

Farming Goes To The City

An Agricultural Movement Is Taking Root In More Urban Areas

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

In South Dakota and Nebraska, where even in the heart of Yankton or Sioux Falls or Sioux City, anyone is within only a few minutes' drive from open pastures and crop fields, it is difficult to not feel a connection to agriculture.

But this connection that people in the Yankton area often take for granted is just as foreign as the star-filled night skies and evenings sparkling with fireflies are to residents of the major U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles and Chicago. In these cities, a person can spend their entire life surrounded by concrete and people and traffic and skyscrapers, and know America's Heartland only by pictures. Children grow up thinking that grocery stores make the food they eat, and their parents may not give a second thought that their eggs have ever been anywhere other than the carton.

But some urban dwellers are changing that notion. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 15 percent of the world's food is grown in urban areas. Most cities now allow a small flock of hens, if not the roosters, and perhaps even a milking goat or beehive or fish tank. Even apartment residents can grow vegetables in flowerpots, and community gardens invite both beginners and the experienced.

"Around the world, people are growing food in cities," said Steven Peck, founder of Green Roofs for Healthy Cities in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Back here, surrounded by agriculture, where home gardens are a summertime tradition that's always been a part of the rural and small town culture, the idea of city dwellers growing their own food tends to be viewed as simply a fad along the lines of "going green" and "natural living." But for these "urban farmers," the choice to get back to their agricultural roots is far from a flash-in-the-pan trend: It's a movement.

According to the Southside Community Land Trust in Providence, R.I., the Urban Agriculture Movement is much more than the practice of growing food in the city — it's a way for people to reconnect with nature, the act of eating, and to their community. It's a way to experience what everyone in the Yankton area experiences everyday as they make way for tractors on the highway or pick their own pumpkin at the U-pick patch.

Urban agriculture is how urban dwellers are finding meaning to their lives, more so than navigating rush hour. Urban agriculture is how urban dwellers are expanding their world beyond the small space behind their duplexes — by increasing self-reliance,



PHOTO: RITA BRHEL

Suzy Hassler of Sutton, Neb., keeps a couple goats to use their milk for home use. More people in urban/community settings are turning to agricultural practices.

conserving financial resources, connecting to the environment, lowering their carbon footprint and personal food miles, offering an opportunity to improve health through better nutrition, and transforming rooftops and balconies into green spaces.

At its most basic, urban agriculture allows people to have control over the accessibility and security of at least part of their food supply. Art Yuen, mother and wife in New York City, explains intercity food desserts, which, like its rural counterpart, involves areas without access to fresh, healthy foods whether in grocery stores or farmers markets, but in an urban sense, it applies to several city blocks rather than hundreds of rural miles. Urban agriculture allows Yuen and many of her friends access to fresh vegetables that otherwise would take an expensive taxi, bus, or subway ride.

Holly Hirschberg, founder and director of The Dinner Garden in San Antonio, Texas, resolved to learn how to grow tomatoes, onions and other vegetables as a way to reduce food costs after her husband lost his job during the recession. Her nonprofit organization now starts out beginning gardeners with the seeds and knowledge needed to grow their own food.

Urban agriculture also promotes fellowship. Despite the conveniences of a high-tech world, social media cannot fulfill a person's need for human connection and interaction. City dwellers yearn for the Norman Rockwell idea of neighbors sitting on their front porches, drinking lemonade, waving at passers-by. Growing and sharing local foods brings this nostal-

gic lifestyle to life.

For some urban dwellers, urban agriculture is as close as they can get to their childhood memories. They're farm kids, but due to the changing agricultural environment and unique challenges of beginning farmers, they have no choice but to live within city limits. Joshua Alder of San Antonio says it was only natural for him — whose parents raise beef cattle on their ranch in the Leon Valley — to put a vegetable garden, a small flock of chickens, and a beehive in his backyard. He says that he doesn't believe he's saving much money on eggs, because of the cost of chicken feed, but he feels that homegrown eggs are healthier and the lifestyle helps pass down his family's values to his children.

Because urban agriculture is challenged by space restrictions, limiting their economies of scale, the gardeners and livestock owners who participate strive to be as sustainable as possible with their finances. This often means getting creative. For example, a quarter-acre garden in West Oakland, Calif., is able to make ends meet by recruiting elementary student volunteers and convincing vacant lot owners to waive their lease fees. Others pool resources and labor. Management techniques center on getting as much quality as quantity from as small of a space as possible with as little input as possible. Permaculture, composting, square-foot gardening, container gardening, yard sharing, and other alternative methods of growing food work well in urban agriculture, even if they're not so sustainable in larger operations. Special

considerations for intercity gardens include rat and squirrel deterrents as well as thieves and vandals.

