



FOODSHED

URBAN EVOLUTION

An agricultural movement is underway in New Jersey's largest cities.

BY JENNIFER L. NELSON □ PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZOË MADONNA

Lorraine Gibbons grew up in a third-floor walkup in Brooklyn with her mother's basil and oregano growing on the windowsill. And she grew edible gardens for her own family in their Maplewood backyard. But it was a child's rhapsodic stories of his grandmother's farm she overheard while chaperoning a school field trip that prompted her to plant her first school garden.

"One of the children in my group pointed out a bird's nest on the ground, and started going on and on about their grandma's farm in Virginia and all the nature and the plants and the animals. When we

returned to the school I walked right into the principal's office and asked for a little piece of property behind the school to plant a garden for the kids," she says.

The school was Tuscan Elementary School in Maplewood. With that action and subsequent expansion to nearby Seth Boyden Elementary School in 2000, she joined a trend that has brought parents to schools across the country with shovels, seeds and an understanding that food literacy is integral to education.

But she knew there was more to do. Gibbons' volunteer work and



Lorraine Gibbons of Garden State Urban Farms.

grant writing projects brought her to Newark, where she saw firsthand the paucity of fresh food and lack of awareness about proper nutrition. “I’d look out the window during my train rides into the city for work, and I’d see all these abandoned lots and buildings ... they seemed the perfect place to experiment with hydroponic gardening,” she says.

Growing Change

With the crippled economy leading to widespread hunger and an increase in vacant city lots, the Garden State is following a nationwide trend of community gardens and farms that are sprouting in major cities across the United States, including New York, Seattle and Baltimore. It is a movement spurred on by the desire to improve access to locally grown, fresh food. Cities such as San Francisco are passing legislation that will make it easier to operate small farms and sell food grown on land that was once concrete, or produce harvested from rooftop gardens.

Detroit is widely considered the center for urban agriculture in the country, in part due to the green space created by the city’s policy of demolishing homes in desolate areas. Though it has suffered from crime, declining property values, and other plights of major urban cities, Detroit’s urban farming movement has been thriving, with fresh produce and new jobs effectively reviving even the poorest neighbor-

hoods thanks to “adopt-a-lot” programs and the efforts of various community groups, independent farmers, and city legislators.

In 2008, Gibbons officially joined the urban agriculture movement in New Jersey, cosigning a lease on a half-acre lot initially marked for development in Newark’s Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District and planting it with 3,000-some vegetables; she paid only a nominal fee to rent the space in exchange for providing vegetables to the community.

Today, her Garden State Urban Farms (GSUF), a for-profit company that engages in nonprofit activities like educational development, is gaining stature as a model for renewing New Jersey’s struggling cities. The company, which employs three full-time and 18 part-time employees, collaborates with urban partners to grow at various sites, including an 1,800-square-foot hydroponic greenhouse in Orange that also trains and educates ex-offenders and at-risk youth in sustainable business leadership. Gibbons also serves as a grower and trainer for the 4,000-square-foot Branch Brook Park Greenhouse in Newark with start-up **AG in the City**. “Our vision is to create a space for learning and hands-on training with the hope of creating an economic model for growing food in an urban setting,” says Stacy McCormack, director of **AG in the City**. “The opportunities for job creation, education and food access are truly unlimited.”

Though the organization originally donated its produce to organizations like the Community FoodBank of New Jersey in Hillside,

GSUF now sells food to groups like the Jersey City Food Co-Operative and provides produce at market prices to upscale restaurants such as Arturo's Osteria & Pizzeria in Maplewood and the Huntley Tavern in Summit. It's also sold on Thursdays at the Newark Beth Israel Medical Center Farmers' Market.

The impact of programs such as Garden State Urban Farms, that encourage city residents to participate in the growing of food either through urban farms or community gardens, has been noted by state public health officials as being "among the best sources of fresh produce at affordable prices for residents of urban, inner-city neighborhoods in New Jersey," says New Jersey Department of Health Commissioner Mary E. O'Dowd. "The Department of Health works with partners across the state to promote gardening skills and establish urban gardens at a variety of locations including schools, hospitals and senior centers. Increasing consumption of fruits and vegetables is critical to combating obesity, and community gardens increase access to these nutritious foods."

The company's growth is unsurprising, considering the immediate support that Gibbons and then-partner John Taylor noted after planting that first plot in the Newark neighborhood that, at the time, had nothing more than a handful of take-out restaurants and a mini-

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mart to feed residents. Volunteers from Integrity House, a rehabilitation center across the street, helped set up the gardens and maintain the plants, while Gibbons bartered gardening lessons for plant water at a nearby Islamic school. The organization also maintained a special rapport with residents of CURA, Inc., the drug treatment center next door.

"We developed such an incredible relationship," Gibbons says. "We were handing vegetables over the fence while they cooked recipes from their cultures and shared family recipes. These are areas that are rich with people who have so much knowledge to share and a desire to enjoy fresh food."

Cultivating Collaboration

Since the beginning, much of Gibbons' gardening system has relied on EarthBoxes. Ideal for harvesting a garden without needing acres of land—they can be moved anywhere, even onto asphalt and rooftops—the raised boxes can increase yields, and make it easy to water and weed plants. She combined this technology with the Small-Plot Intensive (SPIN) farming method, which revolves around intensively growing specific crops on small plots of land.

