

Lettuce rethink city farming

By Julian Walker
Times Staff Writer

Everyone knows the story. Old McDonald, the proverbial nursery-rhyme farmer, had room on his land for countless animals . . . chickens, ducks, sheep, cattle, donkeys, you name it.

However, unlike the Old McDonald homestead, Somerton Tanks Farm in the Far Northeast doesn't have the space to accommodate such livestock.

What the half-acre plot on Tomlinson Road can do, say organizers of the agricultural pilot program, is produce at least \$25,000 in annual revenue from crops grown and sold to local restaurants and markets.

Vegetables — including several varieties of lettuce, potatoes, tomatoes, radishes, scallions, broccoli, beets and beans — are grown on the plot. Officials with the Philadelphia Water Department and the Oley Institute, the prime sponsors of Somerton Tanks Farm, announced last week that the first crops soon will be harvested.

"We want to prove that farming on a small piece of land makes good economic sense," said Nancy Weissman, director of economic development for the water department.

The farm site is adjacent to PWD's monstrous red-and-white-checked water tanks.

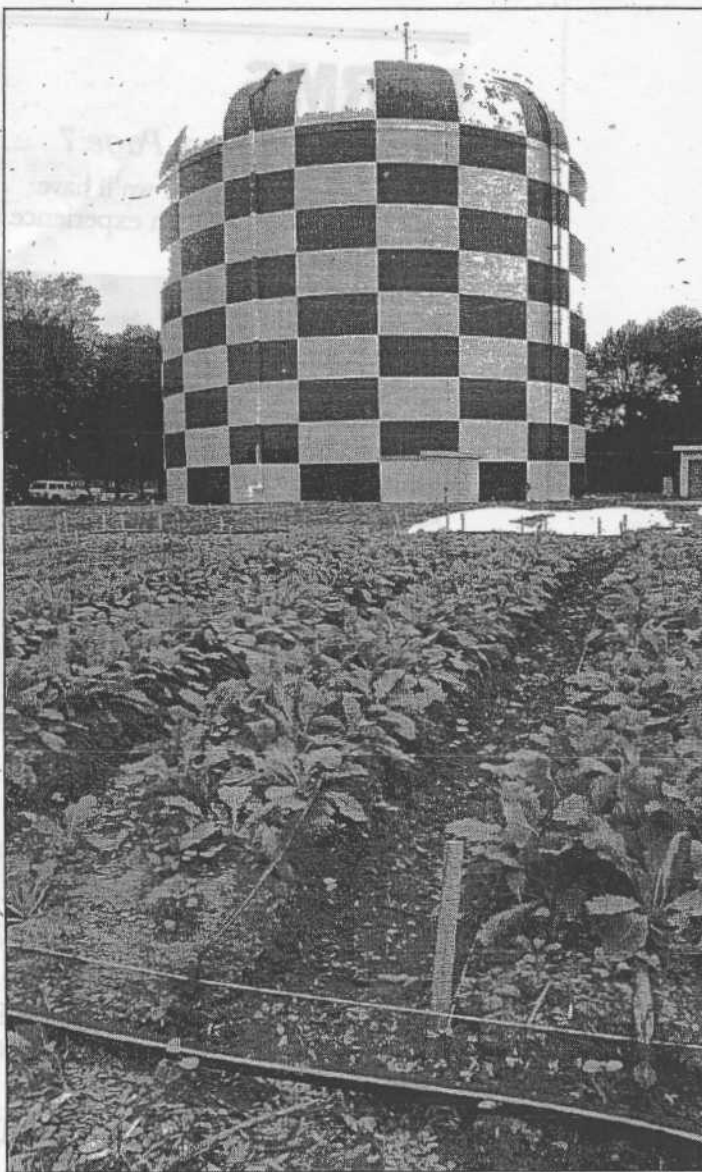
Since February, organic agriculturist Kathy O'Hara has trained three Philadelphia farm fellows, teaching them how to work the land, plant and nurture crops, and to network with area restaurant owners to market their produce.

And there is a market: Philadelphians consume an estimated \$2 billion in fresh fruits and vegetables each year.

The unseasonably cool spring has delayed the harvest by a few weeks, but project sponsors remain confident that the crop will bring a profit.

"Our notion is to grow, sell and document the fact that we can at least generate twenty-five-thousand dollars' worth of produce, and hopefully more," said Joseph Griffin, president of the non-profit Oley Institute, based in Berks County, near Reading.

"People can actually earn a modest but acceptable living doing seasonal, full-time farming on a small piece of land," he added, noting that urban farmers in 19th-century Paris supplied all of the fresh fruits and vegetables for the city's then nearly 2 million residents. "In Colonial America, everyone was a farmer."



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This small piece of farmland is expected to produce \$25,000 of produce.

Today, that tradition continues in places like Hong Kong and Singapore, where thousands of urban farmers produce enough crops on small plots of land to support themselves and their families, said Griffin, citing United Nations statistics that there are 800 million urban farmers active in the world today.

By comparison, fewer than 2 percent of all Pennsylvanians are considered active farmers, urban or otherwise, said state Secretary of Agriculture

Dennis C. Wolff.

The folks behind Somerton Farms know the few new farmers they produce won't have much effect on those numbers.

But they believe they can gradually train and introduce independent organic farmers into the local market who will create a niche industry for themselves, thereby adding jobs and taxes to the economy.

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