GROW

Highlighting Urban Farming in Boston

Contents

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Boston's often overlooked long history of urban farming

Minority activists leaders of movement

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A locally-based tech-savvy hydroponic city farming startup has brought media attention to Boston's urban agriculture scene. But while a recent article in the London-based Guardian newspaper celebrated the white entrepreneurs behind the startup, it left in the shadows the story of the black activists who jumpstarted the movement more than four decades ago.

The latest media attention went to Freight Farms, a company that sells pre-assembled hydroponic farms housed in recycled freight containers, which can be stored in alleyways, parking lots or other spots of open space available in city environments. The design allows for maintaining a controlled interior climate regardless of outside temperature, and the containers are equipped with a monitoring system tied to a smartphone app.

This and similar initiatives are just another stage of the urban growing movement, say Mel King, who advanced urban farming legislation in the 1970s, and Glynn Lloyd, who lobbied for the legalization enabling the urban agriculture industry in the early 2010s and in 2009 co-founded a farming cooperative with plots in Dorchester, Roxbury and Mattapan.

"Folks from the community, we catalyzed a lot of this stuff, going back to changing laws and generating a lot of the urban farming energy in Boston," said Lloyd, co-founder of City Growers. "I don't see it as a separate thing; it's just part of the whole."

Early push

During his time on Beacon Hill, former state Rep. Mel King filed and promoted legislation to facilitate urban farming. Among the legislation was a bill that permitted use of state land for community agriculture and allowed the state to offer to purchase for-sale farm land, with the purpose of then leasing or selling the property to food growers, he said.

"We were in a period where the state was backing of off having farms at mental health institutions and the corrections department and we just wanted to make sure that the land was kept in the hands of the people who were into farming and agriculture," King told the Banner.

"We just wanted to make sure that the land was kept in the hands of the people"

In 1979, Massachusetts implemented the first-in-the-nation Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program. Under the program, farmers who were in possession of "state important" or "prime" growing land had the opportunity to receive a payment from the state in exchange for a permanent deed restriction designating preventing property use that would negatively impact the land's agricultural viability.

In part, King said, he was inspired by the World War II-era victory gardens that were popular in Boston during his childhood and from watching how urban farms brought communities together to collaborate across racial and cultural groups. Promoting healthy eating also was a driver.

Boston Urban Gardeners

Another push for urban agriculture came from Puerto Rican and Caribbean immigrants living around Roxbury Community College who wanted to be able to access land on which to grow food, according to King. In response to this need, he said he pushed for the state to clean up the vacant plots that had been cleared for the failed Southwest Corridor highway and open the property for residential farming use.

Lead paint from the razed buildings had leached into the land, making the soil untenable for crops. Instead, earth was trucked in from Marlborough with activist Dick Gregory leading the trucks into the city to draw further attention to advocacy for healthy eating, King recalled.

This southwest corridor effort led to the creation of Boston Urban Gardeners in 1976, which took up farming on the land and provided gardening education to community members in the South End, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain and Dorchester. One of the founders, Charlotte Kahn, said in a 1989 interview with the Washington Post that that project was intended to beautify and improve depressed areas as well as provide fresh produce to people in low-income neighborhoods with limited food access and to provide them with landscaping job training. In 1990, BUG merged with the Southwest Corridor Community Farm, an organization with similar aims.

Other efforts

Other farming efforts in Boston have included rooftop gardens, which picked up steam about 20 years ago, King

said, as well as farms run by land trusts.

City Growers Cooperative, co-founded by Lloyd in 2009, works to turn vacant lots into urban farmland, thus providing the community with control of their food source and supplying residents jobs and local retailers, restaurants and consumers with fresh food. Among the benefits are giving youth productive activities and helping to improve health — something that continues to be a high concern, Lloyd said.

"[Our community] suffers a lot of chronic illnesses at a higher percentage — cardiovascular, diabetes," Lloyd said. "People who see where food comes from eat differently."

Another boost to the movement came with the founding of the Urban Farming Institute in 2012. The organization, of which Lloyd and King are directors, aims to promote urban farming training, acquire and prepare land for farming, and advocate on supportive policies. This has included co-developing Article 89, which paved the way for much of the current face of Boston's city farming.

Legalizing urban agriculture

Boston's urban farming received a leap ahead with the city's passage of Article 89 in 2013, which legalizes and regulates urban agriculture as a by-right land use, allowing growth and sale for profit of produce within the city. Farming advocates met with the then-Boston Redevelopment Authority to develop the legislation, and two Dorchester farms were selected to pilot the program, including one licensed by Lloyd's City Growers.

Lloyd recalled the outpouring of farmers and farming advocates to regular meeting with city officials to craft Article 89.

"We had Thursday morning meetings, and it was packed with everyone — farmers, chicken people, greenhouse people, rooftop people, bee people," he said.

Continuing to grow

Despite the strong history and continually growing movement in Boston, the urban agriculture field is still often unnoticed by the mainstream and by officials in charge of development and space allocation in the city, Lloyd said. Many people stand to benefit from the budget savings of growing their own food as well as the health benefits, and the next challenge is getting more people aware of the offerings, he said.

