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## MAXIMUM GROWTH

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### Seeds of renewal

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How one greenhouse is bringing vegetables — and employment — to an economically depressed urban area

MATT MCCLELLAN | February 5, 2013

In a downtown Cleveland neighborhood, a seed of renewal is growing in the midst of urban decay. Green City Growers, a 3.25-acre greenhouse, was built in the economically depressed Central neighborhood, surrounded by shuttered businesses and abandoned warehouses.



*Constance Suggs-Wilson is one of the local residents who is an employee-owner at Green City Growers.*

The hydroponic greenhouse will produce leafy greens and herbs for regional grocery stores, food service institutions and wholesalers. It's also producing a spirit of hope for local residents during a time when jobs are scarce.

Mary Donnell, CEO of the fledgling company, says 2013 is going to be a big year for Green City Growers. As we spoke in the first week of the new year, she was busy planning out the first float bed and interviewing several potential employees daily.

The interviews are especially important, Donnell says, because Green City Growers is an employee-owned company — a rarity in the growing world. Currently, it has seven employees, but because the greenhouse is ramping up production, Donnell says she is looking to hire another eight to 10. Eventually, the greenhouse hopes to employ around 40 local residents.

"I've done four already this morning plus met with a packaging supply company," she says, laughing. "We are moving fast these days."

The urban grower will begin harvesting its first crop in mid-to-late January. Donnell says she has been waiting for that moment since the project began.

"It's exciting for me to say those words," she says. "When you just seed, you don't need that many people. But now we are starting to transplant, so we need more people. Then we'll be harvesting, and we'll need more people. So we have been building our staff as our production needs build."

Unlike some seasonal operations, all of Green City Growers' employee-owners will be employed all year. Because the lettuce is a year-round crop, the operation will be in the same production cycle during all four seasons.

The greenhouse will grow with lights in the wintertime so that its days to harvest remain the same, summer to winter. Donnell says that will help the small grower

meet its customers' demand for product.

## Seeds of renewal - Produce Grower

Construction is still being finished at the facility near the intersection of E. 55th Street, Woodland and Kinsman Street, on the site of an elementary school that was torn down decades ago. By sharing the profits of this venture with the workers, Green City Growers hopes to raise up this community.

"We are trying hard to transform neighborhoods and provide good jobs that build financial assets for employee-owners," Donnell says.

### Planting hope

Green City Growers is part of The Evergreen Cooperatives, an integrated network of for-profit, employee-owned, green businesses in Cleveland. The Evergreen Cooperative Corporation (ECC), the holding company leading this initiative, has built within it a performance-driven process of new business development and ongoing management that ensures the long-term success of each of the businesses and the effort in general.

The greenhouse is the latest project to be jumpstarted by ECC, and its biggest bet so far. "This is to the best of anyone's knowledge, the largest food-production greenhouse in a core urban area in the U.S., and one of the very largest local food initiatives in the U.S.," Donnell says. "Here we are in Cleveland, Ohio, and we have those bragging rights."

Donnell calls her company a \$17 million economic-development project. The funding for this particular project comes from the federal new markets tax credits, support from University Circle institutions, the Cleveland Foundation and a \$450,000 loan from the city itself to build the structure and hire many of its workers from the neighborhood.



Top: Eloise Howe transplants lettuce plugs to the hydroponic area of the greenhouse. Bottom: Green City Growers is located in Cleveland's economically depressed Central neighborhood.

<http://producegroweronline.com/pg0213-greenhouse-green-city...>



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### GREEN CITY GROWERS: BY THE NUMBERS

The greenhouse is **3.25 ACRES**. It will produce about **3,000,000 HEADS OF LETTUCE and LEAFY GREENS** and **300,000 POUNDS OF HERBS** every year.

Products will be offered to customers within a **150-mile RADIUS OF CLEVELAND**. The company offers **9** varieties of **LETTUCE and HERBS**. Product is delivered within **48 HOURS** of harvest.

### Not-so-green leaders

This isn't Donnell's first rodeo. She helped start the hydroponic greenhouse program for the Ohio State University Extension service, and her 20 years of experience in commercial fresh vegetable processing has come in handy. Donnell hired Graham Tucker as head grower. He's another veteran, with more than 12 years of experience growing greenhouse crops.

Both Donnell and Tucker decided which crops to grow based on two factors: market demand and heat requirements. Lettuce has a lower heat requirement than tomatoes, cucumbers or peppers, other typical hydroponic plants.

"Lettuce responds well to greenhouse lighting, plus it's a good crop for workers," Donnell says. "It's a little easier to grow. And there is strong market demand for locally grown lettuces."

Green City Growers' customers have all expressed a very strong interest in purchasing locally grown leafy greens and herbs that have a high level of food safety.

Donnell says the greenhouse will be third-party audited for food safety and will adhere to very high food-safety standards, which is especially important with all the leafy green issues.

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For now, transportation will be outsourced to a nearby Cleveland company that has its own refrigerated trucks. In time, Donnell says she plans for the company to have

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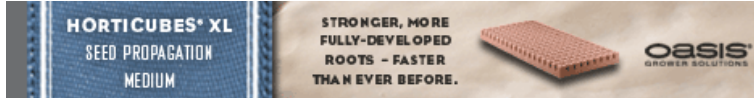
its own trucks and do its own delivery.  
Seeds of Renewal - Produce Grower

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"We have enough moving parts at this moment in time," she says. "We need to simplify the things we can."

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Photography by Jerry Mann



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