

**Linking Small Farms with Inner City Markets Through Youth Farm Stands**

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Partnering small farmers with urban youth through "Urban Delights" Youth Farmstands has begun to enhance the Syracuse community's long-term food security by:

- Linking small farms to entrepreneurial ventures in urban markets.
- Supporting local small farm viability by facilitating expansion into new markets.
- Promoting long-term community based food security planning measures
- Improving low-income consumers' access to and consumption of fresh, locally grown produce through youth involvement in the food system.

The project has accomplished these goals through a combination of innovative community-based strategies, including direct marketing of fresh produce in low-income neighborhoods at eight youth farm stands, providing at-risk urban youth with economic opportunities through food systems job skills training, promotion of healthy food choices. Local small farmers, Extension Educators, and Urban Delights staff and youth participants are working together to grow new and potentially profitable niche markets.

Small farms are able to cultivate increased awareness and new customer bases for their produce, by developing mutually beneficial business relationships with Urban Delights Youth Farmstands. By purchasing locally grown produce at wholesale markets and CSA programs, youth sell the produce in inner city neighborhoods, both filling a need for fresh produce and expanding underutilized urban markets for growers. Urban Delights has made a commitment to sell at least 75% locally grown produce and is currently certified to accept Food Stamp EBT cards directly at the stands, increasing the accessibility small farmers' produce for low resource families. During summer 2001, Urban Delights is the only farm stand in the City of Syracuse to offer the Food Stamp/EBT purchase option.

In addition to supporting growers by directly purchasing produce, youth-owners contribute to the effectiveness of small farms by providing on-site educational materials, including those promoting the positive nutritional, economic, and community development aspects consuming locally grown produce. For the past three summers, youth-owners have strengthened the awareness of locally sustainable agriculture and the connection between local growers and urban residents of Syracuse.

Urban Delights participants have begun to learn production practices of conventional and organic farming through visits and working with local small farms throughout the growing season. Extension Educators are helping to coordinate this entrepreneurial venture and have recruited growers to participate in the agricultural education of the youth-owners. In addition, Urban Delights

provides hands-on training to the youth in areas such as accounting, retail business operations, marketing and customer service relations. Team building, conflict management, leadership and community service are also heavily emphasized concepts. Youth-owners participate in planning, operation, and evaluation of the farmstands, including direct negotiations and planning with growers.

In addition to providing better access to healthy fruits and vegetables for limited resource city neighborhoods, the youth recognize the importance of giving back to the community that supports their business. By participating in numerous community service projects, including working in community gardens, food banks and soup kitchens youth will have ongoing opportunities for service learning connected with community food security.

We received a \$5000 from the Small Farms Grant program as funding for a salary line for an educator to lead action-oriented collaboration among all local stakeholders. We achieved the following outcomes:

- Increased consumption of locally grown fruits and vegetables in low resource areas of Syracuse. Sales revenue increased 67% between 2000 and 2001. All stands in 2001 were in low income areas of the city.
- Increased the number of small farmers represented by Urban Delights farm stands from one grower to six.
- Increasing viability for Urban Delights through better produce variety and increased consumer awareness of the benefits of locally grown produce.
- Promoted sustainable agricultural practices to consumers through the use of farm marketing materials, work with urban community gardens and the establishment of a community garden run by Urban Delights participants.
- Recruited growers to participate in planning for 2002 growing season.
- Assessed the possibility of working with growers to provide seasonal products to city markets, such as pumpkins, Indian Corn, Christmas Trees, seedlings or bedding plants.

Most goals were met in their entirety, while some are a "work in progress" and plans to fully implement will not occur until the growing/harvest season of 2002.

Urban Delights worked with six small farms this year, up from only one grower in the 1999 and 2000 summers. Produce from each of the six small growers and two larger, local producers were featured at the eight city farm stands.

Small growers were directly involved in the Urban Delights program through site visits, field trips, one-one conversations, and follow up phone calls. All growers contacted were enthusiastic about participating in Urban Delights, and considerable time was spent with each "brainstorming" mutually beneficial ways this might be accomplished. Small growers viewed Urban Delights as an opportunity to increase their audience for produce, while the few larger producers we worked with liked the public relations aspect of assisting an urban youth program.

For example, Megan Schader, from Wake Robin Farm, explained "you-cut" flower sales represent a small portion of their business revenue. Collaborating with Urban Delights, where youth would cut the flowers to sell farm stands represented a mutually beneficial way to increase profits for both

operations. Unfortunately for the 2001 growing year, conditions were too dry to allow for this business relationship to actually begin. We remain in contact with Wake Robin Farm to put this plan into action for 2002, as well as possibly extend the Wake Robin CSA to new Syracuse audiences.

Urban Delights has also continued discussions with Dick DeGraff at Grindstone Farms for ways to incorporate the CSA model into Urban Delights sales. One especially innovative idea is a CSA especially for older, low income residents of Syracuse Housing Authority, where youth would divide produce into smaller than traditional shares and provide delivery.

Youth visited and sold goods from Behling Orchards, Mexico, NY, Casey's Berry Patch in Apulia, and Martin's Honey Farm in Sterling, NY. Toad Hollow Farms, South Onondaga, NY, was also instrumental in helping the youth establish a community garden by providing compost and bedding material for the plantings. The hands-on experiences at these agricultural ventures were catalysts for the youth to begin planning and implementing their own small scale urban garden.

Some of the outcomes we have not yet *fully* achieved include exploring direct marketing opportunities with small growers. The coordinator for Urban Delights, Brian Luton, is planning to present about Urban Delights at the upcoming CNY Fruit and Vegetable Growers meeting, and is also planning to attend the NOFA-NY and NYS Farmers' Direct Marketing Conferences as a means to 1.) Assess possibility of working with growers to sell seasonal produce, and 2.) recruit new producers for the Urban Delights 2002 season.

While we have been in verbal contact with producers, we have not done a formal assessment of growers to determine their satisfaction of working with Urban Delights. Due to the timing of this grant (beginning in July 2001), most of growers were involved in brainstorming and planning for the 2002 season, rather than extensive partnerships during the past summer. We plan to incorporate a grower survey into our reporting for the 2002 season.

The largest "road block" for Urban Delights to collaborate with small growers is accessibility. Most small growers do not deliver produce on a regular basis to the city or regional market. As Urban Delights does not have a van or staff person dedicated to produce pick up and delivery, it was difficult to purchase produce from small growers on a regular basis. Urban Delights has funding requests out to a variety of sources to purchase a van. Cold storage was obtained this summer and greatly aided our ability to buy directly from smaller growers and store produce for short periods of time.

It has been our experience that all of the growers were very willing to brainstorm and think creatively about ways to collaborate with Urban Delights. A real asset to our program this year was a full time, year round coordinator Brian Luton. Brian has true passion for sustainable agriculture and his enthusiasm was catching—for both the youth and the growers. The personal relationships with small producers Brian helped to establish has opened doors for hands-on field trip experiences, possible employment opportunities for the youth, and a willingness to participate in planning forums for Urban Delights.