Small Farm Movement Takes Root in the Motor City

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The morning's farm activities include: milking the goats, carrying hay out to the horse, feeding the chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, etc. and collecting eggs, and tending the rabbits. Later on, gathering vegetables and flowers for market day, checking the fruit trees and associated beehives, tinkering with the tractor, preparing the baler for the last cutting of hay, etc., etc. All the familiar farm chores…only these are all being done in the heart of the City of Detroit, almost within sight of the smokestacks of the giant Ford complex. This farm is located on the converted playground of one of the city's public schools, the Catherine Ferguson Academy (CFA).

And CFA is not the only farm in Detroit. By my count, there are now at least six micro-farms within the city limits ranging from about an acre to several acres. Even more important, there are now scores of productive community and school gardens, along with hundreds of family gardens, which are providing fresh fruits and vegetables for their neighborhoods and for sale at various farmers' markets around town. And the urban farming movement is growing here faster each year, strengthening people with healthy produce, and re-energizing communities with shared planning, work, and celebration. It is becoming a movement of urban farmers worthy of linking up with the readers of *Small Farmer's Journal*. But how did this movement come about?

Detroit, as everyone knows, was "The Motor City," the auto capital of the world, home of the GM, Ford, and Chrysler. But in the mid-1970's, the first of the oil crises hit Detroit like a tsunami. Plants downsized and closed, leaving tens of thousands of Detroiters out of work and neighborhoods devastated. People started leaving the city in droves. That exodus left broad swaths of open fields where vibrant neighborhoods stood a few years earlier. By some estimates there are now in total about 40 square miles of vacant land inside the city limits of Detroit. And as the people left, this new prairie land was rapidly repopulated by pheasants, rabbits, and raccoons, 'possums and songbirds, along with the occasional fox or coyote. But it also brought some determined new urban farmers. As a result, by the early 1990's, the Detroit Agriculture Network (DAN) came into being to provide a forum for exchange of information, resources, seeds, etc., among these new farmers.

First—A School Farm

By 1993, Paul Weertz, who was a member of the Detroit Agriculture Network and the biology teacher at the Catherine Ferguson Academy (CFA), set out to transform the playground at the school into an urban farmstead. CFA is a public high school that serves young women who are pregnant or who have young children. The farm chores helped make the biology lessons real to these urban high schoolers, and the animal husbandry helped teach them lessons about the importance of proper care and nurturing for their own babies.

Over the years, CFA's two-acre farm has become one of the jewels of Detroit's urban agriculture movement. It consists of a central pasture with a modest shelter for horses and the occasional steer that the farm raises. Surrounding the pasture are students' vegetable plots and a seed-saving garden. Closer to the school is a small barn that was constructed by students and volunteers a few years ago, for storage of hay and equipment. A grant two years ago allowed the farm to install a small wind turbine on the barn's roof to power the lights in the barn.

Most accessible from the school is the barnyard which houses the poultry coops, a duck/goose pen with pond, cages for about 20 rabbits, a shed and pens for the milking goats (currently only three, but at times as many as seven), and a stall currently occupied by a visiting pygmy pig. A

hoop house for extended-season growing sits nearby, surrounded by flower gardens. To the west of the pasture are a series of fruit tree orchards, and behind them are the beehives. On the north side of the farm, The Greening of Detroit organization has a fruit tree nursery, from which it removes about 1/3 of the trees each year to transplant to community gardens.

During the school year, the young women who are students at CFA do all of the animal care chores. On weekends, a small army of volunteers from across the metro area turns out to feed and water the livestock, milk the goats, harvest vegetables and fruit and press cider for sale after school on Thursdays, etc., all anxious to be a part of the growing urban farm movement.

Next—Soup Kitchen Farm

In 1999 another farm took shape on Detroit's lower east side, the Earthworks Urban Farm. For years the monks at the Capuchin Mission have run a community soup kitchen that serves about 2000 meals-a-day, and they needed to supplement the donated food with fresh produce, so the farm was born on a couple of vacant neighborhood lots. Since that time, the farm has grown to cover parts of several city blocks, and has become a very productive venture. Patrick Crouch, the Earthworks Farm manager, says that in 2008, with only 2 weeks of picking, the farm harvested 200 lbs of asparagus from the recently added patch. And, on a single July day, the farm produced 150 lbs of green beans. Earthworks Farm also markets its own jams, honey, and hand-balm, all made on the farm.

