

The Future of Urban Farming

BY GLYNN LLOYD

Some sights in the neighborhood were so common that I had stopped noticing them; but then one day they came into view. While driving down Harold Street on the way to my cousin's house, I noticed a vacant lot on my left and then, just a block down, I saw two large vacant lots on my right. At the end of Harold Street—right before Howland Street—stood a huge half-acre vacant lot. This area had been labeled the “H-block.” It was a tough neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts, known for the significant number of shootings that occurred—which primarily were gang related. It also was a neighborhood with beautiful housing stock, long-term residents, and strong community leadership. Later that week, intrigued at the amount of vacant space, I walked the streets and tallied approximately 1.5 acres of land sitting vacant among the homes and apartment buildings.



Not long after that day, in the commissary kitchen of my company—City Fresh—the staff was preparing meals for one of the summer camps in session. The team members were cutting heads of lettuce that had been shipped in from across the country, and a question occurred to me: Why couldn't we be growing this lettuce closer to home?

In answer to that question, I—along with a small group of community residents—founded City Growers. It was the spring of 2007. We set out to convert vacant lots—primarily located in the Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan neighborhoods—into intensive micro farms: to put our community idle hands to work and supply fresh, local, organic produce to the growing and insatiable market for local and sustainably grown food. We desired to apply the idea that human-scale production that is less reliant on large equipment and fossil fuels is a more-efficient production method. We weren't alone.

Decades prior, I had devoured Eliot Coleman books. I marveled at the amount of high-quality vegetables his Maine farm was producing on just a couple of acres and well into the cold season. I intently listened to Will Allen and the production he proselytized from Growing Power's greenhouse vertical systems. I was inspired by his emphasis on using practical and functional technologies and his obsession for making amazing soil.



A vacant lot in Dorchester being converted into a microfarm.

Closer to home and a few years back, Greg Maslowe revealed to me how much revenue he could produce on one acre on his Newton Community Farm; the figure he quoted was \$135,000. These people—in their different ways—have proven the ability and efficacy of intense small-scale production.

In 2008, City Growers squatted on land behind Sportsmen’s tennis club in Dorchester. This would prove to be the catalyzing act that changed the zoning laws of Boston. Prior to our land grab, the Tommy’s Rock community in Roxbury had been eyeing local vacant lots with the idea of converting them into agricultural use. Community members had been stumbling along a complicated and unclear path in trying to work with the city to achieve their goals. Bette Toney, an active resident, had heard about City Growers, and a mutual friend introduced us. The community vision was clear, so we took it directly to Mayor Thomas Menino. In our meeting, he clearly was not happy with the idea of setting aside taxable, buildable vacant lots, but he also wanted to get out in front of this new demand for urban farming land. After we were dismissed from his office, Mayor Menino’s administration quickly moved to form an urban agricultural zoning committee. Over the next year, there were dozens of meetings. Once a month there was a public meeting at city hall. Consistently, at 8:45 a.m. on the day of the meetings, dozens of community members—

including agricultural activists, farmers, beekeepers, rooftop growers, and compost specialists—gathered in the overflow section. The community, together with city officials, negotiated the language of what would become Article 89, a citywide zoning article that allows for commercial urban agriculture in Boston.

Just a couple of years after the passage of Article 89, City Growers recruited and trained a group of new urban farmers who sold \$45,000 of produce grown on slightly less than one-half acre. The revenue per square foot was encouraging. Most of the produce was sold directly to restaurants, and roughly 20% was sold back to the community at farmers' markets. Making a go commercially at small-scale farming is not easy work, however, and I came to realize that it is for the extreme few dedicated farmers. Urban farming also has broader potential—as evidenced by its impact in Boston over the past 10 years.

Thousands of volunteers have put their hands in the dirt on urban farms. Thousands of farmers' market and restaurant customers have been buying and eating hyper-locally-produced fruits and vegetables from urban farms. The City of Boston and the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars and significant resources into urban farming. Over the last five years, thousands of attendees have filled sold-out Massachusetts Urban Farming conferences, and dozens of local food events and workshops have become regular staples of the growing local food movement in Boston and other cities. In 2014, newly elected Mayor Marty Walsh cut the ribbon on the city's first urban farm: Garrison-Trotter Urban Farm at 227 Harold Street. This was the first vacant lot that came into view during my travels in 2007, and now the land for the farm is being shifted into a newly formed urban farm land trust, thus ensuring its longevity.

Great start, but what's next? I am convinced that the real challenge and opportunity of the urban farming movement is persuading, encouraging, enticing, and facilitating more urban dwellers to grow their own food. Period.

It gradually is becoming common knowledge that all of us are participants in a dysfunctional and dangerously fragile food system. Our current food system has a design problem. Most of our food comes from large monocrop agribusiness systems that rely on cheap labor and fast-depleting fossil fuels. Fresh water and soil are the two most critical natural resources relied upon by our species, and the rate of depletion of these



Mayor Walsh announcing Boston Urban Agriculture Day at the Garrison-Trotter Urban Farm grand-opening celebration.

resources is the most serious threat to the ability of our next generation to comfortably survive. I would argue that it is no longer sustainable or practical to have less than 2% of the U.S. population directly involved in its own food production. Urban and suburban readers: Picture each household on your block growing market-size gardens and fruit trees, and maybe even a few of your neighbors farming chickens or rabbits. Now envision all the in-between spaces—sidewalk medians, vacant lots, and unused parts of parks—overflowing with food production. We need to get there, but how? How do we create and transition to a more practical and resilient food system while we still are dependent on the existing system?

