Somerton Tanks Farm is the product of a partnership between the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD) and the Institute for Innovations in Local Farming (Institute) a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. In 2001, PWD and the Institute merged their strategic planning and agriculture expertise to work toward their shared vision of a greener City to help protect the City’s waterways and to attract sustainable agriculture businesses to Philadelphia.

PWD is an award-winning, nationally recognized public agency. The Department takes a comprehensive approach to develop and implement solutions to urban water pollution problems. The Institute is a volunteer-run, non-profit organization dedicated to developing sub-acre farming techniques and providing training and support to urban farmers.

News of the success at Somerton Tanks Demonstration Farm is spreading. This year we were honored to receive official visits and enthusiastic support from State Representative Susan E. Cornell and US Representative Allyson Y. Schwartz.

Feasibility Study – Conceptualizing The Future Urban Agriculture Industry

The Pennsylvania Department of Community & Economic Development has provided a crucial tool for actualizing our vision of a future agriculture economy. They have awarded the Institute a First Industries Planning Grant to research the impact that a thriving agricultural industry would have on Philadelphia.

The feasibility study will evaluate and document the economic, environmental and community impact of an agricultural economy. It will determine the smallest site size and the minimal amount of labor needed to run a self-sustaining farm business, identify the steps and supports necessary to bring this new industry to life in Philadelphia, and develop some of the basic tools needed to establish a foundation for commercial farming and conduct a survey of vacant land to identify sites suitable for conversion to agricultural use. The Institute has hired Urban Partners, an expert economic development consulting firm, to perform much of this research.

We received tireless support from Senator Michael J. Stack and his staff to help us acquire this significant grant. Vital assistance was also provided by Senator Vincent Fumo, Representative Sue Cornell, the PA Department of Agriculture, the PA Department of Environmental Resources, Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, the US Natural Resources Conservation Services, Philadelphia Commerce Department, Farm to City and the Food Trust.

Do You Want to Purchase Fine Chemical Free Vegetables and Become a Part of This Success Story?

You can become involved by joining our Community Supported Agriculture program or by patronizing our stands at farmers markets and at the farm. For details on where and how to buy farm produce please email nicole@shelly.com

Family Dinners – A Note from CSA Member David Biddle

When early spring rolls around, dinnertime discussions in our family often turn to two things: first of all, we start talking baseball (all three boys play), second, we begin to fantasize about the upcoming growing season at Somerton Tank Farms and all the exotic, fresh, organic vegetables we will receive at the Mt. Airy CSA every Tuesday evening. We know that it’s only a matter of time before we can begin cooking Somerton Tank spinach omelets and burritos. Luscious baby spinach and olive salads are also a favorite late evening snack after baseball games. And we love grilled beef and pork roasts covered with heaps of sautéed kale, broccoli rabe, and mustard and turnip greens.

By autumn, with baseball winding down, we carefully savor our food from Somerton Tank Farms. We know that our weekly trips to the CSA are numbered and that soon we will return to the dreary life of traditional city dwellers, dependent upon veggies from stores and markets. Cold, snowy days are coming. We put away our bats and gloves, and dream of next season filled with fresh, crisp greens, homemeals and perfectly fielded grounders.

A New Method for a New Era of Farming

In partnership with PWD, the Institute operates the Somerton Tanks Demonstration Farm which serves as the test bed for the SPIN farming method. SPIN (for Small Plot Intensive) takes the conflicts posed by increasing urbanization and limited space and turns them to the farmer’s advantage.

SPIN is the secret to our success. Our half acre is separated into 280 individual plots many of which are planted and harvested 3 to 5 times each season. One challenge this presents is how to retain healthy soil. Our sophisticated crop rotation system does just that, along with cover cropping and generous use of compost. The SPIN method, the knowledge, well-honed skills and hard work of Farmers Nicole and Steve Shelly, and the strong support from trainees and volunteers, together produce the tasty, nutritious vegetables enjoyed by our many customers.
The season is winding down. Especially for me: my first year traineeship is over soon. I’ve been looking forward to a break, but dread leaving the work I love, good food, and of course, Nicole and Steve. The weather has been cool and breezy and beautiful since Autumn has graced us with her presence, there have been some particularly gorgeous days on the farm. And things are slowing down, allowing us to focus on end of season farm tasks. Cleaning up, seeding cover crop, planting garlic? And most exceptional, working on the hoop house.

It’s not entirely simple - revisiting, geometry and mathematical theorems, not to mention the grunt work of driving so many pipes into the ground. Steve keeps mentioning John Henry. But it’s all really exciting in regard to Somerton and my future farming endeavors as well. It’s been a hard season, but completely inspiring and fulfilling. I’ve learned so much, have much more direction than when I started and know more than ever that this line of work is where I want to be. It’s been nice to be near my parents, farming with good people, cooking for hours with my boyfriend and sleeping hard with the sandman. Nothing beats it.

Mira successfully completed her 2005 in-field training. As part of the Somerton Tanks program she is now enrolled in “Tilling the Soil of Opportunity”, a small business development course for agricultural entrepreneurs. In 2006, Mira will return to our field as an Assistant Farmer where sub-acre farm business management will be emphasized.

Our thanks to the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation where sub-acre farm business management will be emphasized.