

City Farming Takes Root In Northeast Philadelphia

By Kennerly Clay

When you stop to consider that the "fresh" produce you get at the store has traveled at least 1,500 miles from farm to table*, buying herbs and veggies distributed directly from a farm in Northeast Philadelphia sounds like a pretty good idea.

Community-Sponsored Agriculture

On a half-acre plot of city land owned by the Philadelphia Water Department, Somerton Tanks Farm produces everything from salad mix to cilantro. The farm supplies local restaurants, farmer's markets, and community residents as part of a community-sponsored agriculture program (CSA). Members support the farm by investing in the harvest before the 22-week growing season starts, at \$450

per share per year. That amount entitles members to generous bunches of leafy produce and fresh vegetables, available every week during the growing season at three central pickup points: Center City, Mt. Airy, and the farm itself. The food is grown without pesticides, herbicides or synthetic fertilizers, and is generally considered healthier, better tasting, and much friendlier to the environment.

According to Roxanne Christensen, Somerton Tanks' project manager, the farm is stress-reducing and calming. "It imposes a sense of order and has a positive emotional effect on the community."

Christensen envisions a network of farms throughout the city with more and more people buying local produce, supporting the local economy, and ultimately "re-engineering the whole food chain here."

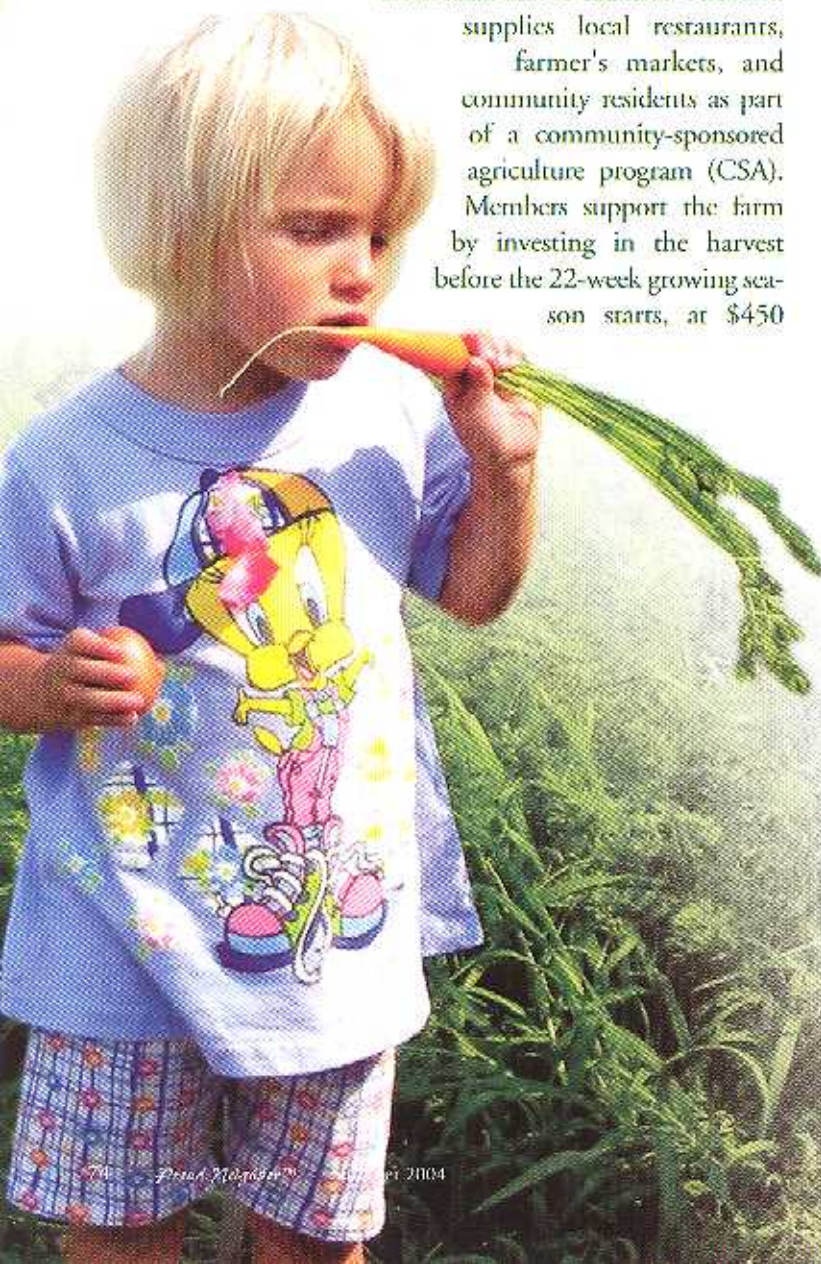
Convincing Local Leaders

Christensen and the farm's founder, Joseph Griffin, understood the benefits of urban farming and its ability to revitalize neighborhoods and create jobs. There were more than 500 CSAs working just fine throughout the country, mostly in non-urban areas, but the concept was a hard sell in the city. "We were kicked out of offices and laughed at a lot," says Christensen.

The real breakthrough came when they met Nancy Weissman, economic development director of the Philadelphia Water Department, who was charged with finding ways to reduce the costs of maintaining the Department's considerable land holdings, much of it grassy lawn and expensive to mow. Turning urban soil into healthy farmland would return storm water to the natural cycle, reducing the expense of water treatment and saving ratepayer dollars.

The Project Takes Root

Eventually, Somerton Tanks Farm attracted the people who now farm it: Nicole Shelly and Lori Albright. Shelly had given up her day job as an architect to get back to the land, and Albright is a former environmental programs manager of the nonprofit Village of Arts & Humanities. Later the Commerce Department, the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Corporation, Natural Resources Conservation





photography by: Jennifer Leary

Services (a division of USDA), and numerous foundations and organizations got involved by providing funding to support farmer training programs, equipment purchases, and farm maintenance.

At the farm's grand opening in May 2003, the former Commerce Department Director, Jim Cuorato, supported the idea of a diverse economic base and acknowledged Somerton Tanks Farm's contribution to the community. Typical greening efforts are often costly to maintain, but the farm actually produces revenue, exceeding its goal of \$25,000 in its first year, and anticipates doubling its revenue by 2007.

Training Future Farmers

In the meantime, the farm—a central program of a newly formed nonprofit called Institute for Innovations in Local Farming—is gearing up to take its message to the masses. Three trainees are set to graduate and ready to be tenant farmers on new farms by the end of 2004, by which time the institute hopes to have agreements in place with additional city communities eager to set up other farms, whose start-up costs range from \$12,000 to \$25,000.

By the end of this year, Somerton Tanks Farm plans to have established formal internships with students from W.B. Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences in Roxborough, one of the oldest and largest agricultural schools in the country. These city students—and future farmers—bring specialized training and experience to Somerton Tanks, which in turn provides them with a way to practice farming in the city.

"A Tipping Point"

While remaining realistic about the economic development benefits to a community (an individual farm may need only a few employees at most), Christensen firmly believes that urban farms "can provide a real tipping point," acting as catalysts to additional investment and positive transformation of economically depressed areas. More important, farms can deliver all the benefits of traditional "greening" initiatives, but are self-sustaining and can even be a revenue generator for the community. ★

Resources

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* Source: *Home Grown: The Case For Local Food In A Global Market*, a 2002 study by the Worldwatch Institute, an environmental and social policy research organization based in Washington, D.C.