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April 22, 2009, 1:01 pm

Fresh Food from City Soil

By [WINSTINA S. HUGHES](#)



Winstina S. Hughes Lorraine Gibbons, of Maplewood, and John Taylor, who are partners in a sustainable farming business in Newark.

It's raining softly outside the hybrid. We're parked at a once-empty lot at the corner of Spruce Street and Washington Street near Lincoln Park in Newark, home to [Brick City Urban Farms](#). John Taylor is explaining how seamlessly the pieces fell into place for the business venture on the site.

It started with an idea and then a call to Lorraine Gibbons, a colleague who lives in Maplewood and designs edible gardens as part of school curriculums. She also created the edible gardens for both Seth Boyden Elementary in Maplewood and the garden for the township's historical house, Durand Hedden.

"I said, 'Lorraine, I'm impressed with your work designing edible gardens at schools. We want to start an urban farm in the city,' " Mr. Taylor said.



Winstina S. Hughes is a graduate of Rutgers University with a degree in Planning and Public Policy. She writes a blog, [Perfectly Planned](#), about Maplewood, where she lives.

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With Ms. Gibbons on board, the partners set off on a mission, which is best described on its Web site: "Our response to unacceptable affordable food shortages and the rising costs of transporting food is to grow produce locally on unused and neglected plots of land throughout Newark."

The venture, Brick City Urban Farms, is described by Mr. Taylor as a mission-driven venture and a "new model for community gardening." This is the project's second season.

The project fits right into an initiative by Mayor Cory Booker to improve the health in Newark's neighborhoods and make more fresh fruits and vegetables available.

The need is well documented. According to Joe Ritchie, CEO of the [Brick City Development Corporation](#), which has developed a Fresh Foods Program to meet this need, " In 2007 the Newark Department of Health

and Human Services did a Community Health Assessment in which residents reported a scarcity in supermarkets that carried nutritious food products.”

The assessment found that there are only two supermarkets in Newark; both are Pathmark and only one is full size.

The development corporation’s Fresh Foods Program has developed a three-pronged program to bring new supermarkets to Newark, provide care and investment for existing small grocers and increase the number of farmers markets in the city, Mr. Ritchie said.

Brick City Urban Farms is a participant in the agency’s [Farmers Market Program](#). Farmers bring fresh foods directly to Family Success Centers, making fruits and vegetables easily accessible to residents.

“Newark is a place where great things are happening.” said Mr. Taylor. “We want to create a model and we want our farms to become a destination.”

Besides growing sustainable produce, the partners hope they are building a business that will be sustainable economically, creating jobs and wealth. Their business model includes using the SPIN Model and Earth Box technology to grow fresh produce.

They expect to hire five employees this summer for a total of six. In the long run, they hope to have two jobs per every half acre they farm.

There is also talk that Brick City Urban Farms will provide local school cafeterias such as St. Philip’s Academy with fresh produce in the near future.

After the Lincoln Park site, they plan to expand their community garden into Clinton Hill, on a two-block lot that was to be the future site of a school.

A bank or two asked them if they expected to be successful. The two business partners said they assured them that Newark residents want fresh food to eat.

Mr. Ritchie said the health benefits are sure to follow. He points to a recent study by the American Journal of Public Health which found that when you add a supermarket in an area “the intake of fruits and vegetables goes up by 32 percent for each additional supermarket in the area.”

Residents in Lincoln Park have begun asking when the garden will open this year, and last summer residents requested specific vegetables. A West Indian neighbor stopped by with a recipe. A Kenyan student from the Greater Newark Conservancy, part of their educational outreach program, was excited to see a particular vegetable from home in the garden. And Newark Council President Mildred Crump [stopped by](#) to share memories of the eggplants her husband grew years ago, as well as an old recipe of his.

The rain has stopped and we’ve stepped out of the car and into a soft refreshing mist. It feels like we’re on a farm, but the buildings around us are brownstones. Mr. Taylor reaches to pick up a bag of dirt. I laugh softly. Standing in a community garden located in the largest city in New Jersey, I feel like I’m in the best of both worlds — and possibly a model for community gardening in America’s largest cities.

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1. 1. April 22, 2009 2:48 pm [Link](#)

what a fantastic business idea! good luck to all!

— *lindsay*

2. 2. April 22, 2009 3:44 pm [Link](#)

OK, Winstina, we (my friends and I) are going to start vegetable “square foot garden” in the backyard. Would you and R. be willing to link up with A. and me and whomever to start The Local’s Square Foot Garden Club? That is, if The Local can do stuff like that ... you could write about plans and planting ...

See <http://www.squarefootgardening.com/>

— *hglindquist*

3. 3. April 22, 2009 3:46 pm [Link](#)

By the way, Winstina, A. and I are getting started this weekend ...

— *hglindquist*

4. 4. April 23, 2009 10:29 am [Link](#)

My name is Matt Feinstein, and I grew up in Millburn-Short Hills. I currently go to school in Newark, and upon graduation in May will be working for a pipeline diversity program in the city that attempts to use the law as a way to teach students the skills they will need to succeed.

I recently read Van Jones' "Green Collar Economy" and actually had entered a memo into my phone about the development of exactly this type of project. I want to commend you on the work you are doing and say that you have my full support. If you get this, please contact me at the above email address. I would love to hear more about your program.

Best,

Matt

— *Matt Feinstein*

5. 5. April 23, 2009 10:33 am [Link](#)

Lindsay – I think so too. Lorraine's work in Seth Boyden is beautiful! The Strawberry Patch sign above the garden path is a great touch, and when the place comes alive in the spring. In the summer I take the time to, just once, stand in the middle of the path and enjoy.

hglinquist – I'm starting a container garden myself this summer, branching out from basil, flowers, and leafy plants this year into vegetables. What you're doing sounds very cool. You should definitely spearhead a meeting amongst us all Local bloggers to meet one weekend in your backyard to work on the garden and hang out as a group. That event would be a great time to be productive, get to know one another, take pictures, and we could all co-ordinate a simultaneous write up & posting on the event on our respective blogs, and The Local. That would really be an event to twitter about. =o) Your thoughts?

— *W. S. Hughes*

6. 6. April 23, 2009 1:36 pm [Link](#)

Matt,

Thank you! I'll be reaching out to you via email. What you're doing sounds very exciting!

Best,

- *W. S. Hughes*

— *W. S. Hughes*

7. 7. April 23, 2009 8:51 pm [Link](#)

Maybe we could talk a group like Ethical Culture Society to let us use some backyard space to host a group square foot garden as a demonstration project ... making it more accessible ... on a regular basis.

— *hglinquist*

8. 8. April 28, 2009 1:20 am [Link](#)

hglinquist – send me an email.

— *W. S. Hughes*

9. 9. May 26, 2009 10:19 pm [Link](#)

I was reading your post and just wanted to see if you've heard of the Grow Box? I've tried it and it's actually a bit better and a whole lot less expensive! They hold about a gallon and a half more water. Check it out at <http://www.agardenpatch.com>. Hope you don't mind me popping in here but I always love a good bargain or a gardening tip!

— *tomatotaster*

10. 10. December 6, 2009 7:39 am [Link](#)

Wow. I'm late in responding to your comment. ...please forgive me. I have a blog that might be a resource if your looking for a bargain regarding gardening or garden tips. My posts are about container gardening specifically. If you visit this link it'll aggregate the content you might find useful. <http://perfectlyplanned.wordpress.com/category/container-gardening/>

I hope you do visit this post again, and if you do, I hope the link helps.

— *winstina*

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