

Hoop Dreams

City Farm, Chicago, Illinois

Resource Center City Farm

Coordinator: Kristine Greiber

Location: Chicago, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$5,950

Grant Year: 2004

Project Number: FNC04-518

Ken Dunn has been transforming vacant lots in poor Chicago neighborhoods into small, inner-city "farms" for years. A SARE grant made it possible to experiment with low tunnels—miniature hoop houses that extend the growing season through the winter.

Cabrini-Green has long had a reputation as one of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Chicago, an area dominated by drug dealers, gang activity, and litter-filled, vacant lots. However, when Ken Dunn looks at Cabrini-Green, he sees untapped resources and a chance for growth.

Growth as in gardens, that is.

"The devastated and neglected communities in Chicago have plenty of vacant land and plenty of people who need work. I thought it would be intriguing to put those two elements together to increase employment and beautify Chicago's neighborhoods," says Dunn, founder of the Resource Center, a Chicago non-profit organization.

The Resource Center operates City Farm, a project that transforms vacant lots in poor Chicago neighborhoods into small, inner-city "farms," producing vegetables at cheap prices for the local community. In 2004, they received a SARE grant to experiment with low tunnels, which are miniature hoop houses that extend the growing season on these farms through the winter.

The hoop structures were just the latest improvement to an operation that has its roots in the 1960s, when Dunn left his family farm in Kansas to study philosophy at the University of Chicago.

"The thing about philosophy is that it's not just about reflecting on things, but changing them," Dunn says. So he decided



...change was needed
in Chicago's poorest
neighborhoods...

change was needed in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods and began restoring vacant lots, in cooperation with the city. In 2000, this work officially became known as City Farm.

Today, City Farm operates three inner-city farms, two of which they own—a 1-acre farm and a one-third acre site. In addition to the permanent farms, they have a temporary site at Division and Clybourn Avenues, located right between Cabrini-Green and the highly affluent Gold Coast.

Although City Farm works in some fairly rough areas, Dunn says they have not had any serious safety problems. The workers get started at 6 a.m. and finish up around 3 p.m., before gang members and drug dealers come out on the streets.

"We take advantage of the peaceful portion of the day," he says.

Over the years, the city has allowed City Farm to use, for no charge, numerous temporary sites, but these farms can fall victim to their own success. If the farm helps to make the neighborhood a more attractive place to live, developers may determine that a stronger financial incentive exists to build in the neighborhood; consequently, the farm will have to leave and the developers will build over the farm site.

"Instead of putting down roots and fighting all of the forces that would displace us, we just move on," says Dunn. "There's more work elsewhere."

The vacant lots are often in pretty bad shape when they get started on them, he also explains. Before City Farm works on a lot, they seal the ground with a layer of clay

and cover it with about 2 feet of compost. To create compost, City Farm collects scraps from nearby cooking schools, restaurants, and hotels.

According to Dunn, the farms sell half of their produce to high-end restaurants in Chicago, which pay a considerable price for their high-quality, organically grown product, particularly tomatoes. This income makes it possible to sell the other half of their produce to the local neighborhood at prices that low-income residents can afford.

"I'm not buying from them because it's a good cause, although I'm happy it's a good cause," says Sarah Stegner, a chef at the Ritz-Carlton hotel. "I'm buying from them because they have great tomatoes."

The SARE grant made it possible for City Farm to build 12 low tunnels in 2004, each one of them 30 feet long and 7 feet wide, says Tim Wilson, general manager of urban agriculture for the Resource Center. These hoop-like structures are roughly hip height, standing 3 feet tall at the apex. They are held up by PVC pipe, curved like ribs and anchored in running boards. Wilson says they use clear plastic for the cover, the lightest overwintering plastic available.

The low tunnels were successful, making it possible for the farms to grow vegetables through the winter very effectively, Wilson says. To help maintain warm enough temperatures and fight off wind, they use a double-cover system. Inside the low tunnels, they use smaller hoops, which provide another cover of plastic and another level of protection for the vegetables.

City Farm mainly grows winter lettuces in the low tunnels, Wilson says, but they also grow other small greens, such as arugula, claytonia, and mizuna.

Everyone involved with City Farm, from the workers to the people in the community, benefits from these lots, Dunn says. Workers get the satisfaction of running a local food system and residents of the neighborhoods have a more pleasant place to live, as well as new job opportunities.

"The city is also a winner," Dunn says.

"The city provides their lots for our use for no charge, but we provide beautification and protection at no charge."

By Jason Peterson