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Society of the Quarter - Urban Farming

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INTRODUCTION

The United States has a long tradition of citizens and communities growing their own food. During World War II, when canned foods were rationed and materials for the production and transport of foods were needed for the war effort, the United States government promoted Victory Gardens in order to supply fresh fruit and vegetables to its citizens. Americans were encouraged to plant gardens everywhere—in sunny backyards, at schools, and even in community plots and window boxes in the urban environment. The nation needed all citizens to do their part to feed the country and the soldiers. An estimated 20 million Americans had gardens during the Victory Garden Campaign and produced more than 1 million tons of vegetables, or approximately 40% of the nation’s produce supply (National World War II Museum, n.d.).

American food supplies are no longer affected by war-time rationing, yet many citizens still experience food shortages. Food deserts are defined as areas where access to affordable, fresh, whole, healthy foods—like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and dairy—are unavailable or
severely limited (Centers for Disease Control, 2012). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines a food desert as a census track with low income, or greater than 20% of households in poverty, and low access to groceries, where at least 500 people, or 33% of the community, live more than one mile away from a grocery (or more than 10 miles away for non-metropolitan tracks) (United States Department of Agriculture, n.d., para. 4). Living in a food desert may reduce a person’s access to and consumption of healthy foods, which could lead to diet related illnesses such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. The USDA estimates that 23.5 million Americans live in a food desert, of which 13.5 million are considered low-income (para. 2.).

Food insecurity, or the lack of adequate food for consumption due to insufficient money or resources, is another serious problem many Americans face. The USDA’s Household Food Security in the United States in 2013 found that 17.5 million households, or 14.3%, experienced food insecurity at some point during 2013, and 5.6% of households experienced “very low” food security, where food intake for one or more members of the household was reduced and normal eating patterns were disrupted (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014, p. v).

Food deserts and food insecurity are two factors that can contribute to physical, mental, and emotional health problems (CDC, 2012; Urban Farming™, 2012f). Community gardens are one method being deployed to reduce the impact of food insecurity. Although community gardens can be a supplementary source of produce, they are not the ultimate solution for increasing consumption of fresh, healthy foods. Education is also key in empowering people to grow and consume nutritious whole foods instead of high-calorie processed foods (Schoenberg, Howell, Swanson, Grosh, & Bardach, 2013). This is where community groups and non-profit organizations can have a great impact towards reducing food insecurity.
URBAN FARMING™ (HTTP://URBANFARMING.ORG)

Modeled after the Victory Garden efforts of World War II, Urban Farming™ was founded in 2005, in Detroit, Michigan, by recording artist Taja Sevelle. The organization began with three gardens and a mission: “To create an abundance of food for people in need by supporting and encouraging the establishment of gardens on unused land and space while increasing diversity, raising awareness for health and wellness, and inspiring and educating youth, adults and seniors to create an economically sustainable system to uplift communities around the globe” (Urban Farming™, 2012a, para. 1). Urban Farming™ encourages personal, community, and corporate gardens to register on their website to become a part of their Global Food Chain™. The Global Food Chain™ is a campaign to change the world’s approach to food production with the goal to, “Create an abundance of food for all in our generation” (Urban Farming™, 2012a, para. 3). A visit to the “Garden Locations” webpage (Urban Farming™, 2012b) reveals a map where one is able to view locations of gardens around the globe in real time; as of 2015, there are over 62,000 gardens registered, a number that is steadily climbing (Urban Farming™, 2012j).

Urban Farming™ strengthens and empowers communities that are located in a food desert or are suffering from food insecurity. The critical components of the Urban Farming™ mission are rooted in their “coexistence model.” This model seeks to raise awareness and provide community support in the following areas: Business Growth, Job Creation, Urban Redevelopment, Urban Agriculture, Health and Wellness, and Global Investment (Urban Farming™, 2012c). These focal points are a part of Urban Farming™’s holistic approach to addressing not only hunger, but also innovation, productivity, and the growth of vibrant communities (Urban Farming™, 2012a). The coexistence model uses community gardens,
projects, workshops, and online educational and community forums to address the tenets of the model.

