

# BROOKLYN

THE BOROUGH

## Farming Local Food: Moving Past The Solution *Du Jour*

By [Sam Horwich-Scholefield](#) July 21, 2010



City Harvest, the agency that recovers and distributes excess food from local restaurants to over 600 food programs throughout the city, recently completed a Community Food Assessment—an in-depth look at the “gaps perceived by community members that inhibit community members from accessing healthy, affordable food.” The results for Bedford-Stuyvesant were disheartening: 94% of residents do not eat the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables; a dismal one-third report eating just 1–3 servings per week. In this segment of the Eco-Apartheid series, I’ll examine how city residents can gain better access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables with innovative solutions.

Perhaps no recent trend in the local food movement has received more positive attention than urban farming. In particular, rooftop and even wall gardening have been lauded as ways to utilize precious space while providing residents with fresh local produce and Brooklyn is home to several locally famous urban farms. Two fine examples include East New York Farms (pictured, via the *Times*), which has sold 14,000 pounds of chemical-free produce at farmers markets, and the Red Hook-based Added Value Farms, where every season young people help harvest over twelve tons of produce for farmers markets, local food pantries and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares (which I touched on in an [earlier post](#)).



Programs like these have an impressive record of growing food in low-income neighborhoods, and should be lauded for their amazing efforts to grow communities by growing food. However, the strength of many urban farms lies less in their ability to deliver produce to food deserts than in the equally promising endeavor of making space for people of all ages to learn, stay active and feel a connection to the land and their communities.

Some food advocates dream of a society in which every kitchen is stocked with fruits and vegetables harvested from individual victory gardens, mimicking the famous vegetable plots popularized during WWI and WWII. Author Michael Pollan, perhaps the country's most eloquent promoter for changing the way we eat, has called for Americans to plant gardens as a way to make a personal impact.

In an April 2008 *New York Times Magazine* article [he wrote](#), “Rip out your lawn if you have one, and if you don’t—if you live in a high-rise or have a yard shrouded in shade—look into getting a plot in a community garden...It’s one of the most powerful things an individual can do to reduce your carbon footprint, sure, but more important, to reduce your sense of dependence and dividedness.”

To be fair to Mr. Pollan, his belief in the power of gardens stems more from a need to combat climate change than to explicitly bring fresh food into low-income neighborhoods. However, other experts have pointed out that personal or community gardens offer a tangible solution to the problem of food access. Professor Tom Angotti at Hunter College has [advocated](#) for increased urban farming as a way to “make food deserts bloom.” The New School assistant professor of Urban Studies Nevin Cohen claims that the 52,000 acres of backyard space in New York City could yield enough produce to feed an astounding 700,000 people.

Certainly, in a place as dense as Brooklyn, residents should be encouraged to improve wasted space, and planting gardens in small areas is a great way to fill empty roofs or dilapidated backyards. Urban farming has many benefits and should be encouraged by the government, but it is not a viable long-term solution to increasing access to fresh fruits and vegetables in low-income communities. Growing a garden sufficiently large enough to provide a substantial amount of produce to local residents requires time and money, and residents in poor neighborhoods are in short supply of both.

Cultivating a garden has many powerful effects on gardeners and the community, but it is not necessarily cost-effective. Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCA), told me in an interview, “The garden movement can be very effective...just not at fighting hunger.” Last year the ambitious [Brooklyn Grange](#) farm failed to show a profit, but this year it has spread itself across 40,000 square feet of rooftop space in Queens. Simply put, \$15,000 can make for a great garden, but on the flip side, that kind of cash can purchase more fruits and vegetables than that garden would ultimately produce. After all, successful urban farms require tons of imported soil, constant watering, seeds, fertilizer, tools and labor.

An excellent 2010 [article](#) by Sena Christian in *Earth Island Journal chronicles* the challenges that urban farms are up against: most cannot sustain themselves without large infusions of grant money and volunteer labor. Even envisioning small plots in backyards and on rooftops in neighborhoods like East New York misses the point—lectures on the health benefits of urban gardening may be lost on someone who works two minimum wage jobs just to feed his or her family. Gardening can, in many cases, be a luxury. Why should people invest in urban gardens when purchasing food from large rural farms is cheaper and easier? It costs more to grow a carrot in NYC than it does upstate.