While most "urban farmers" are simply interested in growing their own food, some are capturing a bit of income through farmers markets or even selling eggs off their doorstep. Detroit has found success from a major undertaking — converting backyards, schoolyards, and vacant lots into gardens whose produce is enjoyed by their caretakers but also sold to a local cooperative, Grown in Detroit, which sells from roadside stands and farmers market tables. Families in New York City are able to sell an average of \$3,000 worth of produce off of a garden just four-by-eight-foot. In Philadelphia, a nonprofit garden generated \$67,000 from a half-acre plot by producing high-value vegetables like lettuce, carrots, and radishes. In Milwaukee, another nonprofit garden sells \$220,000 year with just one acre packed with greenhouses, tilapia tanks, poultry, and goats by selling not only to individual consumers but also restaurants.

"Most farmers don't make much more than \$20,000 to \$25,000," said Nathan Watters of Minneapolis, who doesn't yet make what he would consider a livable wage from his urban farming projects — about \$15,000. "But we are still a sustainable hobby." His goal is to develop an urban farm model that can actually provide a livelihood, perhaps through a subscription farm.

On the other side of urban agriculture are the local governments that are passing ordinances to support and boost locally grown foods. In 2011, San Francisco signed a law allowing vacant lots to be used as garden spaces and for gardeners to sell their produce on-site direct. Seattle passed ordinances in 2010 allowing rooftop gardens and up to eight chickens among others to promote urban agriculture. And in Atlanta, the University of Georgia has teamed with the City and various nonprofits to train urban farmers and support their endeavors through soil testing, marketing, and business management skills.

As with all movements, urban agriculture has the potential to dramatically and permanently shift urban landscapes from consumers dependent upon store-bought food to communities of local foodies. Back here in Yankton, where farming means hundreds of acres and large equipment, urban agriculture may seem to be no more than an overestimated garden or beehive hobby, but for urban dwellers surrounded by concrete and traffic, growing food provides a connection to so much more.

Watters' farming partner Nathan Schreengost, also of Minneapolis, said that urban agriculture has never been about money for him: "I'm not a money or finance person. I just want to grow food."

Southeast Research Farm To Host IPM Field School July 26-27

BROOKINGS — SDSU Extension hosts IPM Field School for Agronomy Professionals July 26-27 at the Southeast Research Farm in Beresford.

Agronomy professionals who attend will earn CCA Credits in soil fertility, 1.5 credits; integrated pest management, 6 credits; crop production, 1.5 credits; and soil and water, 1.5 credits. Pre-registration is requested.

Cost is \$225, if registered by July 13 and \$250 after. Rain dates are Aug. 2-3. To register, visit www.sdaba.org, or contact the South Dakota Agri-Business Association for a registration form; 605-224-2445 or Roxanne@sdaba.org.

Each participant will receive a 3-ring binder with Field School handout and reference material.

Topics covered:

- Weed Management, Crop Injury Characteristics and Weed Identification — Presented by Mike Moechnig, SDSU Ext. Weed Specialist and Mark Rosenberg, SDSU Ext. Field Specialist Agronomy/Weeds Field training will focus on diagnosing common problems, such as crop injury or antagonism, associated with herbicide applications in corn, soybeans and spring wheat.

- SCN and Corn Nematodes — Presented by Buyung Hadi, SDSU Ext. Pesticide Applicator Training Coordinator, Connie Tande, Manager SDSU Plant Diagnostic Lab, and Tamara Jackson Ext. Pathologist University of Nebraska. An in-field discussion will cover options available to growers to manage soybean cyst nematode. The plot site is in an area of the research farm that has been reporting high numbers of SCN and testing of resistant soybean varieties will be shown.

- Precision Agronomy and Variable Rate Fertilizer Application — Ron Gelderman, SDSU Ext. Soils Specialist, Gregg Carlson, SDSU Ext. Precision Ag Field Specialist and Kurt Reitsma, SDSU Ext. Precision Ag Field Specialist. Where are we at with variable rate nutrient application? Specialists will discuss and show new techniques, the do's and don'ts, limitations and possibilities of this evolving technology.

