

Hell's Kitchen Farm Project: A Community Grows Vegetables



Members of the Core Leadership Group of the Hell's Kitchen Farm Project. (Inset) Planting the first seedling in June 2011. Photos by Jenny Sherouse

One year ago, 60 volunteers planted a rooftop garden at Metro Baptist Church in Midtown Manhattan. They formed a bucket brigade to move seven tons of soil up five flights of stairs to the church's 4,000 square-foot rooftop.

The non-profit initiative, Hell's Kitchen Farm Project, donates chemical-free vegetables to two local food pantries, one of which is located in the same building. Managed and run by volunteers, the garden was founded by a core group of four community organizations: Metro Baptist Church, Rauschenbusch Metro Ministries, MCCNY and Clinton Housing Development Co.

"Our mission is to create a more food secure Hell's Kitchen through collaborative farming, education and community initiatives," explains Alan Sherouse, Pastor of Metro Baptist Church.

It all started with a conversation with a social service agency. "We mentioned that there was only one fruit and vegetable market in the area," says Sherouse. "We wondered if our rooftop could generate interest and sustainability."

"It has blossomed into a wonderful collaborate effort with a leadership group of 12 people who each bring a different skill set,"

he continues. "As I look around that table when we meet, it's obvious that if we took anyone away from the table we wouldn't be here. Food is our common ground - it brings us all together in a way nothing else can."

The project, which is in its first full growing season, has become a vehicle for bringing the community together. Besides encouraging good nutrition and sustainability, the experience of farming is very uplifting.

"When I'm up on the roof, the experience of working together in a city that can isolate and having a vista to look out on is inspiring," Sherouse says. "It's the kind of value that encourages us to get our hands dirty. There is much more than food happening there."

Sherouse reminisces about the day that they hefted the soil up to the roof, hand-to-hand bucket style, to construct the beds made of blue plastic kiddie pools.

After the five-hour event, the volunteers gathered around and performed a planting ritual. "We want to see more of that kind of wide-spread involvement and community building," he says.

Future plans for the garden? "We've talked bees," adds Shanti Nagel, Horticulturist for the Clinton Housing Development Company, which builds and maintains affordable

housing in the area. "We've talked chickens - it will be determined by what people are jazzed about. This year we are moving into an educational focus with after-school programs. We are looking forward to having youths up on the farm."

The not-for-profit helps feed 600-800 people a month through the Metro Baptist food pantry by augmenting non-perishables with fresh produce. The crop this year includes green beans, kale, tomatoes, eggplants, hot peppers, lettuce and carrots.

"The most fun is talking to kids and showing them something they've never seen. The younger generation is our best advocate," says Nagel. "You just can't buy carrots like that in the store!"

Hells Kitchen Farm Project is affiliated with Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA provides a direct link between local farmers, small-scale and consumers.

Families and individuals who become CSA members assist the farmer by paying in advance for a seasonal share of the farm's products. In turn, they receive a weekly share of fresh food, directly from the farm, all season long. Each week during June through October, the farmer delivers sustainably grown food to pre-determined spots in the city. The weekly shares,

consisting of seven to nine vegetables and herbs, cost \$485 for 22 weeks for a family of four, \$243 for one to two people.

Members benefit from eating local, fresh, seasonal products and the farmers benefit from not having to take out loans to cover costs at the start of the growing season. Both partners share in the risks and rewards of small-scale farming: weather, insect damage and bumper crops.

Throughout the season, CSA members also have the opportunity to visit and develop a relationship with their farm and CSA farmer. A CSA offers consumers the opportunity to be personally involved in the production of their food, while supporting the health of their families, their local economy and alternative agriculture.

For more information on both the Farm Project and the CSA call (212) 594-4464 or visit www.hellskitchenfarmproject.org.

— Holly Reich

About Big Town **Going Green**

Big Town Going Green is a series of articles showcasing local companies and initiatives that support the environment through innovative "green" programs or services.

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