However, people who create urban farms and gardens have a talent for making the most out of their small spaces. Gardens beautify neighborhoods and provide gardeners with exercise and organic produce. They offer kids an opportunity to learn about the natural world as well as food science. Gardens are intrinsically peaceful areas, and horticultural therapy has been recognized for over a century as a way to bring calm into otherwise chaotic environments.

Brooklyn is now attempting to pioneer an exciting educational program. In January 2010, private donors and foundations came together to try and raise \$1.6 million to build an Edible Schoolyard at P.S.216 in Gravesend (rendering above). The large outdoor garden—fully equipped with a chicken coop, compost system and a pizza oven—will incorporate a variety of disciplines into an outdoor classroom. Students are able to forge a connection to the land, learn about basic nutrition, understand how photosynthesis works, plan layouts using geometry and remain physically active outdoors.

Besides serving as an outdoor classroom for students and a gym for seniors, gardens offer substantial mental health benefits to people living in stressful environments. According to a 2006 study published in *Psychosomatic Medicine*, people with low-incomes and low

levels of education are more than twice as likely to generate hormones associated with stress. This makes sense; worrying about feeding one's family is enough to incite anger and panic in anyone, and horticultural therapy is a proven way to lessen some of these burdens and induce a sense of calm. Gardening has long been used to help alleviate symptoms experienced by returning war veterans or patients with mental health problems. Green spaces are not just places to grow vegetables or learn about nutrition—mental health professionals view them as a way to help people in stressful communities cope with the chaos and hardships in their lives.

The People's Grocery in Oakland, California has done an admirable job of connecting large urban farms with impoverished neighborhoods, and their resilience is a model for other programs. Brahm Ahmadi, co-founder and executive director of the People's Grocery says, "If we're going to address food justice to make any significant effect on this massive issue, we're going to have to scale differently." His organization has come a long way in making produce both accessible and affordable to low-income residents. Their Grub Box program allows customers to purchase boxes of produce with food stamps, mimicking a CSA program.

Columbia professor Dr. Dickson Despommier has written extensively on the topic of vertical farming. Growing food in climate-controlled buildings close to urban centers could present a truly cost-effective way to bring produce to the poor and act as a safety net in case of inclement weather. Vertical farming is still in the idea stage, but in the long term, Dr. Despommier hopes to use NASA research on the potential of hydroponic vegetable farms to construct a 30-story building in New York City. He calculates such a farm could feed up to 50,000 people by using clean and efficient water systems. Although the idea might seem counterintuitive, vertical farms could be cost-effective. Dr. Despommier writes, "An [actual indoor farm](#) developed at Cornell University growing hydroponic lettuce was able to produce as many as 68 heads per square foot per year. At a retail price in New York of up to \$2.50 a head for hydroponic lettuce, you can easily do the math and project profitability for other similar crops." (BrooklynTheBorough.com [featured](#) a small scale hydroponic farm in Bushwick last year.)

As NYCCA's Joel Berg pointed out to me, addressing the problems of poverty in general and hunger in particular require "moving past the solution *du jour*" and finding ways of getting the poor resources they need, like a livable wage. While urban gardens do provide fresh, local and often organic produce to cities, they have not successfully addressed the other side of access; produce must not only be available to low income neighborhoods, fruits and vegetables must be affordable as well. [BK Farmyards](#), a decentralized farming system that takes advantage of under-utilized space to grow food locally, presents one solution to defraying costs.

That dilemma presents visionaries like Dr. Despommier with the challenge of building horticultural high-rises in urban areas at a reasonable price, leaving affordable neighborhoods like Bed-Stuy, East New York or Red Hook with the potential to become the great local agricultural centers of the future. A pipe dream? Maybe, but its food for thought.