

Django's Savory Wild
Mushroom Lasagna
featuring Somerton
Tanks Farm produce.



Photo: Jessica Fine

By Kevin Parker

Progressive Agriculture

The idea of locally grown ingredients has been gathering steam, but in the Philadelphia area, your food could have come from much closer than you think.

When you think of farming in the Delaware Valley, you probably imagine barns, tractors, and rolling fields in Pennsylvania or Southern New Jersey. You probably do not think of sidewalls, concrete, or row homes. Yet, tucked into the Somerton section of Philadelphia, you can find an acreal, albeit unconventional, farm growing a surprising medley of produce. Located on a half-acre plot, Somerton Tanks Farm is the shared creation of the Oley Institute and the Philadelphia Water Department (PWD). That is not a typical beginning for a farm, but there is little typical about Somerton Tanks. This includes the farm's namesake—two 10,000-gallon storage tanks that share space with the farm.

A public utility in charge of maintaining Philadelphia's water supply, PWD also owns and maintains large parcels of land throughout the city. Much of this land is not in use (before farming, Somerton Tanks was a large tract of lawn), but PWD must still pay to maintain it. The department asked Temple University to study the problem and propose alternative uses that could make some of this land commercially viable, reduce maintenance costs for PWD, and not adversely effect water quality.



Django owner
Aimee Olexy.



Temple suggested urban farming as one possibility, PWD agreed, and Joseph Griffin of the Oley Institute was brought in to advise the project.

The challenge in creating a successful farm at Somerton Tanks was to find the best use for such a small space. Looking to the work of Canadian researcher Wally Satzewich, Griffin arrived at a singular approach that relied heavily on crop rotation. As one crop is harvested, another crop is immediately planted in its place. However, this second crop must restore nutrients to the soil that the first crop extracted.

Yet in an urban area, where demand for space is far greater than in rural locations, why bother with farms? In fact, there are environmental, economic, and nutritional benefits:

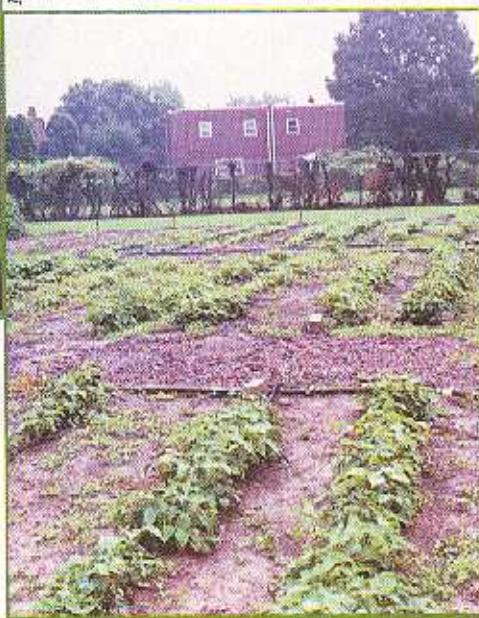
- From PWD's perspective, having a farm on their land is beneficial to water quality. When rain falls on the packed dirt of a vacant lot, it is not absorbed into the ground. Instead, it runs off (known as "stormwater runoff") into nearby rivers or drains. Urban farmland, on the other hand, acts as a sponge, absorbing rainwater and filtering it at the same time.
- According to Somerton Tanks' research, an urban farm on a plot size comparable to Somerton Tanks can bring in between \$25,000 and \$50,000 annually. This means that a single farmer can make a living farming full-time. In the process, they will hire local residents to assist them, creating jobs in the community.
- The farms will provide locally grown produce to people who normally have limited access to fruits and vegetables.

Tomatoes ripen on the vines at Somerton Tanks Farm.



LEFT: The 10,000 gallon water tanks are a majestic anchor to the half-acre plot.

BELOW: Low-lying crops at Somerton Tanks include cilantro, basil, dill and parsley.



Somerton Tanks Farm produce is available at the following markets:

Powelton Village Farmers Market

38th & Powelton Road
Philadelphia, PA

Hours: 10:00 A.M.-2:00 P.M.
Season: May 24 - October 26

Second and South Farmers' Market

2nd and South Streets
Philadelphia, PA

Hours: 10:00 A.M.-2:00 P.M.
Season: May 31 - November 22

or buy directly from the farm

Somerton Tanks Farm

201 Tomlinson Road

Philadelphia, PA

Hours: 2:30 P.M.-6:30 P.M.
Season: August 27 - October 29

Somerton Tanks produce is used at the following restaurants:

Django

526 South 4th Street
Philadelphia, PA
(215) 922-7151
Hours: Tuesday-Sunday
5:30-10:30 P.M.

Salt

253 South 20th Street
Philadelphia, PA
(215) 545-1990
Hours: Monday-Saturday
6:00-10:00 P.M.

Tilapia from the Burlington County Search and Demonstration Project is available at the following:

Four Seasons Seafood Inc.
214 North Tenth Street
Philadelphia, PA
(215) 925-6625



Water feed-in system from Tilapia tanks.

