GREEN DIGEST

Proving the value of urban agriculture

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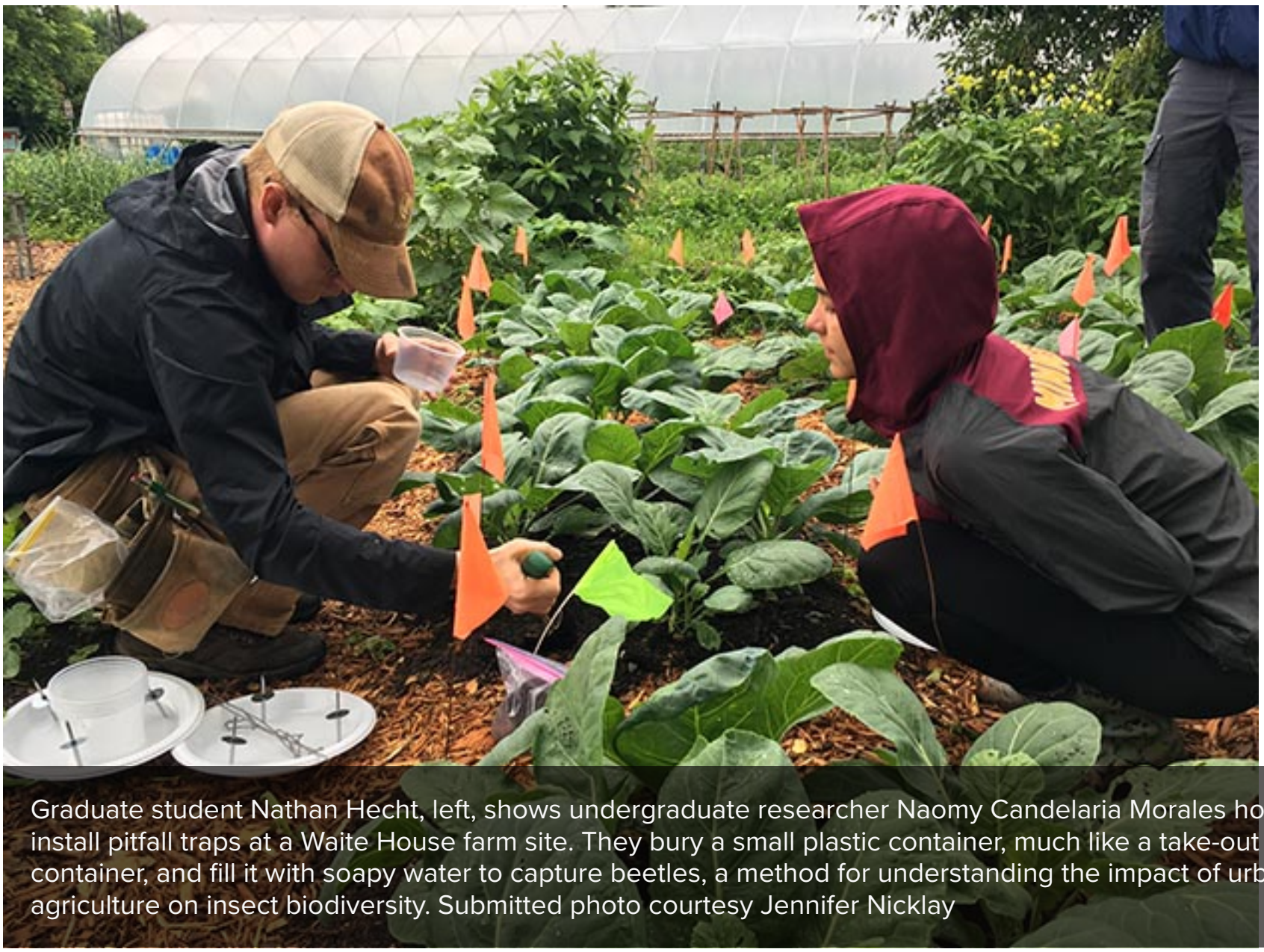

Graduate student Nathan Hecht, left, shows undergraduate researcher Naomy Candelaria Morales how to install pitfall traps at a Waite House farm site. They bury a small plastic container, much like a take-out food container, and fill it with soapy water to capture beetles, a method for understanding the impact of urban agriculture on insect biodiversity. Submitted photo courtesy Jennifer Nicklay

Ten years ago a coalition of food justice and urban farming organizations came together to

reimagine urban agriculture in the Twin Cities.

The Twin Cities Agricultural Land Trust was born with a mission to"secure permanent and sufficient land" for growing local food systems and to "support the recognition of agriculture and food production as valuable land uses and economic engines in our metropolitan region."

Minneapolis is increasingly breaking down the binary between rural food production and urban food consumption through policies like the Garden Lease Program, which supports community gardeners and market farmers (see part one of this column). Still, as TCALT Board Chair Valentine Cadieux said, when it comes to the long-term security of urban food production, "The rules we have are really not working."

An agricultural land trust wouldn't just tweak the rules; it would fundamentally change the game.

Land trusts are a mechanism for holding land in perpetuity through an external non-profit entity. Often employed to safeguard affordable housing (the City of Lakes Community Land Trust is one local example), TCALT wants to use land trusts as a way to guarantee long-term urban farming capacity in the Twin Cities.

So far, TCALT has been working to lay the political, legal and organizational groundwork to make this vision a reality. It hasn't been easy.

According to Cadieux, the problem isn't a lack of political support for urban agriculture in the abstract. But aligning a complicated mix of city and state policy to actually support urban food systems in practice has been a challenge.

There are some helpful models to draw from — in particular, TCALT is working with an agricultural land trust based in Chicago called NeighborSpace— but a lot of logistical components to iron out.

