Beyond the Backyard Garden: Urban Agriculture in Milwaukee

When we think of the many technologies that have made possible the rise of the modern city, we usually think of things like railroads, structural steel, or great feats of engineering like bridges and tunnels, or water works.

But my nomination for the one invention that brought the greatest change to the American urban landscape is one that most of us don’t associate with cities: the tractor.

The tractor ushered in the era of industrialized agriculture and food production. When the tractor showed up on the farm, the work of planting and harvesting crops suddenly could be performed by far fewer people. It might not be an exaggeration to say that if it weren’t for the tractor, the modern American metropolis as we know it wouldn’t exist. If farming were still done by hand, most of us would still be living and working on farms in order to grow enough food to sustain our society. As it is, only 2% of America’s population farms for a living.

Industrialized agriculture made cities possible, and has given our modern society an abundance never before dreamed of. But it has led to a disconnect between those who produce food and those who consume it. Most of us who live in cities don’t know where our food comes from; we haven’t a clue about the people who grew it or raised it and under what conditions, and we’re largely ignorant of the long road from the field to our plate: the many processes that turn a kernal of corn into high fructose corn syrup, for instance.

Many of us city-dwellers have a quaint image of farm life: rolling green acres bursting with wholesomeness, nutritious foods growing from the soils, and, of course, cows and pigs. In reality, much of our nation’s breadbasket is essentially a huge factory dedicated to the production of the raw materials, mainly corn and soy, that supply the mass production of cheap, highly processed foods robbed of any wholesomeness they may have once had.

As the author Michael Pollan has noted, the nature of our modern industrialized food system means that, ironically, it costs more to eat real food than it does to eat the highly processed groupings of calories that pass for so much “food” in your usual supermarket. And this has adverse impacts on our health and society. In Milwaukee, a city which lies in the midst of one of the most agriculturally rich regions on earth, the effects of a poor diet—diabetes, obesity, hypertension—disproportionately affect low-income people, those who are the least likely to have access to high quality foods produced outside of the industrial food-production system. 8.9% of households in Wisconsin, a farm state, are considered “food insecure,” meaning they don’t have enough to eat.

So it only makes sense that in Milwaukee, as in other cities, there is a growing movement to bring the farm into the city—to go beyond gardening by creating a sustainable farm economy in the city, made up of numerous small producers scattered throughout the city.

But how to bring agriculture into the city, a place where multi-acre tracts of clean, fertile soils are scarce, livestock are banned per city ordinance, and where the skills necessary for producing food are largely non-existent?

Two distinct models of urban agriculture in Milwaukee might provide the answer:

Will Allen, a former NBA star who played for the Milwaukee Bucks, owns and operates the only farm in the city of Milwaukee that is zoned for agricultural use. Allen’s 10 acre spread, Growing Power, is the sole remaining piece of farmland on Milwaukee’s Northwest Side, a part of the city that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. This “Community Food Center” grows produce sold at low cost, and distributes nearly 400 produce baskets
per week to low income people throughout Milwaukee. And Growing Power does more than grow food; it “grows farmers,” through workshops and classes for children and adults.

Across town, in an older and more densely populated neighborhood, Walnut Way Conservation Corp., lacks the space for a contiguous multi-acre parcel like the one on which Growing Power operates. Here, in a neighborhood long plagued with high poverty, vacant lots and an aging housing stock, Walnut Way has worked to organize and encourage small plot producers scattered throughout the neighborhood. Walnut Way has secured perpetual leases from the City to farm on city-owned vacant property, and has developed a Youth Corps to introduce the skills of food production in young people from the neighborhood.

Both Growing Power and Walnut Way offer two different approaches to using urban land for agricultural use, and both are breaking down the barriers between low-income people in the city and sources of nutritious, whole foods. But the long term goal of urban agriculture is sustainability, and these efforts in Milwaukee are far from that goal. If one day there exists an agricultural economy in urban areas, producing food and creating jobs, and sustaining itself financially as well as agriculture in rural areas, then these efforts in the urban Midwest may very well lead the way.

To get there, though, we will need to rethink urban land use, as well as our relationship with our food. Will we be willing to sacrifice the ease of the supermarket for healthier food grown inexpensively in our own backyards? And will city dwellers, long freed from farm work thanks to the tractor, return to the practice of growing their own food?

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COMMENTS +

David Feinberg in Los Angeles
Thu, Jun 12, 2008 at 5:10pm

I would love to see a list or database of similar initiatives throughout the country to take stock of this growing phenomenon

Roxanne Christensen in Philadelphia PA
Fri, Jul 18, 2008 at 11:29am

What will accelerate the shift to city-based food production is an economically-viable sustainable farming system that can be deployed rapidly and on a broad scale. That is the concept behind SPIN-Farming. SPIN makes it possible to earn $50,000+ from growing vegetables on land bases under an acre in size. SPIN farmers utilize relay cropping to increase yield and achieve good economic returns by growing only the most profitable food crops tailored to local markets. SPIN’s growing techniques are not, in themselves, breakthrough. What is novel is the way a SPIN farm business is run. SPIN provides everything you’d expect from a good franchise: a business plan, marketing advice, and a detailed day-to-day workflow. In standardizing the system and creating a reproducible process it really isn’t any different from McDonalds. By offering a non-technical, easy-to-understand and inexpensive-to-implement farming system, it allows many more people to farm, wherever they live, as long as there are nearby markets to support them, and it removes the two big barriers to entry – sizeable acreage and significant start-up capital. By utilizing backyards and front lawns and neighborhood lots as their land base, SPIN farmers are recasting farming as a small business in cities and towns and helping to make local food production a viable business proposition once again. Most importantly, this is happening without significant policy changes or government supports. You can see some of these entrepreneurial sub-acre farmers in action at http://www.spinfarming.com

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