Perhaps the most promising part of the Somerton Tanks plan is that the farm is not an isolated experiment. Each season, the farm will take on entrepreneurs looking to become urban farmers. By teaching the students all aspects of organic farming, from the growing of vegetables to developing a small business, Somerton Tank Farms could become the hub of an urban farm network in Philadelphia.

So, equipped with an urban-farm strategy and a vision, how did Somerton Tank Farms fare in its first year of operation? "It's gone very well," Business Manager Roxanne Christensen says, "the challenge hasn't been growing the crops, it's been in creating markets." For now, you can find produce from Somerton Tanks Farm at three farmers' markets in Philadelphia (at Broad and South Streets, Second and South Streets, and Powelton Village in West Philadelphia). In addition, restaurants such as Salt and Django use Somerton Tanks' produce. In the near future, Somerton Tanks produce will be available at the Fair Food stand in the Reading Terminal in Center City. As for the future, Christensen says, "The focus is on training and creating urban farmers, but we'll also be looking to expand our market to other restaurants."

Not far from Somerton Tanks – in bucolic Florence, New Jersey – lies a different type of farm that is every bit as unconventional. Inside a high-tech greenhouse, traditional produce like tomatoes and okra are grown using a non-traditional method. These are hydroponic crops grown without soil: water provides all of the nutrients the plants need to grow. Nearby, there are large tanks brimming with another crop: a "harvest" of 700 tilapia, a fresh-water fish. The entire greenhouse is a lesson in conservation, using waste rather than disposing of it. For example, the wastewater from the tilapia tanks is actually nutritious for the crops, so the water is cycled through the plants. When the cycle is complete, the filtered water is ready to be added back into the tanks. The greenhouse is even powered by gas emitted from an adjacent landfill.

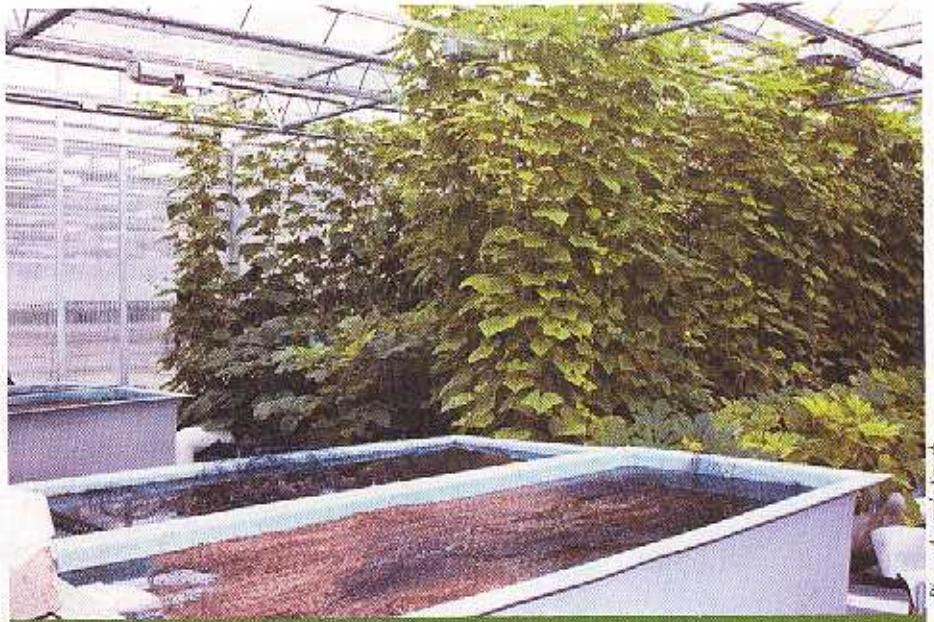
The Burlington County Search and Demonstration Project greenhouse, as it is officially known, is a cooperative endeavor by Rutgers University's New Jersey Ecocomplex and the Occupational Training Center and has grown hydroponic crops since 1996. Using a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, the greenhouse recently added the tilapia aquafarm. Why tilapia? David Specca, director of development programs at the Ecocomplex, explains, "Tilapia are relatively easy to grow. They're much more tolerant than other fish." If their feeding schedule or the water temperature were to fluctuate, Specca adds, the fish would merely slow down rather than die.



