Urban farms can provide

food directly to neighbors, restaurants, stores, and food banks close by. They give people who live in cities a chance to be independent and sustain urban living, no matter the status or income level of the area. Urban farms can utilize sustainable resources such as rainwater and yard waste compost. Gardening in the city also improves the quality of the soil, even if it has been contaminated with building rubble. These farms can also serve as an excellent learning experience for children who don't get the chance to visit rural farms. While sustainable organic rural farms can also help their communities, urban farms are especially revolutionary because of how difficult it is to grow and raise food in the city.

An urban farm called New Roots has been growing next to Karen House in St. Louis for over three years. What was once four empty building lots is now a flourishing vegetable farm. Rows of vegetables like carrots, collards, garlic, and tomatoes can be seen through the chain link fence on Hogan Street. Behind the rows is a small greenhouse made of recycled windows that holds trays of baby seedlings. An aquaponics<sup>1</sup> system in progress is currently improving this greenhouse. Further back are multiple compost bins, one housing worms to make vermicompost<sup>2</sup>. Two herb beds hosting plants like sage, chives, sorrel, and dill are framed next to the greenhouse and hoop house. The large hoop house covered in clear plastic serves as a shelter for the outdoor kitchen equipped with picnic tables, a stove, a fridge, and a sink. Beyond that is a newly renovated chicken coop housing nine chickens. The plot also contains an earthen oven made out of clay and other natural materials. This time of the year, the farm comes to life with farmers and volunteers working, playing, and cooking together on most days.

This farm was created with a mission to educate, provide food security, and be a model of sustainability. New Roots educates by providing workshops, volunteer opportunities, field trips and tours, internships, and a summer kids program. It is important for the farm to be a resource for those who want to be in touch with gardening, agriculture, or just nature, but have

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**Mary Hargadon** has been an intern and collective member of New Roots in the past, and now grows a flower garden for the farm - check out her work in the park near Karen House on Madison street!



Mary Hargadon

trouble doing so due to city living. Food security is established simply by having a plot of land in the middle of a city neighborhood that has healthy food available. The food isn't donated or transported to New Roots; it's grown at the farm, and can be grown year after year. The farm practices sustainable agriculture by growing organically and not using artificial chemicals. It also accomplishes this with techniques like creating compost from waste from the farm and building with some recycled materials. Having the produce readily available in the city and at farmers markets is also more sustainable than having food be shipped from far away.

One of New Roots' big programs is its CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). A CSA is a program where members buy a share of the farm every season, and therefore pick up a certain amount of vegetables every week during the growing season. A typical weekly share includes a bundle of around eight different vegetables, including root vegetables, greens, garlic, onions, and seasonal crops. New Roots usually has around twenty CSA members that all live in the St. Louis city area. This gives city dwellers a chance to get local organic produce and a chance to get to know their farmers. The CSA is the revenue generator for the farm. The shareholders also sometimes have other ways of contributing to the farm, like printing the brochures or screen printing T-shirts for the kids program. Shareholders and farmers gather yearly for events like potlucks and the harvest party in the Fall.

New Roots' main motive, though, is to serve the immediate community in the surrounding neighborhood. Its placement in North St. Louis city wasn't random, but rather intentional. In-

ner city communities tend to be the most disconnected from their food and have less organic produce available. The farm serves its neighbors with the summer kids program (YAP) and the North City Farmers Market. YAP (the Youth Apprenticeship Program) meets twice a week when school is out with kids ages eight and up, some being guests of Karen House. The kids harvest the vegetables for the shareholders and then make a lunch together including food grown on the farm. They get to learn how different vegetables grow by picking crops like beets or eggplant and work together to get the food washed and stored. While getting kids to eat vegetables can be challenging, many are more interested after picking the crops themselves and preparing them in dishes like pizza.