**URBAN AGRICULTURE**

Strategically placed gardens in urban environments can reduce the impact of living in a food desert because they are a source of healthy foods in a community lacking easy access to a grocery. Wang, Qui and Swallow (2014) conducted a geographic analysis of food desert locations compared to the locations of community gardens and farmers markets in Edmonton, Canada. The study revealed that in mature, inter-suburban communities, where gardens and markets were factored in, the size of the food desert was reduced. The analysis also found that farmers markets and community gardens were often located near existing grocery establishments. This suggests a need to strategically plan the location of an urban community garden if the intent is to provide as many citizens as possible with access to affordable, fresh food. The USDA-ERS Food Desert Locator (United States Department of Agriculture, 2015) maps food deserts and has great potential for use in community garden planning. Urban Farming™ establishes and encourages the creation of gardens on unused land and space (Urban Farming™, 2012a), including community gardens in several of the food deserts in and around Detroit (Urban Farming™, 2012b).

The benefits of community gardens extend beyond access to healthy foods, impacting the social, health, and economic aspects of an urban area. They provide a source of free or low-cost produce which can increase consumption and knowledge of whole foods. Gardens can be catalysts for cultural and generational integration, helping individuals become self-reliant and empowered (Golden, 2013). Beyond agriculture, Urban Farming™ uses their gardens for
workshops and events focused on positive lifestyle choices. Chefs host cooking classes in the gardens where participants are taught how to prepare inexpensive, healthy, and easy recipes at home. Yoga, fitness, and dance classes are taught at Urban Farming™ garden sites to help address the obesity epidemic by promoting active lifestyles (Urban Farming™, 2012f).

BUSINESS GROWTH, JOB CREATION, URBAN REDEVELOPMENT AND GLOBAL INVESTMENT

Food insecurity and food deserts are associated with poverty and economic downfall in communities (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2014). Urban Farming™ addresses the deeper socioeconomic issues contributing to hunger through their coexistence model. By empowering and educating people, as well as connecting them to opportunities and resources, Urban Farming™ not only gives away food to combat hunger but also the tools to create vibrant and sustainable communities (Urban Farming™, 2012a, para. 6).

Urban Farming™ supports business growth in communities through a range of programs and workshops on topics including financial literacy and entrepreneurship. In 2010, youth from low-income households participated in the Urban Farming™ Young Entrepreneurs and Money Management Program in partnership with YoungBiz (http://youngbiz.com), an organization that teaches finance and business to youth through relevant strategies, like converting personal interests into money-making ventures (Urban Farming™, 2012g). These programs aim to produce economically empowered communities that can support business growth.

Urban Farming™ raises awareness about employment opportunities and provides training in a growing sector of ecologically sustainable careers and technologies. They have supported community projects focusing on alternative energy, green engineering, water conservation, living
walls and rooftops, and green architecture (Urban Farming™, 2012e). By exposing and training communities in green technologies, Urban Farming™ is opening a door for citizens to become involved in career opportunities with a high probability for future success. For example, Urban Farming™ projects have focused on the green building market, an industry which is predicted to expand. According to “Green Multifamily and Single Family Homes: Growth in a Recovering Market,” by 2018, 38% percent of builders will have 90% or more of their construction projects classified as “green” (McGraw Hill Construction, 2014).

The Coca-Cola Rain Barrel Harvesting Project is one way Urban Farming™ has brought green business innovations into communities, giving citizens first-hand experiences in green technologies. The project was funded by a $100,000 grant from Coca Cola (Dalton, 2012), with support from the Home Depot to assist in the construction of nine pergolas at Urban Farming™ community garden sites throughout Detroit (Urban Farming™, 2012d). The pergolas collect rainwater from their rooftops, which is stored in repurposed Coca-Cola syrup barrels. Solar turbo pumping irrigation systems then use the harvested rainwater to water the Urban Farming™ community garden plots (Urban Farming™, 2012d).