So while TCALT's efforts have been slow, there are some nearer-term solutions that seek to make existing property conditions at least a little friendlier towards food growers.

A partnership between the Fresh Water Society, the Land Stewardship Project and soil scientists at the University of Minnesota is investigating a way to ease financial burdens for urban farmers by studying water filtration rates at urban agricultural sites in Minneapolis and St Paul. The premise of the study is this: Does urban agriculture provide water filtration benefits that are greater than if the land were to be left unmanaged?

The idea is that if scientists can prove that agricultural land filters water better than unmanaged open space, urban farms could qualify for reductions in stormwater management fees. In Minneapolis these fee reductions are allocated through the Stormwater Credit Program, and in some cases dismissed entirely, if land use is shown to address either stormwater quality or quantity.

Soil scientist Nic Jelinski is leading this project alongside academic partners in hydrology, horticulture and environmental health.

“Most of the work around urban agriculture has been around food production,” Jelinski said. “But what are the other potential co-benefits?”

Jelinski was first approached about the project in 2015, and a pilot study was underway by the following year. Now Jelinski is sitting with the first year’s worth of official data out of a planned three-year study.

While he is hesitant to comment on any results before the study is finished, so far it appears that urban farmland “infiltration rates are higher in the surface soil relative to other open spaces uses,” he said. These differences are not as significant as you get deeper in the soil, however, and “we need to see whether or not these patterns hold over more sites,” Jelinski added. But the preliminary results bode well for making an argument that agricultural land use provides ecosystem services that should qualify for city subsidies.

Even though stormwater credits may provide some financial breathing room, property taxes remain one of the biggest obstacles for urban agriculture. As Tamara Downs Schwei, the city’s Homegrown Minneapolis and local food policy coordinator explained, “We have zoning that allows agriculture to happen but we don’t have agricultural zoning.”

This is an important distinction. Even if farming is allowed on commercial land, the farmers

don't qualify for agricultural tax rates and other tax benefits.

There are many roadblocks to changing the property tax structure. First, these tax rates are set at a state level. And even if tax codes are re-aligned to give breaks to urban farmers, it impacts city tax revenue.

As Cadieux noted, despite best intent "cities want the land to generate the most tax income."

Minnesota is in interesting case, Cadieux said, because "we are an agricultural state that understands agriculture to require large pieces of land." This is reflected in the tax code. For example, agricultural homesteads which qualify for special tax benefits must be at least 10 contiguous acres — many times larger than any amount of land urban farmers work with.

The issues for urban agriculture are bigger than food production or water filtration alone. It is also important to recognize how race, language, and class intersect with long-term land tenure.

As Cadieux pointed out, "Many potential food growers are migrants, refugees, and young adults who do not have the capital to invest in land." For example, there are many Southeast Asian farmers along the urban periphery operating under year-to-year "handshake" leases, with no guarantee to land access, she said.

"We've had a really racist system of governing land," Cadieux said.

Increasing attention has been given to the history of redlining and exclusionary covenants in Minneapolis (most recently through projects like Mapping Prejudiceand a related exhibit at the Hennepin History Museum, "Owning Up: Racism and Housing in Minneapolis").Cadieux and TCALT want us to understand that this racist history applies to agricultural land too. And this racist legacy has very real consequences for our food systems at large.

"It's keeping people with skills we really need from accessing the land," she said.

These are the types of systemic issues that Cadieux hopes TCALT can play a part in addressing. It is an ambitious vision that she fully embraces. When it comes to urban agriculture, she said, “We tend to think of ourselves as being more limited than we are.”

CORRECTIONS

The original version of this column misstated the size agricultural homesteads must reach to qualify for special tax benefits; it is at least 10 contiguous acres. The story also misquoted Cadieux, who referred to Southeast Asian farmers in a comment regarding farms on the urban periphery.

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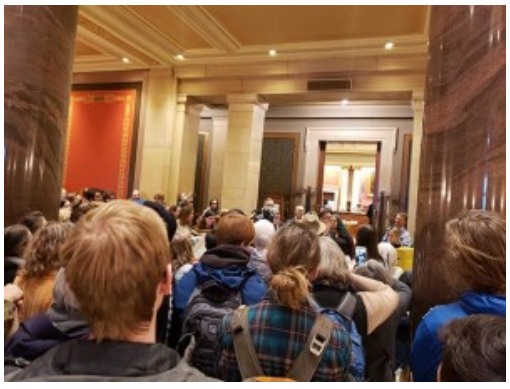

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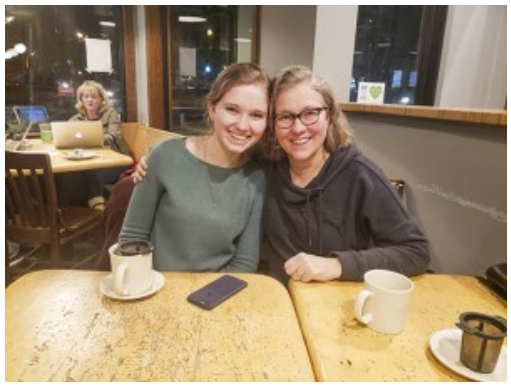


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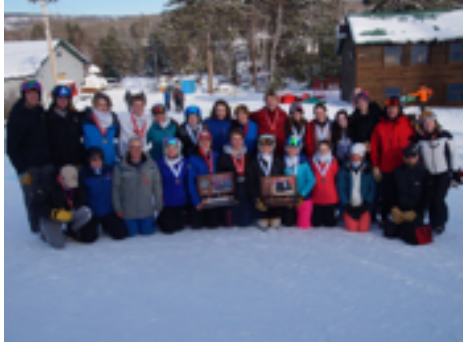

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