Now, more than ever, I believe this is a bottom-up spiritual and cultural undertaking. The leaders in this movement play important roles as catalysts. This is where organizations such as the Urban Farming Institute (UFI)—with community credibility, farming knowledge, and social and political capital—can fully step in and start creating the new system. In 2011, The Urban Farming Institute was formed as the founders of City Growers realized that relying on pure market forces to obtain land, develop farms, and train community farmers wasn't going to work. In 2015, City Growers

merged with UFI. This allowed government and philanthropic dollars to blend with market sales as revenue sources to support all the components of not only attempting to develop urban farms but also attempting to create a new industry. Public and private vacant-land conversion has been a slow process but recently has picked up steam. Currently, six parcels totaling approximately two acres are under cultivation or are in the process of being converted.

Urban community residents lead UFI, from the board to the staff. Executive Director Pat Spence is a beloved longtime Mattapan resident. Bobby and Nataka, a husband-and-wife team who were born and raised in Roxbury, are spiritual leaders of the urban farming movement and have both street credibility and industry mastery. Together they are a taste of the secret sauce that positions UFI to shift community behavior. As communities of color that historically and economically have been dispossessed, we must be more self-reliant regarding food—this is a crucial step toward making us more resilient to the unstable future.

How do we make it happen? How do we become more self-reliant? Start with the community influencers and provide them with the necessary education and tools. The UFI is positioned to “train the trainer”—partner-



From left, Nataka Crayton-Walker, Greg Bodine, and Bobby Walker at a City Growers microfarm in Dorchester. | Photo by Leise Jones/City Growers

ing with individuals and organizations to provide education on the mechanics of small-scale food production, and to provide the tools—including land, soil, and water. The goal is to enroll families and to find champions within each family to start getting their hands dirty—one seed at a time. From a spiritual and cultural place, the next chapter in the movement is to make the act of growing food both a family and a community practice. Additionally, there is a health and economic argument: Densely nutritious and less-toxic diets, dollars saved from self-production and, potentially, dollars earned by selling excess food all are practical benefits.

Access to land is key. For many residents of our urban and peri-urban communities, the good news is that land ownership or access is an asset that we already have on the books. Be it your front porch, windowsill, or backyard, many urban dwellers have access to land and its power to grow. This underutilized resource is sitting right under our noses.

The UFI has been working with national and local land-trust experts, including the Dudley Neighbors Inc., and is in the process of creating a land trust for urban farms. Simultaneously, UFI is working with the City of Boston—a willing partner that is ready to shift appropriate vacant lots into this urban farm land trust. This provides secure long-term land tenure for the larger spaces within the community. An important milestone of this relationship is the construction of the new UFI urban farming center at the old Fowler Clark Epstein Farm on which the oldest buildings in Mattapan sit—the original farmhouse and barn are being repurposed as the hub of the activities described here.

Access to good soil also is critical for making the shift. Half of what urban residents put on the street corner for trash pickup can and should be turned into compost. We have the potential to create thousands of pounds of black gold. Vacant lots, raised beds, and backyards are waiting to receive it. We also have the unique opportunity for an intergenerational knowledge transfer—many of our elders have experience and knowledge of growing—and it is our responsibility to reconnect our kids to the sources of their food. Seeds can be part of that educational medium, being able to save, share, and plant community seeds is a critical part of true self-sufficiency and resilience. This is the reason that a seed library will be part of the new center.

An important benefit of this shift is that it offers an alternative to today's material-accumulation-focused and screen-obsessed culture. Parents can point themselves and their kids toward activities that teach practical skills



Every year, hundreds of volunteers—primarily youths—are reconnected to the land by touring and volunteering at UFI farms, such as the Glenway Street farm pictured here.

and produce something worthwhile. It enables us to reconnect to the natural cycles and all the richness of natural sciences (such as plant biology) that come with the growing of food.

Sustainable and long-term change includes ongoing education. It also requires a strong mindset, one that not only asks and answers important questions, such as, “How did we get here?” and “Where are we going?” but also envisions a new path and future of what is possible. What would it mean if nearly 100% of your home waste was turned into soil that grew most of your food? And what if this became true for you and for more than half your neighbors? I am humbly optimistic that this is what is next for urban farming.

Glynn Lloyd has been an innovator in the field of transformative urban economic development for more than 25 years. He is the president and founder of City Fresh Foods, a company that brings ethnic meals to homebound elders and provides healthy meals to school-aged children. Glynn catalyzed Article 89, a citywide zoning article that allows for commercial urban agriculture in Boston. He then founded the Urban Farming Institute, a community-led nonprofit that supports the development of the new urban farming industry in Massachusetts.