Crouch tells visitors how the farm is trying to develop a new model of helping feed urban residents by having as many people as possible who are serviced by the soup kitchen working on the farm. The farm is also developing a couple of different programs involving young people in the growing, harvesting, and marketing of farm produce with the goal of helping to "create new, young leaders of communities." Crouch dreams of new ways to get healthy, local produce out to the community, for instance, by developing bicycle-powered mobile sales stands. In recognition of all this good work, this past February, Earthworks Farm was selected as one of the top ten producing urban farms in the country by *Natural Home* magazine.

Upping the Ante: The Garden Resource Program

But the big leap forward for Detroit's urban farming movement came in 2003, when the Earthworks Farm joined forces with the Detroit Agriculture Network, the Greening of Detroit (an organization primarily focused on reforesting the city), and the Michigan State University Extension Service, to found the Garden Resource Program Collaborative. The Garden Resource Program (GRP) which grew out of that collaboration started by providing seeds and some gardening resources (tilling, compost, etc.) to 39 community gardens and 41 family garden participants. But the program has grown by leaps and bounds, so that now the GRP provides a multitude of training classes, technical assistance and advice, marketing guidance, etc., in addition to providing seeds and seedlings to community and individual gardens across the city. For the price of GRP membership ($10 for family gardens; $20 for community gardens), members are able to pick up spring seeds in late March, cold crop transplants in April, warm-weather seeds and sets in May, and fall crop transplants in mid-summer, with all seedlings being grown organically at the Earthworks Farm.

During the 2008 growing season, the Garden Resource Program provided resources to 169 community gardens, 40 school gardens, and 359 family gardens within the city. In the process it distributed 32,320 packets of seeds and approximately 129,360 transplants! The 40 by 60 foot greenhouse at Earthworks farm is now working at capacity to provide those transplants, and the growth of the Garden Resources Program is still accelerating.

But the Garden Resources Program seeks to provide more than just gardening resources and skills. The GRP consciously strives to make the urban farming a communitybuilding activity. By emphasizing community gardens, where the work and the produce are shared, and community garden events and celebrations (community work days, picnics and cook-outs, meetings to plan, evaluate, and share experiences, etc.), the GRP helps strengthen community bonds as it enlivens the communities in which it operates. Megan Kohn, an Americorps volunteer serving on staff for the Garden Resource Program, came to Detroit "… to practice small-scale, intensive growing practices [because]…more people need to be growing food close to where they live…" Her immersion in the Garden Resource Program, however, caused her to "come to a deep realization that the work is so much more about the people, and the connection between people… Neighbors growing food together is powerful. We are literally building an alternative food system here…"

Grown In Detroit Takes Off

Detroit's urban farm movement entered a new phase in 2005, when the Garden Resource Program started helping urban farmers begin to market their produce. By 2008, 47 gardens were participating in the Grown In Detroit Cooperative, marketing their produce at seven sites around the city, including the city's old and wonderful farmer's market, the Detroit Eastern Market. In the co-op, experienced marketers help show newer sellers the ropes, educating them about quality standards, packaging, pricing, etc.. As a result, in 2008 the Grown In Detroit Cooperative had gross sales of $14,668, with 100% of the profits going back to the local gardens and gardeners involved.

Last season the Grown In Detroit Cooperative initiated a program to involve and train young urban farmers. This program, called Youth Growing Detroit, developed seven different groups consisting of 61 young people and 11 adult leaders. The young people involved not only helped produce the crops that were taken to market, they also helped staff the Grown In Detroit tables on market days. In addition, they participated in two summits in the spring to exchange ideas, tour each other's gardens, make plans for marketing produce, etc. And, on market days, in addition to learning marketing and record-keeping skills, the young farmers also earned a small stipend for their hours invested.

A Compost Workgroup within the GRP has been focusing on developing a community composting pilot project to demonstrate an open-pile composting system scaled appropriately for community gardens. And, as of last year, a Seed Saving Project was initiated to increase the proportion of seeds grown locally for distribution to community gardeners. In addition, the GRP offers training classes and resources on a wide range of topics from extended-season growing to urban beekeeping. Finally, through its 9-week Urban Roots training course, the GRP trains participants both in horticulture and community organizing to provide them with the skills necessary to help build the developing urban farm movement in new neighborhoods.

Here A Farm...

In 2003, the Garden Resource Program, along with several community partners, took over two acres of the city's 26-acre Romanowski Park and turned it into a farm plot. The farm provides a site for training classes for the GRP, and the produce from this farm goes to community residents, many of whom work in the garden during "Community Garden Nights" every Thursday from April to October. Some of the produce is also used for education lessons in nearby schools. And the remainder is harvested and sold through the Grown In Detroit Cooperative. The farm also includes a teaching pavilion, a playground with integrated teaching gardens, a 118-fruit-tree orchard, and a sugar maple grove.

