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Where Industry Once Hummed, Urban Garden Finds Success

By JON HURDLE

PHILADELPHIA — Amid the tightly packed row houses of North Philadelphia, a pioneering urban farm is providing fresh local food for a community that often lacks it, and making money in the process.

Greensgrow, a one-acre plot of raised beds and greenhouses on the site of a former steel-galvanizing factory, is turning a profit by selling its own vegetables and herbs as well as a range of produce from local growers, and by running a nursery selling plants and seedlings.

The farm earned about \$10,000 on revenue of \$450,000 in 2007, and hopes to make a profit of 5 percent on \$650,000 in revenue in this, its 10th year, so it can open another operation elsewhere in Philadelphia.

In season, it sells its own hydroponically grown vegetables, as well as peaches from New Jersey, tomatoes from Lancaster County, and breads, meats and cheeses from small local growers within a couple of hours of Philadelphia.

The farm, in the low-income Kensington section, about three miles from the skyscrapers of downtown Philadelphia, also makes its own honey — marketed as “Honey From the Hood” — from a colony of [bees](#) that produce about 80 pounds a year. And it makes biodiesel for its vehicles from the waste oil produced by the restaurants that buy its vegetables.

Among urban farms, Greensgrow distinguishes itself by being a bridge between rural producers and urban consumers, and by having revitalized a derelict industrial site, said Ian Marvy, executive director of Added Value, an urban farm in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn.

It has also become a model for others by showing that it is possible to become self-supporting in a universe where many rely on outside financial support, Mr. Marvy said.

Mary Seton Corboy, 50, a former chef with a master’s degree in political science, co-founded Greensgrow in 1998 with the idea of growing lettuce for the restaurants in downtown Philadelphia.

Looking for cheap land close to their customers, Ms. Corboy and her business partner at the time, Tom Sereduk, found the site and persuaded the local Community Development Corporation to buy it and then rent it to them for \$150 a month, a sum they still pay.

They made an initial investment of \$25,000 and have spent about \$100,000 over the years on items that included the plastic-covered greenhouses and the soil that had to be trucked in to cover the steel-and-concrete foundation of the old factory site.

“The mission was: How do you take postindustrial land and turn it into some kind of green business?” said Ms. Corboy, an elfin woman with the ruddy cheeks of someone who works long hours out of doors.

She approached her early lettuce-growing operation with conventional business goals and little thought for what an urban farm could achieve.

“I thought you didn’t have to have a relationship with the community,” she said. “You would just be a business person.”

Customers said the farm was a breath of fresh air in a gritty neighborhood.

“It’s a little piece of heaven,” said Janet McGinnis, 47, who lives on nearby Girard Avenue. “We live in the city, and it makes me feel good to wake up and see flowers.”

Ms. McGinnis said she could buy herbs, bread and produce elsewhere but did so at Greensgrow because it is part of the community. “We’ve got to keep it in the community,” she said. “We have to give back.”

Despite the community goodwill, the farm lives with urban problems like theft and violence. “I have gone through every tool in the box eight or nine times,” Ms. Corboy said.

Although no one at Greensgrow is getting rich from the operation — after 10 years’ work, Ms. Corboy is making an annual salary of \$65,000 — there is a sense that their time has come.

“Ten years ago when I said we were going green, people thought we were out of our minds,” Ms. Corboy said. “Now we are top of the party list.”

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