Gibbons continues to gravitate toward projects that foster strong collaborations between many organizations.

One such partnership is with Orange High School, where plans are under way to construct a hydroponic classroom inside a greenhouse. Her work has already inspired courses in nutrition and botany, in addition to programs that will prompt students to practice business principles by selling produce. "Our school system is in an area where the accessibility to fresh food just isn't there. We know that the best way to reach out to the community is through the children ... and one thing we've noticed is that most students couldn't

tell you where the frozen peas you find in the supermarket actually come from," says Candace Goldstein, director of special programs at Orange High School.

Another is the urban farm at the Newark Beth Israel Medical Center. The hospital began by installing some of Gibbons' raised beds in an empty, hospital-owned lot across the street; now in its second summer, the urban farm provides organic produce to the community and employees, and serves as a training ground for a host of nutrition and anti-obesity programs for children and adults. This year, the farm was recognized with the New Jersey Hospital Association Award for Community Outreach and the American Hospital Association NOVA Award. "It's not just about plopping a farm in an urban lot—we have to educate people," says Barbara B. Mintz, assistant vice president of wellness at the medical center. "The garden has helped us close the loop between nutrition, exercise, and wellness by providing people with the very food we're telling them they need to eat."

Meanwhile, GSUF continues to plant with organizations like Greenway Farms in Hackettstown and Arthur & Friends in Sussex County, whose greenhouse served as the model for Gibbons' project in Orange. It was during her initial planting at the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural Center lot that she connected with HANDS, Inc., an Orange-based housing and neighborhood development organization. One of her newest initiatives will take GSUF into Bergen County, where Gibbons will serve as a consultant for organizations like Garfield F.U.N. in helping to establish their own urban farms and community gardens.

But Gibbons is not the only urban farmer in New Jersey. Alexander Marcoulides was inspired by a speech delivered by councilman Darrin Sharif at the Greater Newark Charter School where he was teaching science at the time.

"It was about creating change and making a lasting impact, and before I knew it, I was driving around on a Sunday and looking at all of the abandoned [properties] ... and I saw potential," he says.

He soon began applying for grants and launched his organization, **Green Revolution**, to help transform the landscape of Newark by working with students to design and plant urban farms throughout the community. The organization has both a nonprofit and for-profit side; Gibbons has even consulted with Green Revolution on building its own hydroponic greenhouse. Marcoulides and Gibbons are already in talks to develop a green campus in Newark that will provide space for various organizations to harvest their produce.

The movement is growing in south Jersey as well. When Andrea Ferich moved to Camden's Waterfront South section a decade ago, she stumbled upon a vegetable and flower garden outside of the church on Emerald Street. "I heard all this talk about Camden being a food desert, so it was really surprising for me to move there and see people working together and building communities through this garden," she says.

Camden, she learned, is home to approximately 25 acres of gardens and farms, from vegetable gardens to fruit orchards, and has been distinguished as the fastest-growing community garden city in the county by a study at the University of Pennsylvania.

It wasn't long before Ferich connected with the organization behind it all: the **Center for Environmental Transformation**, a Christian nonprofit organization launched in 2007 that focuses on environmental transformation and justice in the Waterfront South neighborhood. ►



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“The area was once considered a dumping ground, but we saw it as the perfect location to provide a model for a more sustainable form of food and energy production,” says Mark Doorley, president of the board of trustees for the organization.

Along with its urban farms, the organization also helped to acquire land to build a greenhouse that starts 12,000 heirloom vegetable seedlings each year. It sponsors a variety of internships, cooking classes, and other classes and programs that serve some 500 children and teenagers every year.

“These kids are then inspired to help get the produce out into the community; they’ll pile vegetables in wagons and knock on doors to get food to people who can’t get out or who simply aren’t familiar with the value of fresh vegetables,” said Ferich, now director of sustainability for CETC.

Growing Community

Urban farms are becoming community hubs where local residents come together to water, weed, and harvest the fruits of their labor while swapping stories and sharing recipes and cooking tips. “Gardening is a concept that seems so simple, and yet it’s solving all of these complicated problems,” Mintz says. “It’s serving the same role as a water cool-

er in a traditional office environment; we have such a diverse population in our city, but people of all ages are coming together to talk about food, their families, and their cultures.”

Though many residents have fled urban cities like Trenton, organizations such as *Isles* are putting those vacant lots to good use. The land is being transformed into urban gardens that span anywhere from one to 10 city lots, and *Isles*’ low-cost assistance provides the necessary materials and equipment along with the training to help residents grow their own food (see “Fertile Fellowship”, *Edible Jersey*, Summer 2010). This year, *Isles* received a major grant from the Rita Allen Foundation for its Urban Fresh Foods Project to help build the organization’s capacity in urban agriculture and education activities.

Like Gibbons’ educational programs, along with improving access to better quality food, these initiatives all strive to help connect young people to the world around them.

“We’re providing these kids with a context for everything they’re seeing in movies or learning about in school, from finance to global warming,” Gibbons said. “These are children who didn’t know where a radish came from, and now they’re getting excited about healthy food and hearing people’s stories—and they respect the community in which they live.” 🐦