- Know Thy Enemy; And Thy Friend: Scouting, Identification and Thresholds for Major Arthropod Pests of Corn, Soybeans, and Forage Crops — Presented by Ada Szczepaniak, SDSU Ext. Entomologist, Kelley Tilmon, SDSU Soybean Entomologist and Jonathan Nixon, SDSU Ext. Field Specialist Entomology. SDSU Entomologists will show participants scouting techniques, identification tips and discuss thresholds for common insect pests of corn, soybeans and alfalfa.

- Soil Salinity and Why We Are Seeing the Problem — Presented by Bruce Kunze, Retired NRCS Soil Scientist and Larry Wagner, SDSU Ext. Field Specialist Agronomy. Two soil pits will be dug to expose participants to issues with salinity, compaction, water infiltration and how past and current management practices have affected certain soils.

- Climate Trends Impacting Agriculture — Presented by Dennis Todey, SDSU and State Climatologist and Laura Edwards, SDSU Ext. Climatology Field Specialist. Participants will be shown the working components of a field weather station and will be introduced to climate measuring tools and their uses as a prediction model for agronomic pest and crop management.

For more information contact Darrell Deneke, SDSU Extension IPM Coordinator, 605-688-4595 or Darrell.deneke@sdstate.edu.

The Onset Of Drought: A Nervous Journey Into The Unknown

BY RITA BRHEL
P&D Correspondent

Perhaps it's not such a far stretch of the imagination that an unusually mild winter that turns into an extra early and warm spring might turn into a very hot and dry summer. It's not that I'm surprised by this summer's heat, even though we had three weeks of a heat advisory recently, but I guess that I just didn't think that the weather would turn into such a severe drought. Did you?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Drought Monitor, this summer's drought now stretches across two-thirds of the lower 48 states. What?!

I'm taking a look at the drought monitor now, and wow, is it lit up! From the tip of Texas all the way through to the Canadian border north of the North Dakota and Minnesota line, from California's coastline to almost the East Coast, there are varying shades of yellows, browns, and red indicating everything from the "almost drought" abnormally dry to an exceptional drought. And that drought of all droughts — the nearly black areas of exceptional drought — aren't just in the West, but down into the Southeast as well. That's probably the most surprising to me — that these states east of the Mississippi that do normally see decent rains, even in the summer, are suffering just as much as us west of the Missouri who are no stranger to dry summers.

Of course, geographic trends aren't the only variables to my reaction. There's also fear — oh, yes, a good deal of fear that stems back to a decade-long drought only about a decade or so ago that resulted in a lot of ranches going out of business around here as



Rita
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the pastures dried up and hay became too expensive, not to mention scarce, to feed once-profitable herds. I recall my husband-to-be absent-mindedly beating a thistle with a stick while we waited at the pasture gate to walk down looking for a lost calf, and my father telling him only half-jokingly to leave the only green thing in the pasture alone. I remember driving past pasture after pasture shorn to the ground by overgrazing, not because of poor management choices but because there simply was no other way. It looked like someone had mowed the pastures with the shortest setting on the blade height. It was heartbreaking.

And there's the fear that my husband and I might join the throngs of producers who couldn't make it through another long-term, multi-year drought. The past couple of years, we've been pouring all of our extra cash into the loan principal for this property; there's so much more security if you know that you own your land and house and barns and vehicles and livestock outright and your future is no longer tied to your bank. But, it's still going to take a few years to get to that point. And we're trying to manage our livestock and pastures in the most financially sustainable way, but even then, I don't know if what we're doing can make it through a drought like the one we had at the turn of the century.

Pastures aside, it's nice to not have to mow the grass as much and I'm glad to have the aquifer under

us so that we don't have to worry about water. My husband grew up on a farm that was not blessed with good access to water, and his family had to time their water usage — like taking showers and running the clothes washer — with the cattle drinking at the windmill, or they'd run out of water halfway through the task. Eek!

It was also nice that, while we're back to 100-degree temps, we did get a week or 10 days or so there of a break in the oppressive heat wave to allow our chickens to go back to producing eggs and to enjoy an evening on the porch swing, despite those truly elephant-sized mosquitoes. There have always been some giant mosquitoes flying about, but this year's bugs seem to be monstrous. I saw one the other day

that I at first thought was a good-sized wolf spider. I saw a bit on the news the other night about how there seems to be a lot more bugs this year, as well as bigger bugs this year. No kidding! I wonder whether grasshoppers will be a big problem this year, as they usually are in drier years, or if there is enough other competition? I guess the stink bugs are down in numbers this year, so there's hope for all the other pest bug species, too.

What would really be great is that some of these rain chances — albeit slight — would pan out. So far, no luck, but I'm crossing my fingers that this summer isn't the beginning of a bank-breaking drought.

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