Dave Madan, a founding board member of Urban Farming Institute, said minority-led urban farming organizations often have gone overlooked — something that can limit the organizations' ability to continue and expand their work, given that media attention and recognition in the public eye often is important to bring resources.

"There's a pretty stark difference in the access to publicity and resources that happens between white organizations and organizations le-d by people of color," Madan told the Banner.

He said that the Guardian's article sparked for some the idea that this could be "an opportunity to build the conversation about what the history of the movement is and where credit should be due, and to share the story so that the folks supporting this movement — funders and consumers — have a proper sense that there are these other organizations that may not get the same level of publicity and that there are other individuals doing this work."

"The history should be remembered and told," Madan concluded.

"People who see where food comes from eat differently."

‘I Wanted To Be On Land’: A Conversation With Urban Farmer Kafi Dixon

Kafi Dixon is a farmer in Boston. A “backhoe-operating, tractor-driving, Hi-Lo-shifting, plant-seed-in-the-ground farmer,” as she puts it.

Dixon founded the Common Good Cooperative, an urban farm in Dorchester where women of color learn about agriculture, entrepreneurship, food sovereignty, and access to green space. Last year, during the pandemic, Dixon’s cooperative grew 500 pounds of produce and donated it to local families and senior living facilities.

Dixon and her work are featured in a new documentary “A Reckoning in Boston,” which premieres in New England on May 7. WBUR spoke with Dixon about the challenges of being a Black farmer, inequity in Boston and the joy of tinkering. The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Last year during the pandemic, it was like everyone suddenly discovered the value of green space. But you were way ahead of that game; how did you get started in urban farming?

I started this back in 2015, based on what I knew the women in my community were going through—the women I grew up with in Upham’s Corner and Mattapan and Dorchester.

All of the women I’ve grown up with have lost either sons or their children’s fathers or brothers. And you know, we understood the violence of the city and just continued to exist in it.

But I knew that there were other spaces that were much more peaceful, and I had seen those places, lived on them, worked on them. I had benefited from healthy space and healthy conversations. And what better way to integrate women into self-designed green space that is for their health—mental and physical—than to found an urban farm?

How do you actually start an urban farm in Boston?

You create a cooperative. You know, you may not have the power and privilege of affluent networks, so one of the ways to address the resources that are missing is to come together as the many.

I just realized that a lot of communities around this country—and oddly here in Boston, too—they were designing for rather than with. And you realize that there is not just an inequality, but there’s an inequity in that design.

As much as the city and this region claims to be progressive—or likes to see themselves as progressive—there are still a lot of spaces that are thought of as spaces welcoming to Black women, that by design are not.

Can you give me an example?

Agriculture. Most of those spaces are not reflective of Black women enough for Black women to feel like they’re safe space for them to integrate into. Just look at the city of Boston, right? We can look at whether or not this is the first urban farm founded by a woman of color. Right? We can interrogate that question. We can interrogate how many women of color contractors there are. Right? We can interrogate how many women of color, especially African American women, are homeowners in the city. Right? We can look at diversity in upper management in some of the largest fiber 501(c)(3)’s in Boston. We can look at women of color and startup industries in the city of Boston, and look at the diminishing numbers of women who are in the startup field.

The census says that the African American community is the only demographic that’s being lost in the citycof Boston. That’s the federal government saying that there are a people, for whatever reason, that are not existing as a culture in a professed progressive city.

If we are branching out into different spaces, into different sectors, and we don’t have a reflection of our community that’s in those spaces, then you can perceive that as an unwelcoming space. I’m fighting to be in a space that’s no longer integrated for Black women.

“I’m fighting to be in a space that’s no longer integrated for Black women.”

Have you always had a knack for farming and growing things?

I wish! I’m a woman with little standard academic education—maybe the eighth grade was the highest grade I completed—which was the reason I became a small business entrepreneur very early. It was because it didn’t require a high school diploma. Right? And nobody questioned my adequacy as far as education.

And I decided to go work on other people’s farms from upstate New York to Virginia to Mississippi. I was working in a very blue collar job, so I would save up my money and I would leave for a month and go work on farms. And then I went through rural farm training and certification.

Wait, you saved up your money and took all your vacation time to work on farms? Most people would save up for, you know, a cruise.

Or a really nice car?

Right! So what drove you spend all your free time working on farms?

I had just decided that I wanted to be on land. And I knew how to grow food. I had run produce markets, but I’d always purchased from somebody else. So who am I not to be able to go grow my own food and sell into markets? So this was, in my mind, my retirement plan.

So, yes, it was something I had to save up for because all business enterprises require a little bit of research—I wanted to make sure that as I was thinking about investing in land that it wasn’t a fantasy, that it was something that I felt capable to do.

How did you finally make the transition to professional farmer?

There’s no such thing as a professional farmer! You can ask any farmer, there’s no such thing.