Young basil plants at the Rutgers Agricultural Extension.

The growing season begins when a shipment of 700 young tilapia arrives from an aquafarm in St. Croix (whose research was instrumental in initiating the tilapia farm at the Florence greenhouse). The young fish weigh less than .5 ounces and are .25 inches long when they are placed in two small tanks that serve as the nursery. Initially they are fed 10 percent of their body weight each day. The tilapia remain in the nursery for 12 weeks until they reach a weight of approximately 1.75 pounds grams. Then the tilapia are moved to larger tanks for another 24 weeks. At that point, they are shipped to market. (The fish are available at Four Seasons Seafood Incorporated in the Chinatown section of Philadelphia.) In all, the growing season takes nine months.

So far, Specca notes, things have been going well. The tilapia farm is part of a feasibility study; the greenhouse currently is collecting data to determine if raising tilapia could be profitable for interested farmers. If it is, then the greenhouse, like Somerton Tanks, will become a training center for would-be aquafarmers.

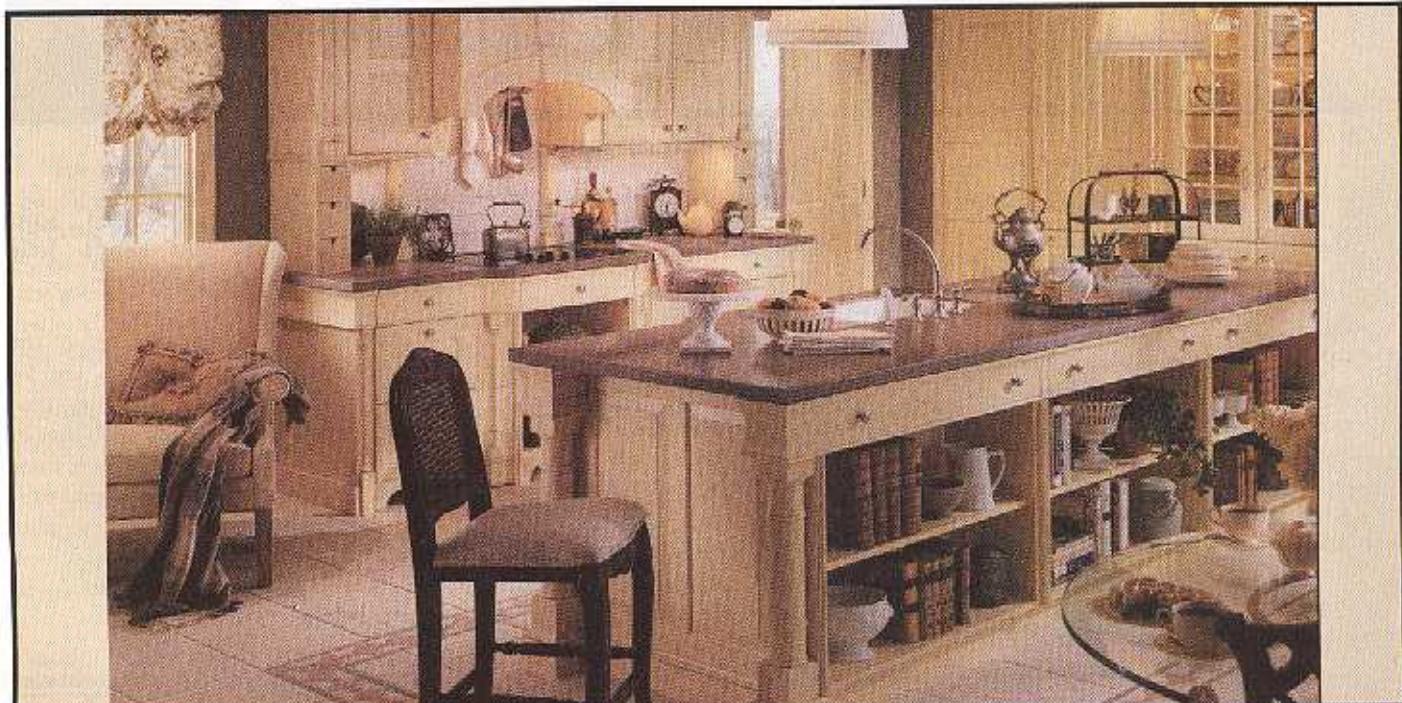


Intermediate water filtration system, at Rutgers facility.

Both Somerton Tanks and the tilapia farm at the greenhouse are in their early stages, but the future looks promising. In time, thanks to places like Somerton Tanks and the Burlington County Search and Demonstration Project that are dedi-

cated to training others, a new wave of farmers soon may completely redefine what we think of as "grown locally."

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