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### Urban Farms

Marcia Stepanek and Tracie McMillan

#### The urban farming movement finds an urgent new cause: the nation's food shortage



FOR YEARS, URBAN DWELLERS HAVE TINKERED WITH window-box and roof-deck gardens, toiling to transform small patches of empty land behind brownstones and beneath skyscrapers into bounty.

But now, there's something bigger growing out of those neighborhood plots. More and more people—and most notably, nonprofit health advocates—are creating urban farms to promote healthier and less expensive local alternatives to corporate processed foods.

Their timing couldn't be better. As food shortages worsen and gas prices continue to soar, urban farms are stepping up to sell—at below-market prices—some of their healthier and more-affordable bounty to help feed the nation's hungry.

Growing Power, a Milwaukee-based health food nonprofit, has been producing organic food for years as part of its mission to offer area residents an alternative to processed foods. Earlier this month, the group decided to expand its reach to serve lower-income residents in southern Wisconsin and inner-city Chicago. For \$14—half the price of what it would cost retail—Growing Power's urban farms will give buyers a bag of enough fruit and vegetables to feed a family of four for a week.

For Growing Power's executive director, Will Allen, it's a dream come true. "I'd wanted to do something like this for years," Allen told *CONTRIBUTE Online*. "We have a program for health advocates that asks people to pay us \$500 up front in exchange for a share of organic produce grown by local farmers throughout the growing season. But then, when the food crisis came up and gas prices started going through the roof, I thought, *why not offer more people the chance to buy healthier food every day of the week?*"

The program, kicked off by Allen May 10 and reported on by Milwaukee's local ABC News affiliate and by *The Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*, has generated enough new demand for what the urban farms produce, that Growing Power now offers \$8 half-bags to singles, as well. "This is not a subsidy," Allen says. "I believe people can afford \$14 or \$8 a week. People pay a lot more than that just for cigarettes."

The no-subsidy philosophy also prevails at City Slickers Farms in San Francisco's Bay Area. The seven-year-old Oakland-based nonprofit runs six community farms

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### FEATURED VIDEO

#### PLAY TO WIN

The new documentary, *Kicking It*, is all about a different kind of sports playing field. Produced by movie mogul and philanthropist Ted Leonsis and directed by Susan Koch, *Kicking It* follows seven homeless soccer players from around the world preparing to compete in the 2006 Homeless World Cup in Cape Town, South Africa. For many, just getting on the field has meant getting off the streets, off drugs, and off alcohol. In this clip, 19-year-old U.S. team-player Craig Holley speaks of a childhood of abuse and a life of limited expectations. The documentary was an official selection of the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, an audience award-winner at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York this past spring, and was recently broadcast on ESPN.



there and sells the local produce to buyers based on what they can afford. "We started out as part of the organic food movement and now, with rising food prices, we also see that we can offer a healthier alternative to food subsidies," says food program assistant Logan Harris.

Earth Works Garden, a nine-year-old organic food nonprofit partnership in Detroit, also believes in engaging with the people it serves, offering city residents and patrons of the city's soup kitchen a chance to grow what they eat. "We give people seeds to grow what they like, and then give them the chance to take it home with them," says Patrick Crouch, the field and greenhouse coordinator of Earth Works Garden, which works closely with other food nonprofits in the city, including Detroit's famous Capuchin Soup Kitchen, which has been feeding the hungry since 1929. "If people don't have a home to go to, they can take (the food they grow) to a relative's home, or to a friend's. Or, they can volunteer in our soup kitchen and prepare it there to share with the people who eat there. It's a great feeling when someone working in our kitchen can tell people they've grown it themselves," Crouch says.



*Calvin Chin (left) and other volunteers from "Team Charlie Brown"—a group of friends and area urban farm advocates—pitching in during New York Cares' "Hands On NY Day" in April 2008 at the Bedford-Stuyvesant urban farm in Brooklyn, NY*

Jerry Smith, the director of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, says one of the best things about the organic food movement's expansion into emergency food has been its power to teach people better eating habits. "We're in the inner-city where there are no grocery stores," Smith says. "There are some kids in low-income families who think that food comes from gas stations, so not only are we able to provide food. We're also able to promote awareness."

And that's not all. The organic food movement also is starting to help traditional emergency food providers offer a healthier mix of food across the board. Throughout New York City, for example, an increasing number of nonprofits without urban farms of their own are swapping much of their canned and boxed-goods stock for fresh, locally grown produce.

For the nonprofit Food Bank For New York City, food grown by local farmers has been a godsend. CEO Lucy Cabrera says the supply of emergency food stored at the nonprofit's central warehouse in the South Bronx has dropped by a dramatic 59 percent since fall—the worst shortage Cabrera says she's ever seen. "Shelf-stable products are behind 53 percent, and produce is 21 percent behind" what's considered a normal supply, she says. Now that the food bank has started buying surplus produce from local farmers, the situation doesn't seem as dire, she says. "We're buying more from New York State farmers and we believe that this will end up being more cost-effective for us," Cabrera adds.

Other nonprofits serving the hungry are hopping onto the fresh food bandwagon. Across the city, organic food advocates have united to create Local Produce Link, which last year connected 17 emergency food providers directly to upstate growers. Last year, the program distributed about 31 tons of produce, said Jacqueline Berger,

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**THE CONTRIBUTE POLL**

**Should Barack Obama and the nation's new Democratic leadership work next year for tighter regulation of charitable organizations?**

- No, not necessary
- Yes, through increased enforcement of IRS spending rules already on the books
- Yes, through new laws that boost the amount of oversight over how charitable organizations spend their tax breaks

the executive director of Just Food, one of the nonprofits involved. Structured as a community-supported agriculture project, farmers are paid for the year up-front, removing much of their financial risk, and food pantries and soup kitchens reap the benefit all year.

Philanthropists are starting to sit up and take notice. Urban farms provide today's younger crop of donors who are impatient for quick results with a high-impact outlet for their altruism. Late last year, Arabella Philanthropic Investment Advisors, a private wealth consultancy with offices in New York, Washington, and Chicago, issued a report that advises donors seeking fast and significant social impact for their donation to consider urban farms. It said that emergency food programs—including community-supported agriculture programs like Local Produce Link—are one of the Top 10 "quick and most effective ways" to make a difference.

Still have some doubts?

Consider New York City dwellers Robert and DeVanie Jackson, co-founders of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Farm, a vacant lot the couple transformed into tillable land in 2004 to bring healthier food to their gritty Brooklyn neighborhood. Some neighbors told them before they broke ground that they'd be better off turning the land into a parking lot. But the Jacksons persevered. Now their urban farm produces so much food, they sell collards and tomatoes on the street most weekends. "When we first started, we were doing a food pantry because of the lack of quality food," Devanie Jackson says. "Today, we've got a farm and it's not only providing healthier food for those in the neighborhood. It's food for people who can't afford it otherwise."

What's next? The Jacksons are hoping to expand into a nearby community garden and launch a farmer's market where they can sell whatever the local food pantry doesn't need. "We don't have a Whole Foods, and Fresh Direct doesn't deliver here," says Devanie Jackson. "But people everywhere need fresh and healthy food."

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