GREEN DIGEST

Urban farmers seek stability

MIRA KLEIN JANUARY 24, 2019
UPDATED: FEBRUARY 8, 2019 - 9:37 AM

Seamus Fitzgerald and Taya Schulte operate Growing Lots, an urban agriculture operation in Minneapolis. Submitted photo

Growing Lots is a working farm tucked into an increasingly dense urban landscape.

It used to occupy three sites in South Minneapolis where co-owners by Taya Schulte and Seamus Fitzgerald grew vegetables, operated a community-supported agriculture program, or CSA, and sold produce to local chefs. In 2018 those three sites were reduced to two.

Growing Lots lost access to the third site after their Longfellow landlords decided to sell. Schulte and Fitzgerald had been leasing the property for a few years, but for the landowners the process of renting out to urban farmers with a labor-intensive business and slim profit margins got too complicated. Add that to neighborhood development pressure and the outcome became almost inevitable.

Fitzgerald certainly wasn't surprised.

"For us, [land] is tenuous," he said. "It's hard to get more than a one-year lease. Maybe you'll get three years if you're lucky."

Now, Growing Lots is left with two sites. The first is a former parking lot they lease from Seward Redesign, a community development nonprofit. The second is a plot of residential land that they lease for free under the agreement that the farm keeps it tidy.

The farm stays operational through a combination short term leases and good will — not exactly the stability needed to plan for a long-term urban agriculture strategy.

"Urban agriculture" is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of urban food production practices. It can mean everything from a single backyard raised bed to a sprawling rooftop garden. It can be on public land or private land, under short-term lease or long-term ownership, operated by round-the-clock farmers or a group of teens on the weekend. In short, urban agriculture can look very different on the ground (or, more accurately, on the soil) from one site to the next.

Short term and unstable land access poses a problem for urban farming — particularly for farmers like Schulte and Fitzgerald, for whom farming is their business and livelihood.

The thing about farming is that it's not quick; productive land needs to be cultivated over time.

“In general, it takes three years to build up organic matter and turn it into workable soil,” Fitzgerald explained.

As experienced farmers, Schulte and Fitzgerald have been able to do their best under precarious circumstances. As business owners, however, one-year leases are not a sustainable business plan. Or a sustainable lifestyle.

“If the lots we had were more stable, I’d be making more in-depth investments and amending (the soil) in a way to make it more productive,” Fitzgerald said. “We are in a temporary situation, so we don’t feel secure sinking money in. What we do works for the moment, but it’s minimal.”

This is part of the reason why Schulte and Fitzgerald plan to step away from Growing Lots within the next few years so that they can start a more permanent farming project in rural Minnesota or Wisconsin. Just as the farm was passed to them, they hope to find some good folks to steward Growing Lots when they leave.

Even as Growing Lots faces an uphill battle for land access, there is widespread understanding that the Twin Cities are experiencing an explosion of urban agriculture. As Brian Martucci noted in a 2015 article for The Line, this explosion has brought the region “closer to developing a legitimate hyper-local food system than at any point in the previous two generations.”

Thanks to a series of policy adjustments at the municipal level, this agricultural trend has only grown stronger.

Homegrown Minneapolis, a city initiative dedicated to promoting local food systems, oversees the city’s Garden Lease program, which rents out vacant and unused public land to urban gardeners. Over the last few years Homegrown has worked to make the program more accessible by removing deposit and insurance requirements, addressing some of the issues raised when it was first launched in 2009. The city also expanded the Garden Lease program to make lots available for prospective market growers as well — farmers not just looking to grow produce but to sell it too.

The Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan redoubled city support for the Garden Lease

program and other urban agriculture measures. And now the Park Board is getting into the urban farming game, too, moving one step closer towards a system for gardening on parks-owned land through a recently adopted Urban Agriculture Activity Plan.

Outside the city, urban agriculture is increasingly being recognized on a federal and state level. In 2016, the USDA published an Urban Agriculture Toolkit, signaling a major shift in a Department that has traditionally focused exclusively on rural environments. That same year, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture recognized urban farming as within its political mandate and committed to supporting the practice.

"Ten years ago there was a sense that (urban agriculture) was a flashy, fleeting interest," said Valentine Cadieux, board chair of the Twin Cities Agricultural Land Trust (TCALT).

But clearly that interest has hung around, and policymakers are catching on.

Despite these promising efforts, problems with land tenure remain a major obstacle to truly supporting urban food systems. Fitzgerald identifies this disconnect in the difference between community gardening that focuses on personal use and community engagement and urban farming as a business.

For example, the Garden Lease program gives priority to applications from community gardens over market farmers.

Tamara Downs Schwei is the city's Homegrown Minneapolis and Local Food Policy Coordinator. As she explained, this prioritization policy comes from the tricky terrain of leasing public land for private profit.

"We are looking to see more nuance in these tradeoffs," Downs Schwei said. But as it stands, she continued, "it has been harder for market farmers to access the lots even though they are technically eligible."

Long-term land access impacts the Garden Lease program too.

Typical leases range from one to five years, with the possibility that the city could break a lease if they want to use the land for other purposes. That is because the vacant lots are

held by city departments with mandates other than urban farming, primarily the department of Community Planning and Economic Development.

“Those parcels are being made available on an interim basis while the city is waiting for the right moment to turn them into housing,” Downs Schwei explained. “Sometimes there are two or three adjacent parcels that make a big great urban farm, but also make a big great housing development.”

Fitzgerald understands these competing land interests, particularly when it comes to the need for more affordable housing. This tension is playing out through one of the remaining two Growing Lots properties, because Seward Redesign has plans to eventually turn it into new affordable housing.

And Fitzgerald knows that affordable housing is urgently needed.

“If they were turning the land into luxury apartments or a Whole Foods, then I’d be angry,” he said.

But for urban farming to continue in Minneapolis in spite of development pressures and housing needs, something will have to change.

“If we want urban agriculture, we need land for it dedicated in perpetuity,” Fitzgerald said.

Next issue, this column will explore some innovative approaches to urban agriculture. Do you have experience with urban farming and tenuous land access? Tell me about it! Email mira.r.klein@gmail.com.

CLARIFICATION: An earlier version of this story inaccurately stated that Fitzgerald and Schulte were looking to find more permanent farmland in rural Minnesota. They are also looking in Wisconsin. Fitzgerald would also like to clarify that despite the limitations of short-term land tenure, Growing Lots has always maintained baseline soil inputs to ensure quality and productivity.

More in Green Digest

A youth-led climate movement

Proving the value of urban agriculture

A family pipeline intervention

Most Read

- dio 2 Cafe closes in East Harriet

1

2

Mpls. skiers fare well at state

3

Keeping your dog safe around rabbits

4

Weighing surgery for an older pet

5

Lucky Oven Bakery closes at 54th & Penn

Back to top ↑

NEWS FOCUS VOICES MORE

Search ... Search

About Us

Contact Us

Community Calendar

Contribute

Find A Copy

Careers

Advertise

 Terms of Use Privacy Policy Sign In