

Sustainability Leaders in Action

Urban Farms: An Upcoming Film Takes a Fresh Look

Paul Wright

Consider the history of agriculture and it will be rural scenes that typically come to mind. Yet as human beings congregate increasingly in metropolitan areas, cities may well play an important role in the future of farming. Getting closer to that future, however, will mean for many of us acquiring a different mindset about food. The hope of helping to change our collective mindset is what sent Dan Susman and Andrew Monbouquette around the US this past summer to witness first-hand the urban farming phenomenon with the immediate goal of turning what they saw into a documentary film, *Growing Cities*. (More information about the making of the film can be found at www.growingcitiesmovie.com.) Their journey was the topic of a conversation we recently had with Dan Susman.

Where does an urban farming enthusiast get his start? Susman, now 23, grew up with gardening parents in Elkhorn, NE, where he helped out in the family plot. Although he “drifted away” from the experience (by his account), as a student at Dartmouth College he came across members of the campus community who shared an interest in sustainable farming. An organic farm located on the Dartmouth campus offered a hands-on opportunity not only to grow food but to learn about the tangle of issues related to food and our society today. His participation in a project to establish a Sustainable Living Center at Dartmouth pushed him to think more deeply about sustainability as a daily possibility.

Working on an urban farm in Portland, OR, proved to be a tipping point for Susman, distilling some long-steeping notions about food, its origins and its impact on us. He imagined what might begin to happen if urban-dwellers came to think differently about food, and in particular how to go about inspiring children to connect some important dots in the food and food distribution chain. This last point, he stresses, is especially important given that the average age of farmers in the US is approaching 60.

Voyage of Discovery

It was time, he thought, to take his passion one---or many---steps further. The next step turned into a voyage of discovery. When he talked it over with Andrew Monbouquette, a boyhood friend as well as a rhetoric and media studies major, the two set out on a cross-country journey that would take them to some 60 urban farming sites. Now transforming the hours of footage they shot into a completed film, they expect to release *Growing Cities* by mid-2012.

What they observed along the way was a movement that, for the most part, still operates mostly under the radar. “We’d done our research,” says Susman. “We thought we knew what is going on. But we also uncovered new projects we hadn’t heard about,” often through word of mouth directing the pair to some new site. Yet far from marginalized, says Susman, urban farming is attracting growing interest. (He points out that, during World War II, “victory gardens” in towns and cities produced about 40 percent of the fresh produce consumed in the US---hardly, in that era, a marginal reality.)

Conscious that urban farming is often thought of (to the extent it is thought of at all) as a hobby, Susman says that he and Monbouquette were determined to showcase the diversity they found. Besides the better-known educated enclaves of communities like Berkeley and Portland (OR), they also visited sites in West Oakland and the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, typical of the urban food deserts that plague many inner-city neighborhoods today. Detroit, he says, is becoming an “urban prairie,” as abandoned tracts across the city are being turned into usable land for food production. What is important to note, he adds, is that “people everywhere [undertake] urban farming for all sorts of reasons. Some do it by choice; others are more seriously motivated [by need].”

For Susman, perhaps the greatest discovery made along the way was the sheer number of people actively engaged, in one form or another, in the farming experience. “We saw an amazing number of creative solutions.” From backyard donkeys in Austin, TX, to urban bee-keeping to a one-acre rooftop farm in Queens, NY, to food raised hydroponically aboard a barge moored in the Hudson River, the possibilities seemed endless.

The Power of Food

Even more compelling than the actual farming projects themselves, however, was “the power of food to go beyond food,” says Susman. While a powerful organizing influence in communities, “food can also help us address other issues. Food by itself will not change the world. But what comes from it may get us there.”

Susman also observes that urban farming can begin to shift our view of how we can contribute to sustainability in deeper ways. “So many people go to ‘progressive’ places to work on sustainable projects. But we can make a bigger impact if we do it in places that need it the most. Go to the front lines.” He adds that urban farming is about more than simply growing food. It is also a matter of distributing it, selling it, communicating about it, which means that there is a place in the picture for everyone to fit if they want to get involved. “Stick with what you care about, and don’t get lost trying to figure out what you can do.”

One of Susman’s hopes, once the film is completed, is to make use of it for encouraging school children to expand their thinking about the world they live in. Many observers today see a crisis ahead in the US as a generational shift and the modern economy eclipse traditional farming life. For thinkers---and doers---like Dan Susman and Andrew Monbouquette, “down on the farm” may take on a wholly new meaning in the future. We wish them well with *Growing Cities*.

Observations:

Mary Ferdig

The story behind the making of *Growing Cities* exemplifies the principles of sustainability leadership by virtue of the curiosity and spirit of inquiry that have led Susman and Monbouquette to imagine, discover, invent and experiment with creative possibilities. Their experience represents the leadership capacity to both learn and share what they have learned so far while interacting with people during the research and filming stages, as well as those who will view the completed film and consider what it means for them. Their ideas and actions are *challenging* current frames of thinking about food, farming and agricultural practices, social structures and education, *inventing* and *illustrating* new frames for thinking, while, at the same time, *calling attention* to historical frames of thinking (for example, victory gardens) which taken together

provide a holistic basis for learning and changing. This example of sustainability leadership can *help us to see* a larger, integrated relationship between food and modern life. It enables us to imagine how food not only nurtures the individual human being, but is a catalyst for nurturing community interconnectedness and well-being, providing a platform for expanded public health, economic prosperity and human consciousness.

(Readers can follow the film’s progress, view exclusive clips from the film and keep updated on urban farming at www.growingcitiesmovie.com or at www.facebook.com/growingcities.)

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