

Creative Farming in the City

by ANDREA WATTS

The produce sold at a City Grown Seattle's farm stand can't get any more local to the consumer. When shoppers visit the Crown Hill farm stand, they walk by the rows of lettuce, sunflowers and broccoli that will be sold in the coming days. Across the street a backyard hosts another farm plot filled with broccoli and squash. *Food grown in your neighborhood* is City Grown Seattle's mission, and their fledgling CSA model demonstrates that farming and city living are compatible.

Had it not been for the passage of the Local Food Action Initiative, Resolution 31019 in April 2008, their CSA model wouldn't be possible. This resolution laid the framework for

creating policies that strengthen the sustainability and security of Seattle's food system and enables the public to sell produce grown on their property, "Basically making it legal to do what we are doing," said Becky Warner, City Grown Seattle's farm manager.

Founders Noelani Alexander and Scott Behmer started City Grown Seattle in 2011 upon the foundation of the now-defunct Seattle-based Harvest Collective. With acres of farmland unavailable in the city, they tapped into the overlooked, unused spaces within the city to grow food – backyards. Through the use of social media and postings on neighborhood blogs, City Grown Seattle found land partners willing to give their novel farming concept a try. In its first year they



Crown Hill Community Center's farm plot.

had four plots and one farm stand. In 2014, they grew to five plots totaling 13,500 square feet and sold their produce through two farm stands.

Warner says one of the reasons why land partners approach City Grown to volunteer use of their backyards is because they no longer want to do landscaping. At the farm plot by the Crown Hill Community Center, the building manager reached out to them in spring 2012 to see if they were interested in a strip of land sandwiched between the sidewalk and the building. What used to be grass that required mowing is now growing food for the neighborhood, and Warner describes it as being a "net positive" for everyone: from the building manager who saves on ground maintenance to the preschool teachers who take their classes to visit the farm. The other land partners receive a weekly share of the produce grown across all the farm plots in exchange for use of their land.

Growing produce in the city comes with challenges that you don't typically find in a rural setting, such as heavy



City Grown Seattle's Crown Hill farm stand.

metal contamination. Warner says that potential farm plots are tested for heavy metals, and some sites proved unusable because of these contaminants. Compost and fertilizer are used to supplement any missing nutrients, and the plot is ready for planting. By using compost purchased from Cedar Grove, City Grown Seattle completes the life cycle of food use in Seattle: the food waste from their produce is taken to Cedar Grove through the city of Seattle's food recycling program where it is turned into compost.

Though their farm plots aren't certified organic, Warner says that they use organic practices and shoppers can see how their produce is being grown each time they walk by the Crown Hill farm plot. Organic techniques include intercropping and integrated pest management, Warner explains, and Ariana Taylor-Stanley, a farmer who joined in 2014, adds that they have had less pest damage overall compared to their experiences elsewhere.

Though their plots are small, Warner says they use traditional farming techniques that she and the other farmers learned while interning at larger farms. Before joining City Grown Seattle, Warner interned at Bainbridge Island's Laughing Crow Farm and Oxbow Farm. Taylor-Stanley also interned at Laughing Crow Farm and had her own CSA, Moon Rabbit Urban Farm, which has since merged into City Grown Seattle.

One issue they contend with, which isn't an issue on farms spanning acres, is the need to use space very efficiently. Warner says they consider a plant's size when deciding if and where to plant it, because if a plant takes up too much growing room at the expense of other plants, it can decrease their profitability. And even city farming follows the same work cycle of buying seeds in early January, starting

the plants in February and selling by mid-May. Warner's large backyard serves as an unofficial base of operations with its greenhouse in the back and also hosting a farm stand during the summer.

In its first year of operation, City Grown Seattle only sold produce through its farm stand, but the following year, they became a CSA. However, Warner explains that they don't follow a traditional CSA model since they don't grow enough to fill every member's box each week. Instead they use a free choice model where people pay a set amount and they then select the produce they want each week, she explains. Each year has seen a steady growth of membership, starting with 11 members in 2012 and 32 in 2014.

This past season City Grown Seattle had two farm stands: one in the Wallingford neighborhood and the other in the Crown Hill neighborhood. At their farm stands, which are open once a week from mid-May to the first week of October, customers find the usual offerings of winter squash, broccoli, lettuce and zucchini because they try to have a variety for everyone. Warner says they have more walk-up customers than CSA members who visit the farm stands, but CSA members purchase more produce at a given time than walk-up customers. Unfortunately, this year they were unable to participate in the Wallingford farmers' market in an effort to reduce costs.

"While I miss being at the farmers' market, because it made us feel 'legitimate,' it was more profitable selling from our Wednesday and Saturday farm stands," said Warner.

Even with this being the first year of the Crown Hill farm stand, Warner says they received support from the neighborhood, with the neighbors commenting that it is convenient



to stop and purchase produce. After having run a farm stand outside her house for the past few years in the Wallingford neighborhood, she says it just boggles her mind that people take time out of their busy day to visit her house on a Saturday to purchase produce.

Warner joined City Grown Seattle in 2012 as a farmer and is now the farm manager following the departure of Behmer who now works full-time for the Seattle Community Farm. Along with Alexander, Warner and Taylor-Stanley, their other farmers include Ashley Wilson and Matthew Wagshol. In her two years with the farm, Warner has witnessed City

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Grown Seattle's expansion of its CSA membership, a more than tripling of their farming area and a honing of its business operations. As with any small business, it is about covering expenses. Though Warner says that their profits aren't paying for them to live in Seattle, and they supplement their farming revenue with other jobs, they manage the business to make it worth their while.

While City Grown Seattle's original goal was farming in backyards,

they have gradually transitioned away from this due to the costs of commuting between farm plots. "We have had many land offers in West Seattle which we have turned down because of the time of travel involved," said Warner. Even now, three years later, they still have people calling and asking whether they could donate their backyard. Unfortunately, more often than not,

Warner has to decline the offer. This is one reason why they like the partnership with the Crown Hill Community Center since it is a large plot of land and Taylor-Stanley lives in the area, which makes visiting the plot more cost-effective. They are also part of a three-year pilot project that allows them to lease unused land from the city of Seattle.

They broke ground this year on their 6,000-square-foot plot and Warner describes the opportunity as beneficial because it allows them to consolidate into a larger area. She also sees their model moving toward larger used land rather than people's backyards unless the backyards are sizable simply because of the cost involved with traveling between sites and because larger plots can yield more produce.

Though the pounds of produce sold hasn't been totaled yet, Warner expects it will surpass their total of 2,900 pounds in 2013, and the next few months mean a break from farming until the planning starts again. With their CSA still relatively new and each year bringing new farmers and farm plots, Warner doesn't expect to expand their business, saying "we are pretty comfortable" where the business is. And with their success thus far, she sees "potential for more folks to be doing farming like us."

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