

Detroit roots for urban farming



Hey Detroit, the world is watching. The city has been the poster child for a lot of things, and now it is in the spotlight for urban agriculture.

It's like a fascinating science experiment: take vast swaths of vacant land, add an under-employed populace and a dash of food desert, and who knows what you might end up with. Growing food in the city is not new. Many African Americans who migrated here from the South for factory jobs in the '20s had green thumbs, as did immigrants from European countries like Poland and Malta.

One of my first articles -- for the short-lived but, I like to think, memorable, *Motormouth Magazine* -- included an interview with what we'd now call an urban farmer. He is still farming a vacant lot adjacent to his house with collards, cukes and okra. I remember being blown away by his output, but he was expressly nonchalant. I mean, it just made sense for him to make use of a vacant lot as something inherently more valuable than that: a place to grow food.

Now, a dozen or so years later, the scenario is being played out on a much, much larger scale, all over the city. In its seventh year, the Detroit Garden Resource Program now supports nearly 1,000 community gardeners operating on scales ranging from tiny household plots with a few tomato plants and some cabbages to multi-lot gardens that feed many households. And a \$1 million downtown farming operation took seed just a couple of weeks ago in partnership with MGM Grand.

This dirt is on the cusp of going mainstream, no doubt. So it shouldn't be a surprise that someone has sat down and tried to figure out how to make money by producing produce right here in Detroit. While entrepreneur and Detroiter John Hantz has plans for a commercial farm in the city, not everyone is thrilled.

The seed

Hantz has lived in Indian Village for about 20 years. He runs a financial services company -- Hantz Group -- based in Southfield that employs more than 550 and maintains 23 offices. On his daily commute, Hantz found himself struck by the same thing that many other residents are at one time or another: the sheer volume of vacancy in Detroit. At an urban farming forum held at University of Michigan Dearborn in April, he recalled the inception of his idea: "I'd drive through blighted neighborhoods in the city (and I realized that) the city was not positioned to rebuild neighborhoods. And, if we wait for the city, (which is) not fair to the city, it was not going to happen."

He says that over five years it costs the city about \$12,000 to maintain each vacant parcel -- which adds up to about \$2.5 billion taking into consideration that there are 30,000 acres or 200,000 parcels vacant in Detroit. He came to the conclusion that something had to be done on "a significant scale."

In contemplating what that something might be, he chose farming because it is "land extensive." In true supply and demand thinking, Hantz posits that Detroit "cannot create value until we create scarcity, and large scale farming could begin to take land out of circulation in a positive way." Hantz brought on someone with a strong background in farming to make this vision happen: Mike Score.

Score is a Detroit native and Michigan State University grad with a degree in crop and soil sciences. He spent time in Zaire working on agriculture development and later taught at the University of Kentucky, where he received a master's degree in rural sociology. He returned to MSU to work with its Extension Center. He found himself specializing in developing sound business plans for food entrepreneurs, which is how he met Hantz. He helped create a financial model for the farm and was then was offered the position of president of the operation. "I dreamed of working with this project, but I've never been president of anything," Score says.

The plan

Hantz proposes investing \$30 million over 10 years in creating the largest urban farm in the world. His goals are to grow fresh, natural foods; enhance the environment and aesthetics of the city; attract agri-tourists; increase the tax base; create jobs; and improve the quality of life in Detroit.

The plan shakes out into three tiers.

The first, Score characterizes as "a simple agriculture business, a farm." A barely break-even prospect, the first-phase farm is "a platform on which to build" and will be the first to be implemented. This initial phase calls for 70 acres of land and would include the reuse of at least one existing building in order to allow for year-round growing. Even with this aspect of the plan, Hantz Farm draws critics, some of whom characterize the enterprise's attempts to purchase land as a land grab. At the April forum, Hantz retorted, Detroit has "30,000 acres, but we act like we have five," also noting that all this space provides opportunity -- and room -- for more ideas than just his: "You could do every idea I've ever heard of tomorrow."

Phase two adds education and tourism to the mix. Targeting students of all ages, senior citizens and community organizations, the idea is to "enhance (the farm's) finances and (make it) more meaningful," says Score. Agri-tourists would be intimately connected with Michigan's farm system, one that produces the second most diverse batch of crops anywhere in the nation. Score likens phase two to the Detroit Zoo and Greenfield Village, saying that it would operate "like a private park and education center."

The third and most ambitious part of the plan would create a global innovation center for urban agriculture that would aggregate products and systems -- both proven and prototype -- from around the world under one roof. Think the Auto Show of urban farming. "We believe a new global industry is being born," says Score. "There will be 9 billion people (on earth) by 2050, and conventional agriculture doesn't have the capacity." He and Hantz envision a place where world leaders trek to Detroit to check out ideas, see them in action and perhaps even take one or two products back home with them.

The critics

So, what's not to love?

With some of the more established and productive urban farms in Detroit measuring in at about an acre, some find the amount of contiguous land used in large-scale farming concerning. "Smaller (farms) fit within the fabric of a neighborhood," says Patrick Crouch, manager of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen's Earthworks Urban Farm. A large commercial operation becomes "a substitute for community redevelopment instead of being a catalyst for community redevelopment."

Critics also say too few jobs will be created given the scope of the land use. Hantz says he plans to create 15 to 20 positions within the first year and 200 to 250 within a decade. "Most farms are not supporting a large number of employees per acre, the density of employees is pretty low," says Crouch, saying some farms only employ a handful of people on a thousand acres.

Crouch gardens his own plot in North Corktown and says some of what makes small-scale community farming so valuable is not quantitative. "There are other aspects of this work that are beneficial, and it's not necessarily just about money," he says. "It's a place to bring your children to work with you, there are benefits to the community, there are all these other benefits, like being out in the sunshine doing something physically active, not having to pay (for produce). ... I tend to look at these things from this standpoint." Still, Score thinks Hantz's operation can improve the status of smaller growers by improving the supply chain. Eastern Market Corp. president Dan Carmody has said that there is "plenty of room" for large and small operations in the city.

As phase one of Hantz shapes up, some bureaucratic issues will have to be ironed out, like zoning and establishing agriculture tax rate and ordinances. Score says that "small-scale organizations need zoning too," pointing out that technically selling produce grown here is illegal. "We want the government to come up with (a set of rules)," he says. "Let's resolve the dissonance between what (community farmers) are doing and what the law allows."

Hantz says he hopes both his venture and the network of smaller ones can both thrive. "We need to coexist, both profit and nonprofit. We need taxes, we need jobs, we want capital investment, but we've told capitalist

markets to move on," he says. "I respect the role of each player, ... (but) there are divisive things that keep us from advancing." Hantz Farms continues to negotiate land purchases from the city and hopes to get off the ground this year. Meanwhile, thousands of Detroiters pick up a shovel and dig in next to their house or down the street. The proof is in the produce at the Grown in Detroit stall at Eastern Market and the greens on your Mudgie's sandwich. How this all shakes out is still a mystery, but one thing is for certain, it'll be an interesting one to solve, and the world is watching.

Kelli B. Kavanaugh is development news editor for Model D.