And I say that because there’s still this burden that I, as a Black woman, carry around, like, “what experience do you have as a farmer?” And that’s used to marginalize people, like, “I don’t think she can do it.” But then we romanticize the failing farming couple, right? The greenhorns of the world, who are out there on land and are not able to survive. Because without question, it was the space and not any question about their aptitude.

But when Black women or men of color—especially here in the Northeast, which is weird—talk about moving into agricultural enterprises we’re put to a test that most people aren’t put through when they decide to, you know, quit graduate school at Harvard and to take a loan out and buy land somewhere in New Hampshire.

What do you like best about faming?

One of the things that attracts me to agriculture—actually a lot of farmers don’t admit this—but they are low-key tinkerers. Farming and agriculture requires you to be constantly problem-solving. And it’s easier to solve the problem of a tomato hornworm than affordable housing, or Section 8. It’s easier to purchase a high quality packet of nematodes to deal with certain beetles that attack your crops. It’s easier to get your soil tested and to get into the science of weed reduction and land remediation—right?—than it is to look at some of the socially systemic problems that are generational. So, yeah, thinking about agriculture, you know, I’m up for it. It’s easier than the other side of this.

Beantown Farming: 10 Urban Agriculture Projects in Boston

From rooftops to abandoned lots, from school yards to greenhouses, gardens and farms are popping up all over Boston as urban agriculture and the local food movement continues to grow. Food Tank has created a list of ten of the city's innovative urban agriculture projects.

1 Berkeley Community Garden

is a community of 140 farmers in Boston's South End. The garden grows a variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs, including bitter melon, cilantro, chinese long beans, and broccoli. In addition to producing food, the garden also provides information and resources to gardeners, and is one of the few community gardens in Boston open to the public.

2 Bloombrick Urban Agriculture

is an indoor farm located in the heart of Cambridge. They "specialize in growing and selling still living microgreen, wheatgrass, and other select produce in hydroponic and soil systems", but have a much larger vision for the future. Bloombrick hopes to help cities become fully sustainable, truly local, and dynamically regenerative, starting with Boston. They want to show people that home gardening and commercial urban farming is practical, feasible, and essential.

Beantown Farming: Continued

3 City Growers

with the help of local community partners, helps to reclaim and secure abandoned land throughout the city of Boston for growing food. By transforming the vacant lots in Boston into " intensive urban farms that are economically and environmentally sustainable", City Growers "[creates] employment for community members at livable wages, [addresses] food security issues by increasing local agricultural production capacity, [and increases] local access to affordable, nutrient-rich foods."

4 CitySprouts

provides a school gardening program that is integrated into the Boston Public School's curriculum. Currently operating in 12 public schools in Cambridge, MA. The organization also provides support and resources to public schools across Boston. These services are available through three different programs: Classroom to Garden, which supports teachers as they extend their lessons into the school gardens; Food Education through food-producing school gardens; and CitySprouts Summer Intern Program, which helps youth build connections with their local food system and the urban natural environment.

5 The Food Project

uses sustainable agriculture to engage the youth in Massachusetts in social and personal change. Since 1991, The Food Project has provided youth with valuable experiences pertaining to our food system and food justice. They have farms across eastern Massachusetts, including several urban farms in Boston. The food produced on Boston farms supports the Dudley Town Common farmers' market and several local hunger relief organizations.

6 Green City Growers

provides the services necessary to transform unused space into urban farms. They help people of all skill levels with gardens by transforming yards, rooftops, and vacant lots into thriving, organic urban vegetable gardens and farms.

7 Higher Ground Farm

is Boston's first rooftop farm. Located on a 55,000 square foot space on top of the Boston Design Center, Higher Ground Farm grows greens, tomatoes, and herbs that are sold to many local restaurants. Starting in 2014, with hopes of increasing access to fresh, healthy food and contributing to the sustainability of the food system, the farm will be offering community supported agriculture (CSA) shares and will be selling its produce at local farmers markets.

8 ReVision Urban Farm

is a community-based urban agriculture project. Victory Programs, an organization dedicated to helping homeless individuals and families, uses its fields to grow produce and provide nutritious, and culturally appropriate food to the residents of the ReVision Family Home. Produce is free for residents and made affordable for other community members. In addition, ReVision Urban Farm provides information about healthy eating and sustainable farming, and offers job training for the youth and homeless in the community. The farm is shaped by three main goals: "small-scale, green, economic development; community food security and job training and education."

9 The Urban Farming Institute

their mission is "to contribute to healthy people and sustainable cities by promoting and creating self-sustaining urban farming enterprises and farming jobs." The institute does so by creating farms, providing farmer training, promoting public education and policy change, and bringing people in urban neighborhoods closer to food production.

10 Urban Hydr"O" Farmers

is a group high school students enrolled in the Hydroponics track of Boston College's College Bound Program. They grow food hydroponically–without soil– in a small greenhouse on BC's campus, enabling them to grow year-round, and sell the produce at farmer's markets in Boston.

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