While the Garden Resource Program is easily the most thorough and supportive urban ag effort in Detroit, it is not the only one. Another non-profit, called Urban Farming, was founded in 2005 to help neighborhood residents get city approval to use vacant lots for community gardens. Its website reports that there were 58 such vacant lot gardens in Detroit in 2008.

Another expression of Detroit's urban farming movement is centered on the campus of Wayne State University in the heart of the central city. SEED Wayne (Sustainable Food Systems Education and Engagement in Detroit and Wayne State University) is "a campus-community partnership dedicated to building sustainable food systems on WSU's campus and in the Detroit community, through activities in teaching, research, engagement and operations." On campus it has several raised-bed vegetable gardens and involves students in maintaining them. It hosts a monthly farmer's market on campus, pressures the university's cafeteria system to "buy local," composts cafeteria waste, etc..

The moving force behind SEED Wayne is the visionary professor of urban planning, Dr. Kami Pothukuchi, who views the importance of urban agriculture in the broadest sense. As she said, "We're not just concerned with urban agriculture, but with the whole issue of community food security." By "food security" she means that communities should have access to a food system that provides an equitable distribution of safe, healthy food products that are produced in a responsible and sustainable way that does not burden the either the community or the earth with pollution and heavy chemical inputs.

SEED Wayne's work thus far has been noteworthy enough to land a substantial Ford Motor Company "College Community Challenge" grant. The themes of sustainability and community partnership in SEED Wayne's program were central to its securing this award. And, as part of this community partnership, some of the grant money will be used to fund the construction of a new, larger greenhouse at the Earthworks Farm, to help keep pace with the growth of the Garden Resource Program.

There A Farm...

And 2008 saw the establishment of yet another micro-farm in Detroit, this one located inside the large city-owned Rouge Park on the west side of town. The 2-acre D-Town Farm is the project of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. Marilyn Barber, serving as the farm manager, organizes volunteers, especially school children, to come out and prep the soil, plant the sets, harvest the produce, and market the goods.

Detroit has always been a city of gardens. As Patrick Crouch, farm manager at the Earthworks Farm, noted, there are two main reasons for this. First, Detroit, unlike New York or Chicago, is a sprawling city of single-family homes, so residents always had space for vegetable and flower gardens. Second, the auto industry and other heavy manufacturing in the area drew many people from the southern states, people who grew up tending gardens and livestock. More recently, the influx of Spanish-speaking families has brought many people with farming experience from Mexico, Puerto Rico, etc.. So that, while city ordinances still prohibit keeping livestock, there are and have always been people around the city who kept chickens, ducks, rabbits, goats, etc.. And this spring, the Garden Resource Program's class "Raising Chickens in the City" had 70 participants! That's 70 new families that will be gathering their own, "farm-fresh" eggs this year in Detroit. And it is strong evidence that Detroit's urban farm movement is growing broader and sinking deeper roots each year.

Detroiters Join the Small Farmer's Movement

The significance of this growing urban ag movement should be clear to readers of *Small Farmer's Journal*. The movement is awakening ever-wider circles of urban residents to the importance of eating healthy, local-grown produce. Every new urban farmer becomes a small-farming educator and advocate for his or her neighbors. That translates into many new customers for the nearby rural farmers selling at Detroit's farmers' markets.

But far more important will be the political support that the urban farming movement can give to rural small farmers. Those 70 new families raising chickens here this year will be 70 households who will need to quickly learn about the NAIS, about the groundswell of small farmers fighting it, and about why they need to join in taking a stand against the NAIS themselves. And those 70 families, as participants in the Garden Resource Program, will be connecting with hundreds of other farmers here. Combine that with the broad network of friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc., that each farmer knows and influences and it can easily turn into thousands of new supporters for the rights of small farmers—thousands of new families who will want to break the grip of Big Ag on their wallets and their lives.

Sometime this spring, on Detroit's lower east side, Paul Weertz and his neighbors will once again be cutting, raking, and baling hay on the vacant city blocks nearby. Most of that hay will go to feed livestock at the Catherine Ferguson Academy Farm; some will be sold. But some will get used for the Halloween hayrides that Paul gives to inner-city kids, many of whom have never seen a tractor before. And that will add joy to a lot of lives, and more new friends for the small farmers movement—urban and rural!

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