

Growing crops in the city

October 25 2010

A case study published in the 2010 *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education* by professors at Washington State University studies the challenges one organization faced in maintaining an urban market garden. The journal is published by the American Society of Agronomy.

Since 1995, Seattle Youth Garden Works (SYGW) has employed young homeless individuals or those involved in the juvenile justice system. SYGW offers teens and young adults the opportunity to work, develop social skills, and eventually find stable employment or return to school. Uniting social programs and urban agriculture has been used in many cities with the aim of reducing poverty and increasing food security.

In the past, the organization lacked the resources to plan and implement a successful marketing campaign to maintain their small garden in the South Park Neighborhood of Seattle. With the help of faculty at Washington State University, a method of incorporating Community Supported Agriculture was proposed.

According to the study's authors Mykel Taylor, Doug Young and Carol Miles, the Community Supported Agriculture program allows residents to subscribe to a weekly, delivered box of produce from SYGW's garden for a growing season, usually from May to November. SYGW's eight-year crop rotation plan will utilize their half acre space to provide a variety of crops while adhering to the USDA principles of [organic agriculture](#).

However, the South Park neighborhood is located in a poor, heavily urbanized district. According to the authors, grocery stores that once carried fresh produce have moved from the neighborhood, a term known as food flight. To combat the absence of available produce and the cost of a CSA box, SYGW would donate to the community food pantry along with two other city garden programs.

Although the CSA program was found to be the most practical, other direct marketing alternatives were explored. King County, WA holds 28 farmers markets, 10 in the Seattle city limits. Though these offer growers a chance to sell small amounts of produce to a large number of consumers, the most successful farmers markets have one to two year waiting lists for vendors. While others welcome new vendors, they have not reached the customer capacity to make such a venture cost effective for SYGW.

With the passage of the Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act in 1976, the number of direct to consumer marketing programs has boomed. Support has grown for organic and sustainably grown foods, local farmers, and a reduction of pollution caused by chemical fertilizers and large-scale agricultural practices. Direct-to-consumer agricultural sales increased by 104% in the United States between 1997 and 2007 with Washington ranking 7th in the nation showing an increase of 163.2% in the same ten-year period.

The authors' research indicates that there are 11 other CSA programs that exist in Seattle. Nevertheless, SYGW hopes their organizations goal of helping homeless and underprivileged youth will attract clients.

More information: View the abstract at www.jnrlse.org/issues/

Provided by American Society of Agronomy

Citation: Growing crops in the city (2010, October 25) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-crops-city.html>

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