



Peter McDermott is co-owner of Ohio City's Urban Growth Farms.

Growing Home

Peter McDermott wants you to eat local. Here's why his idea could transform our city. / BY CHRISTINA BERNECKER /

For Peter McDermott, it all started in the dirt. But while other little boys were pretending to dig for treasure or pushing around mounds of soil with Tonka trucks, he was planting vegetables with his parents in the garden behind their West 44th Street home.

"Every spring we would borrow a Rototiller from our neighbor who lived two doors down, and I would till our garden in the backyard barefoot, which was actually kind of dangerous," McDermott recalls. "But I loved feeling the soil underneath my feet."

He grew up in an urban neighborhood when most families with children had hightailed it to the suburbs, fearing the dangers a city could pose. "I ended up surrounded by this tight-knit community of passionate people who believed in the city and wanted to make it better," he says.

Over the years, while attending Urban Community School and St. Ignatius High School, those early influences stuck with him. When McDermott was 20 and attending Cleveland State University, he rented his first community garden plot on West 45th Street, directly be-

hind his childhood home. It was there that McDermott's sense of community turned into a mission. He saw what growing one's own food can do, not only for individuals but entire neighborhoods.

"I would be out there pulling weeds, and people walking down the street, whether they were homeless guys or yuppies, ... would stop and start up a conversation," he says. "That sort of sparked in me this idea of how local food production creates this sense of connectedness and community."

The product of that observation was the website localfoodcleveland.org, a social network that the now-26-year-old McDermott created in June 2008 as a crossroads for those interested in growing and eating local food. It's 2,000 members can learn about internships at nearby farms, read about restaurants such as Flying Fig and Bistro 185 that buy from local growers, and get advice about entrepreneurial farming.

Naturally, McDermott's two day jobs are also tied to the idea. He's a network weaver for Entrepreneurs for Sustainability, meaning he helps connect those interested in the local food movement with people and ideas that can help their project succeed. He's also co-owner of the Urban Growth Farms on West 48th Street in Ohio City.

"My time [is a] 50/50 split between looking at how we can move the local food economy forward and [putting] my hands in the dirt, growing fresh vegetables for markets in Cleveland and seeing what it takes to be an entrepreneurial farmer," McDermott says.

Here's why he believes so much in the local food movement: If just 10 percent of the food Cleveland families ate was grown here, McDermott's says it would boost our local economy by roughly \$360 million annually and create more than 4,000 new jobs. But even 10 percent is a tall order given the limitations of urban farming.

"You have to think about the complete dietary intake of a human being," McDermott says. "Staple crops and livestock will never be produced within the city, and farming is incredibly hard work."

But that doesn't mean he isn't making progress. In just the 2 1/2 years since localfoodcleveland.org was launched, McDermott says the idea of growing and eating local has gained momentum here.

"Five years ago, you could maybe count on one hand the number of people growing food for profit in this city," he adds. "Today, you would need 20 hands."