



SITE SEARCH:

GO!

[SIGN IN](#) | [REGISTER](#)



SUBSCRIBE
to Crain's



e-mail
alerts

[DAILY NEWS](#)

[INDUSTRY NEWS](#)

[THIS WEEK'S ISSUE](#)

[FEATURES](#)

[LISTS & DIRECTORIES](#)

[RESOURCES](#)

Monday September 6, 2010



[Home](#)

Urban farmers, advocates cite challenges in cultivating business



Peter McDermott is an urban grower and network manager for Entrepreneurs for Sustainability.

Photo credit: JASON MILLER

By **KATHY AMES CARR**

4:30 am, August 30, 2010

Farming is a tough business. Not only is it physically demanding, but it also can be mentally and emotionally taxing, especially for entrepreneurial urban farmers who must sift through a field of obstacles before their dreams become for-profit realities.

However, the need for small farms is emerging in Cleveland and other cities as consumers grow more aware of sources of food and industrial farming becomes more costly, said Peter McDermott, who farms two plots on Cleveland's near West Side.

So, a hearty group of urban farming pioneers is rising to the challenge.

"We're going to need tens of millions of farmers over the next few decades as energy to generate industrial farms becomes more expensive and scarce," said Mr. McDermott, a network manager for Entrepreneurs for Sustainability, or E4S. "Industrial farms use a lot of natural gas and oil, but we're going to have to transition into farms that rely more on human and animal energy."

"Therefore, we'll see a transition into smaller, more sustainable farming," he said.

Urban farming advocates such as Mr. McDermott say microfarms could play an important role in feeding Clevelanders in the future, but that securing financing, obtaining land and generating

income aren't easy. Nonetheless, a coalition of government and nonprofit organizations and other local food economy proponents are working to advance urban agriculture by easing land access, issuing grants and enhancing partnerships.

"Farming can be financially sustainable," Mr. McDermott said. "But we need more entrepreneurial farmers who are willing to take risks."

About five years ago, there were only five to 10 urban and suburban farm projects in Cuyahoga County, said Morgan Taggart, program specialist for OSU Extension — Cuyahoga County's urban agriculture program.

Now, there about 50 farm projects throughout the county. Their goal is to sell their own produce and other goods to local grocers, restaurants and consumers.

Growing a Farm 101

That's easier said than done. Mr. McDermott and his girlfriend, Virginia Houston, will generate about \$10,000 in revenue this year. However, he said there's potential to generate between \$30,000 and \$40,000 per half-acre, which is where he hopes to be within two years.

So for now, the half-acre farm that Mr. McDermott started in 2008 is a part-time business, but he said many microfarms such as his can become profitable if they do two things: Plant high-value crops such as greens, carrots and onions that thrive in small spaces, and market directly to consumers through farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs.

CSA members pay subscriber fees upfront to area farmers and in return receive shares of weekly produce.

"We're preparing to start up our own ultra-local CSA that will serve about 25 subscribers within a one- to two-mile radius," he said. "We will turn a profit this year."

Before farmers can develop CSAs and other direct-market avenues, they must have access to land, which is available in the city.

Land hoe

According to nonprofit community developer Neighborhood Progress, there are 3,300 vacant acres and 15,000 vacant buildings within Cleveland's city limits.

Taking advantage of some of that empty space, Ohio City Near West Development Corp. helped develop Ohio City Farm — the largest contiguous urban farm in the nation. The nonprofit economic development organization leases the land for the farm at West 24th Street and Bridge Avenue, behind Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority's Riverview Complex, from CMHA.

Graham Ford Veysey, creative director of Ohio City Near West, said his group co-developed the project with The Refugee Response, which empowers local immigrants to become contributing members of society; restaurant operator and microbrewer Great Lakes Brewing Co.; and urban

grower Central Roots, all of which license the land from Ohio City Near West.

"This is a unique collaboration of non-profit, for-profit and entrepreneurs who've all been catalysts behind this project," Mr. Veysey said. The city of Cleveland's economic development department has chipped in by issuing to the stakeholders Gardening for Greenbacks grants, which award recipients who make capital improvements to urban sites.

Because banks' lending requirements are so stringent and it's hard for farmers to get small loans, creative financing and governmental partnerships will be a critical part of tilling blighted land for urban farms, according to Mr. Veysey. However, there should be a payoff for cities such as Cleveland, with an overabundance of idle property.

"All this vacant land is in purgatory, but we have the opportunity to put it to productive use," Mr. Veysey said.

Digging up problems

Even with land, however, there are issues for would-be urban farmers.

Todd Alexander discovered problems with lead in the soil of his Central Roots market garden project, an initiative that received this year a \$20,000 grant through the city of Cleveland and Neighborhood Progress Inc. to develop vacant land into productive use.

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency conducted in spring soil samples, and when lead turned up in part of the two-acre plot at East 59th Street and Thackeray Avenue, the agency halted part of the project until further testing could be done.

Lead contaminants are a problem at sites that used to house gas stations or other heavy industrial sites, though OSU Extension — Cuyahoga County's Ms. Taggart said most urban agriculture projects target residential land.

Come together

Even if small urban farms continue to grow and populate the region, local operations such as Mr. McDermott's can't stand alone without more support from the community.

Residents within the 16-county Northeast Ohio region consume about \$8 billion in food each year, but less than 2% of that consumption is of local food. The boost to Northeast Ohio's economy could be significant with just a 1% increase in local food spending, industry advocates say.

Many restaurants and even grocers are doing their part — clients who buy produce from the Ohio City farm alone include Ohio City Pasta, Side Show at the West Side Market, Dante in Tremont and the Flying Fig in Ohio City. Still more buy products from farmers markets.

Jeff Heinen, co-owner of the Heinen's supermarket chain, said he buys food from more than 100 different local farming operations and would like to bolster that capacity as more farms come online.

Even though small farms alone can't meet the demands of a grocer that must supply 17 Northeast Ohio stores, perhaps adding more spokes to the wheel will keep food suppliers and distributors circulating their products locally as much as possible.

"They could combine their deliveries," Mr. Heinen said. "When I listen to small producers, logistics seems to be one of the biggest challenges."



[Subscribe](#)



[Print](#)



[E-mail](#)

LIGHT THE NIGHT WALK
The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society

Taking Steps to
Cure Cancer

Tina Fey
Light The Night Walk
National Spokesperson

Join today!

A promotional banner for the Light The Night Walk. On the left is the logo for the event, which includes the text "LIGHT THE NIGHT WALK" and "The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society" with a red ribbon icon. The main text reads "Taking Steps to Cure Cancer". On the right, there is a photo of Tina Fey, identified as the "Light The Night Walk National Spokesperson", and a red button that says "Join today!". The background is a dark blue with white stars.

[About Us](#) : [Subscribe](#) : [Advertise](#) : [Crain's Links](#) : [Site Map](#) : [Contact Us](#) : [Corrections](#) : [Terms of](#)

© 2010 Crain Communications Inc.