



grow
HARTFORD

2014

ANNUAL REPORT

A PROJECT OF

HARTFORD
FOOD SYSTEM

WWW.HARTFORDFOOD.ORG



OVERVIEW

Grow Hartford, a program of Hartford Food System, completed its eleventh year of urban agriculture and youth leadership development in 2014. This program provides youth leadership education and a working urban farm that produces thousands of pounds of fresh produce for residents of Hartford. Youth input to Grow Hartford's program structure and development has been a key element since the program's inception in 2004. Grow Hartford aims to:



- *Promote a sustainable and equitable food system in Hartford by supporting grassroots activism and youth leadership through agriculture.*
- *Encourage active lifestyles and foster community action related to food security, sustainable agriculture, and the environment.*
- *Foster responsible stewardship of urban land with organic farming methods and the revitalization of formerly vacant lots.*
- *Restore the link between people and agriculture by encouraging the involvement of low-income urban youth and families in food production.*
- *Use the platform of urban agriculture and informed youth leaders to build a healthy food system in Hartford that is responsive to the health and cultural needs of all residents, regardless of income.*

HARTFORD FOOD SYSTEM

Since 1978, Hartford Food System, Inc. (HFS) has been dedicated to addressing problems of food security in Hartford. Our mission is to fight hunger and improve nutrition in our community. Our goal is a healthy, culturally-responsive, just, resilient and sustainable food system that meets the needs of all community members. To help make this happen, we implement programs that improve access to nutritious and affordable food, we help consumers make informed food choices, we advocate for a robust and economically sound food system, and we promote responsible food policies at all levels of government.

Our activities are based on the following strategies:

- 1) *Increase access to normal food outlets.*
- 2) *Deepen the connection between consumers and agricultural production.*
- 3) *Increase community capacity to advocate for a healthy and just food system.*
- 4) *Advance public policies to improve the affordability and quality of food.*



2014 represented a transition year for Grow Hartford. The previous farm manager for the past five years, Rodger Phillips, left Grow Hartford to start his own farm in the Farmington Valley at the end of 2013. Dan Gregory, who previously worked with Grow Hartford in 2012 as the assistant farmer, became the farm manager at the beginning of the year. Despite some challenges that will affect the program next season, including the loss of our main site at Laurel Street, Grow Hartford has continued to increase its impact in the city by finding new opportunities to be more successful as a program.

In 2014, Grow Hartford managed five sites in Hartford and one half-acre site at the Community Farm of Simsbury, all totaling about 2.3 acres. The overall yield from all sites was over 21,000 pounds. Ninety varieties of vegetables were grown, ranging from traditional vegetable varieties to ethnic produce such as callaloo, a popular Caribbean leafy green, and jilo, an African variety of eggplant.

Laurel Street operated as our main site of operations, where we propagated our seedlings, distributed our CSA, held a majority of our summer youth program, and prepared for farmers markets. Because we were at this site most frequently, we focused on crops that required frequent succession plantings and more care, like greens, in addition to numerous root crops, peas, beans, onions, leeks, cucumbers, tomatoes, scallions and summer squash.

Our site at the corner of Main and Park Street provided the majority of our tomatoes for our markets, as well as large amounts of peppers and peas. At Broad Street and Zion Street, we grew many summer hearty crops due to the sites' lack of water access. The majority of our kale was grown there, as well as early onions, okra, eggplant, and flowers. While we were unable to focus on these plots as much as we would have liked this season, we look forward to increasing the amount of crops grown on both sites next season.

Our site at the Swift Factory included a large variety of crops, including callaloo, okra, tomatoes, beans, turnip greens, onions, peas, potatoes and watermelons. At Community Farm of Simsbury, we focused on lower maintenance crops, such as potatoes and winter squash. However, heavy pest and disease pressure from Colorado potato beetles and downy mildew drastically reduced our yields at this site.





This season, Grow Hartford focused on selling at two Hartford farmers markets: the West End Farmers Market on Tuesdays and the North End Farmers Market (run by Hartford Food System) on Wednesdays. These two opportunities provided excellent visibility for our program and allowed us to have a greater impact in the city by providing fresh, affordable produce that often traveled less than a mile to each market. Reception by customers was very positive, many of whom were previously unaware of our program. We plan on continuing to attend both of these markets next season.

Both markets have the advantage of accepting SNAP/EBT. With the support of Wholesome Wave's Double Value Coupon Program, the North End Farmers Market is able to double all SNAP purchases. With about 40% of Hartford's population enrolled in SNAP, this was an important decision for us to increase the accessibility and affordability of fresh, locally grown produce in the city. While most of the purchases for the season were cash, 27% of the sales were either SNAP or CT's Farmers Market Nutrition Program coupons. There was confusion regarding our ability to accept WIC Cash Value Vouchers, which disallowed us from accepting them this season. Despite having gone through the training in the past to accept them, we were not listed as having been trained. We are working with the CT Department of Agriculture to help us and other vendors to be able to accept them next season.



Special pop-up markets at Hartford Prints, Hartbeat Ensemble (in conjunction with a week of food security events), and the annual Hartford Harvest Market provided us with additional outlets for sales and promotion of our programs. We also provided produce for a fundraiser at Flatbread Company in Canton and a farm-to-table event at Town & County in Hartford, which both benefitted Hartford Food System.

