

Cleveland's for-profit urban gardens are growing

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by [Jim Nichols](#)

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Lisa DeJong / The Plain Dealer Lorenzo DiSiena, 69, from the Detroit Shoreway area, picks some lettuce in an urban garden called the Kentucky Garden in Ohio City in Cleveland. DiSiena, originally from Italy, has gardened two plots, each 20 X 20 feet, for about four years. The community garden, on the corner of Franklin and W. 38th Street, is

one of the oldest urban gardens in the area.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Money doesn't grow on trees, we've been told our whole lives.

But it might grow on vacant lots all over Cleveland.

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It could grow in row upon row of beans, tomatoes, herbs and strawberries planted on deserted land and between deserted buildings -- and in fact it already is. Gardeners who have cultivated food on derelict land for themselves and their friends are now growing food to sell for profit.

In a city where the swaths of abandonment seem to grow by the day, entrepreneurs and public officials are seeing a chance to capitalize on blight by turning wasteland into farmland.

No single entity keeps comprehensive tabs on the scale and scope. Yet, leaders of various gardening programs say the city is seeing what they believe is its biggest proliferation of big-lot gardens since the Victory Garden days of World War II.

By various counts, more than 200 community gardens -- neighborhood grow-your-own collaborations -- have sprung up on empty lots. Scores of community-

gardening enthusiasts are graduating to tending "market gardens" -- for-profit enterprises trying to make a go of it as side businesses. About a dozen entrepreneurs have made it a full-time job -- a career.

Wind and solar energy and biotech frontiers grab headlines and venture capital as "green jobs" generators. But a loose coalition of enthusiasts ranging from dirt farmers to top elected officials and civic leaders see raising and marketing of fresh, local produce on idle lots as a realistic vehicle for green job creation, entrepreneurship and revitalization.

"What's going on is agriculture -- but it's really economic development," said Natalie Ronayne, executive director of the Cleveland Botanical Garden.

## **City is fertile for economic growth**

Someday, and maybe soon, those opportunities could create hundreds of small farms -- each a small business providing a livelihood for one or more people -- within city limits.



Lisa DeJong / The Plain

Dealer Lorenzo DiSiena, 69, is proud of his beans that he grows in an urban garden called the Kentucky Garden in Ohio City in Cleveland.

It's enticing on a micro level, says Morgan Taggart, an urban-farming specialist at Ohio State University's Cuyahoga County extension service.

"There definitely can be a good return on investment," she said.

How good? Researchers at OSU's Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center estimate that urban farmers could gross up to \$90,000 per acre by selecting the right crops and growing techniques, Taggart said. At experimental plots in Philadelphia, urban-market gardeners pulled in up to \$68,000 in revenue per half-acre.

Then there's the big-picture, macroeconomic appeal: The effort could mean hundreds of millions of dollars to Cleveland's economy each year, enough to land farming among the city's biggest industries.

By one estimate, Northeast Ohioans annually spend \$7 billion on food -- Clevelanders accounting for about \$1 billion of that -- and less than 5 percent is produced locally. Most is shipped here from far away -- an average trip of 1,300 miles from farm to plate. Consequently, billions of dollars flow out of our local

economy and into the pockets of farmers and industrial conglomerates far, far away.

If Northeast Ohio could grow its local food-production industry enough to recapture just a few percent more of that, "that's hundreds of millions of dollars that can be captured here," said Bradley Whitehead, who heads the Fund for Our Economic Future.

Whitehead's economic-development organization is intertwined with the region's major chambers of commerce and is funded by mainstream business and philanthropic interests here.

Some people point to the fund's fascination, and its willingness to invest \$200,000 or more into studying ways to better market locally grown food, as a sign that local urban agriculture's shoots have reached the establishment.

"Ten years ago, there were only a handful of people doing this," observed Brad Masi, a local-foods activist, farmer and teacher at Oberlin College's New Agrarian Center. "In the last two years, we've seen just an explosion.

"What's driving the whole thing," Masi added, "is that entrepreneurial people are creating their own opportunities."

And there is a lot of help.

Ronayne's University Circle nonprofit has been teaching gardeners for 70 years. Its fast-growing Green Corps Urban Youth Program employs about 80 people, mostly teenagers, to run a half-dozen inner-city farms of an acre or less each.

Some of its former garden managers have created careers as the Johnny Appleseeds of for-profit urban farming, teaching others to scratch out a living -- or at least a side income -- from the urban soil.

Joining them are denim-overalls agriculture experts from OSU, Case Western Reserve University and Oberlin and, in a recent twist, Whitehead and other backers from the suit-and-tie world of Greater Cleveland's economic-development establishment. A business-leadership coalition called Entrepreneurs for Sustainability has added to the momentum.

## **Urban farmers face opportunities and obstacles**

Opportunities already abound, says OSU's Taggart.

"You don't need a ton of infrastructure to produce food," she said. "You need access to land, water, sun and know-how. That's not a lot of barriers to entry compared to other start-ups."

Certainly, access to open land gives Cleveland a leg up -- albeit perversely: Decades of population drain, industrial death and, most recently, the foreclosure crisis have left about 3,300 vacant acres in the city, and at least 15,000 vacant buildings.

A report last fall for the nonprofit Neighborhood Progress Inc. and the Cleveland Planning Commission cast those sobering figures in a most optimistic light, particularly for city farming.

"After demolition," the report heralded, "surplus land becomes a raw asset for the city -- a resource for future development as the city's population stabilizes and progress is made toward recovery."

Cuyahoga County Treasurer Jim Rokakis recently led the creation of a quasi-government land-bank agency to recycle that land and now is trying to issue bonds for redevelopment -- a vision that includes small-business financing for urban farmers.

"We can take these problem properties and turn them into opportunities," he said. "I really believe that."

But there are many hurdles to overcome, Rokakis and Taggart agree. A big challenge: finding ways to sell a lot more locally grown food.

The markets are good now -- growing demand and

limited competition on the supply side, many growers say.

Customers at the ever-expanding number of local farmers markets are snapping up so much of what grows in the city that the gourmet chefs who also demand local produce can scarcely get enough.

City farmers are also selling through "community-supported agriculture" arrangements, under which fresh-food fans pre-pay in the winter for weekly deliveries of whatever fresh crops are in season during the spring, summer and fall.

But those mechanisms would support only some small percentage of growth in supply. For urban gardeners to green up hundreds more acres of the city's blighted core and really boost the local economy, their market needs to grow.

That kind of market development is Peter McDermott's job working for the Entrepreneurs for Sustainability business group, and he says it's not an easy task.

"It's a chicken-and-egg question," McDermott said.

Success, McDermott explained, would mean getting major institutions -- hospitals, schools, supermarkets and more -- to commit at a far greater scale to buying local produce. That can be a difficult proposition to sell,



given that local food fetches high prices now, while demand outstrips supply.

Without a bigger, established market, it could be difficult to recruit banks to invest in start-up loans or other capital needs, added Rokakis. He has a list of more than 700 vacant properties of a quarter-acre or more, and scores of them would be ideal for high-intensity farms.

"It's doable, but it's not going to be easy," Rokakis said. "We need to create a market for local products here. I don't think it's going to happen overnight.

"I think there is a model out there," he added. "We just have to find it."

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