Edible walls, or living walls, are another growing green business opportunity that Urban Farming™ demonstrates and supports within communities. Edible walls are a vertical farming method in which plants are grown without pesticides on 2’x2’x4” recycled steel panels that are linked together and mounted to form walls 6 feet high and 24-30 feet long (Urban Farming™, 2012i). Edible walls lower energy costs, improve air quality, reduce noise pollution, intercept run-off, increase biodiversity, provide food, and mitigate urban heat island effect (Feng & Hewage, 2014). Urban Farming™ started the Global Food Chain™ pilot project in Los Angeles with the installation of four edible wall systems in and around downtown L.A. The edible walls
were placed in locations that serve homeless or low-income communities, such as the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, and all produce grown was donated (Urban Farming™, 2012i).

Urban Farming™ recognizes the role of urban redevelopment, especially in impoverished areas that need economic stimulation. When developers focus on a parcel of land where an existing community garden is located, Urban Farming™ is committed to co-existing with that development. They strive to work in conjunction with developers to incorporate edible walls within the project design (Urban Farming™, 2012h). These edible walls earn LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) energy-efficient-construction certification points for developers (Urban Farming™, 2012g), making them a win-win solution to promoting urban gardens. By training communities to participate in emerging industries, growing businesses, and working with developers, Urban Farming™ sets the stage for global investment in distressed cities such as Detroit or Los Angeles (Urban Farming™, 2012a).

CONCLUSION

Over the last 10 years, Urban Farming™ has helped to bring urban agriculture and community gardening into the spotlight. Inspired by the Victory Gardens of previous generations, Urban Farming™ empowers communities to establish agricultural and economic self-reliance to support citizen’s needs. Urban Farming™ offers knowledge, tools, and support to tackle food deserts and food insecurity in the United States. Through their “coexistence model,” Urban Farming™ seeks to provide all persons with not only access to affordable, healthy foods, but with the ability to produce food and economically sustainable communities. Urban Farming™ is breaking the cycle of emerging food assistance and bringing to life their vision, “to create an abundance of food for all in our generation” (Urban Farming™, 2012a, para. 2).
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Urban Farming™ is a valuable resource with a mission and goals that many communities and organizations share. Across the U.S., many similar organizations are providing support for urban agriculture and community-produced food projects. A sample of those groups include:

- **Added Value** (http://added-value.org/), New York, NY:
  “Added Value is a non-profit organization promoting the sustainable development of Red Hook by nurturing a new generation of young leaders. We work towards this goal by creating opportunities for the youth of South Brooklyn to expand their knowledge base, develop new skills and positively engage with their community through the operation of a socially responsible urban farming enterprise.”

- **Growing Power** (http://www.growingpower.org/), Milwaukee, WI:
  “Growing Power is a national nonprofit organization and land trust supporting people from diverse backgrounds, and the environments in which they live, by helping to provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food for people in all communities.” They have offered hands-on training, demos and technical assistance in community food systems since 1993.

- **Advocates for Urban Agriculture** (http://auachicago.org/), Chicago, IL:
  “AUA is a coalition of individuals, organizations and businesses working to support and expand sustainable agriculture in the Chicago area, from home- and community-based growing to market gardens and small farms.” The website is a hub for information, projects, resources and opportunities related to sustainable urban agriculture; membership is free.
• **Seattle Tilth** (http://www.seattletilth.org), Seattle, WA:

“The mission of Seattle Tilth is to inspire and educate people to safeguard our natural resources while building an equitable and sustainable local food system.” Seattle Tilth organizes classes, programs, resources and a long list of urban agriculture groups in the Seattle area.

• **Atlanta Harvest** (https://atlantaharvest.com/), Atlanta, GA:

“Atlanta Harvest delivers fresh, naturally-grown produce to its customers while directly challenging the some of the root causes of urban poverty.” Atlanta Harvest is building a network of urban farms in the Atlanta area to assist with food production and economic redevelopment in distressed areas of the city.

**REFERENCES**