The North City Farmers Market is a collaboration with New Roots and the Old North Restoration Group. New Roots sells produce there every Saturday morning from 9:00am to 12:00pm at the 14th Street Mall on St. Louis Ave, just blocks away from the farm site. There are different vendors and activities each week. There are also other vendors selling produce besides New Roots, like the farm Burning Kumquat from Washington University and City Seeds. Low prices make the food available to a variety of people, plus five dollar vouchers for the market are supplied to food banks in the area so that more people have a chance to get fresh local produce in the city. Bikes are provided and fixed through the market to make transportation easier for community members.

New Roots has always been run by a collective, which currently has seven members. Some of the members work full time for the farm, and some part time. In ages running from early twenties to early thirties, Sara, Chris, Stephen, Joe, Molly, Amy, Trish, and new intern Jenny, run the farm. The collective members don't make a wage for their hard work, but they make sure that enough money is made to support each other. Each member gets something like an allowance each month, providing just enough to scrape by. The collective has faced challenges in both the past and present with urban agriculture. There has been the ongoing struggle due to the fact that it takes full time work to run a farm, but New Roots can't provide full time pay or benefits like health insurance. This leaves many of the members balancing jobs with their work on the farm, which at times is exhausting. Yet, this way of life works because many farmers share meals and living spaces in the neighborhood and live cheaply. Because they integrate work, play, and food together, farming is much more than a job; it is a lifestyle for the collective.

While each of these revolutionary farmers comes from a different background, for the most part they had to learn farming skills later in life. Being part of an urban farm attracted them for overlapping reasons. Every member has different skills to offer to the project and takes on different responsibilities. There is obviously much physical labor to be done with crop management and building the structures on the farm, but there is also a lot of behind the scenes work. Volunteer contact, market organization, sprout management, curriculum writing, and accounting are some of the many ways each person contributes. Even though the farm looks like a peacefully growing garden at first glance, much work and organization goes into it. The collective is responsible for the management and the labor that is neces-

sary to run the project, and every year they have managed to grow with the farm, despite challenges and setbacks.

Though New Roots isn't a perfect system that completely feeds its community all year long (yet), it is a model, proof that food doesn't have to use tons of oil to travel to people, and that it can be grown locally. The model teaches adults and children how to grow their own food, or at least gives people the chance to support local farmers. Its presence provides a green space in the neighborhood, where there is normally little plant life. The farm demonstrates fair treatment to animals and how to raise them. It demonstrates what variety of vegetables can grow in the area and don't need to be transported from other states. Along with physical expansion, the collective is always seeking out new methods of growing and strengthening the sustainability of the farm, like with the new aquaponics system. They are also continually sharpening skills such as food preservation and seed saving.

Though the collective finds urban farming very rewarding, the act can be draining because of the constant battle against



New Roots Urban Farm, photo by Beth Buchek



Mary Hargadon

pollution and soil contamination. Despite these challenges, they continue to improve the quality of the earth on the farm site and provide a green space for the neighborhood. There is also the conflict of desire for a bigger stretch of quiet land in the country, where one could be more in touch with nature while farming and see all the stars at night. Yet, the color, diversity, and picturesque grit of the city remain satisfying for the moment. Urban farming gives farmers the chance to connect with so many different kinds of people daily and the immediate resources of recycled materials to be creative with. Being present in an urban setting can be very influential and inspiring for fellow urbanites, not to mention a wonderful resource. For now, the collective is committing their time to farming in St. Louis, and many are truly grateful.

For info on New Roots visit [www.newrootsurbanfarm.org](http://www.newrootsurbanfarm.org), or email [collective@newrootsurbanfarm.org](mailto:collective@newrootsurbanfarm.org). You can visit during the warm weather months on weekdays at 1830 Hogan, St. Louis, Missouri 63106.

1. New Roots is turning their greenhouse into an aquaponics system by raising fish and recirculating their fertilized water to feed seedlings. the water is recirculated by a solar powered pump.

2. Vermicompost is compost that has been broken down with the help of earth worms.