In December, Hartford Food System started operating a year-round mobile market, which provided an additional outlet for some of our late season crops (mostly root vegetables). This will create another opportunity for sales beginning as early as May and throughout the season.





This season's Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program lasted for 12 weeks from July to September. Each week, 33 families and individuals picked up approximately \$30 worth of vegetables. Shares were offered at \$350 for market-rate shares and a subsidized \$75 share for eligible low-income customers. Our ability to accept SNAP also helped the affordability of the CSA as well. As in past years, our CSA sold out fairly quickly after opening sign-ups and produced a sizeable waiting list throughout the season.

As revealed in our end-of-the-season survey, reception for the CSA was very positive. The lowest ranked aspect of the CSA rated in our survey was the length of the season. A 12-week CSA is short compared to other CSAs offered in the region and next season, we plan on increasing the length of the CSA by four weeks.

An organizational share was also provided to the Chrysalis Center for use in their Freshplace Food Pantry. This share functioned similar to our regular CSA program, but featured less variety, greater quantities, and lasted for several weeks longer. Each week, we provided 50-100 pounds of produce. This share was a good outlet for peak times in the season when we had an abundance of produce. Produce was also donated for use in cooking classes led by Hartford Food System and in homeless shelters, including South Park Inn, which borders our site on Main Street.



“A wonderful experience and invaluable service to families like ours on a crazy-tight budget! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”





COMMUNITY



Youth from our summer program learn how to plant onion sets, donated from NE Seed.



Pickle donation from Adamah Farm.



Grow Hartford engaged with several community partners throughout the season. Over 100 volunteers helped with the farm this season. In addition to many individuals and CSA members, several groups including students and teachers from the Watkinson School, fellows from Adamah Farm in Falls Village, youth from YouthGROW in Worcester, students from Trinity College, and Food Corps service members assisted with several projects and daily farm operations. We would like to increase volunteer involvement to help maintain the farm more effectively, but also to engage the community in a more meaningful way.

Our youth program engaged 19 Hartford youth in farm activities and education during the summer. For five weeks, the youth assisted with maintaining the farm, which included weeding and planting crops for the fall. Our youth leaders conducted several activities that educated the youth on food access and food system issues.

Grow Hartford was involved in several events throughout the year that helped to increase our exposure. We tabled and led hands-on activities at an Earth Day event at the Hartford Riverfront, the Big E, and ImPACT Fest, a resource and multicultural fair held in Bushnell Park. Grow Hartford's farm manager led multiple sessions on how to grow your own vegetables at Hartford Food System's Community Kitchen program, as well as a workshop at NOFA's Summer Conference that provided an overview about how to start and maintain a successful urban farm.

We are incredibly grateful to our funders and for several donations that helped to assist our program this year. This season, we received seed donations from Hartford area seed companies, NE Seed (based in Hartford) and Comstock, Ferre & Co. (based in Wethersfield). These donations helped to lower the cost of the produce, which enabled us to offer more affordable prices for our customers. To thank us for hosting a farm tour and discussion for their fellows, Adamah Farm donated jars of several varieties of pickles to give away to our CSA members.



CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The greatest challenge as we transition into next season will be the loss of our main site at 75 Laurel Street. The organization that we leased the land from terminated our lease so they could expand. We will be moving the bulk of operations (including our propagation greenhouse that was meant to be used at Laurel Street) to our site at Swift Factory, which is located in the Northeast neighborhood and is currently our only site in the North End.

Swift Factory, situated less than a mile from the location of the North End Farmers Market, will allow us to increase our impact in an area of the city that has an established need. Because the immediate neighborhood is more residential than the Laurel Street site, we hope that this will allow us to engage residents more effectively.

Our goal is to create an urban agriculture resource center at Swift Factory that showcases crop diversity on a small scale, provides workshops to neighborhood and city residents, is a distribution site for our CSA, and to become a regional leader in urban agriculture. The non-profit, Community Solutions, which owns and oversees the rehabilitation of Swift Factory, are very receptive to our increased involvement with the property and we look forward to strengthening our partnership with them over the coming years.

Another challenge we faced was efficiently managing the amount of sites this season. Coupled with some staffing issues and an intensive harvesting and market schedule, it became difficult to effectively manage our five sites in Hartford, and the additional site at the Community Farm of Simsbury. In addition to the loss of our site at Laurel Street, due to a variety of reasons, we will not continue managing a plot in Simsbury. While this represents a loss of about an acre, this will enable us to be more efficient with our planting and management of our current set of properties.

Additionally, with plans to build a cold storage unit at Swift Factory, we will be better able to manage our market schedule by enabling us to harvest for multiple markets in a single day. Overall, to be able to manage our sites more effectively, we will need to increase our volunteer involvement. In the coming season, we look forward to increasing our volunteer capacity by reaching out to several groups, organizations, and offering open volunteer hours to assist with the management of the sites.

Despite several challenges, Grow Hartford's season was very successful. Although we experienced what might be seen as several setbacks as we transitioned into the 2015 season, many opportunities arose that will continue our engagement in the Hartford community. As an established farm that becomes further rooted in Hartford's culture, Grow Hartford continues to find new ways to advance the program and to increase our impact in the city.

