



FARM ALLIANCE
BALTIMORE CITY

2012-2013 Report

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(cover) Jessie Scott harvests mustard greens at Civic Works' Real Food Farm. (below) Walker Marsh harvests radishes inside one of seven high tunnels at Real Food Farm.





THE FARM ALLIANCE OF BALTIMORE CITY is a network of producers working to increase the viability of urban farming and improve access to urban-grown foods. We are united by practices and principles that are socially, economically, and environmentally just.

This booklet is intended to share some of our experiences from our first two seasons working together. We hope this information will be useful to other groups of growers wanting to work cooperatively, whether urban or rural.

This project supported in part by the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. SARE is a program of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Building the alliance

BALTIMORE IS A VIBRANT CITY with a strong history of community gardens and a recent growth in urban farms focused on production growing. While the city has significant vacant land, limited access to fresh food, and high unemployment, it also has strong neighborhoods and a burgeoning food movement. The idea for a network grew out of existing collaborations. Farmers were already teaming up on seed orders, lending tools, and sharing knowledge, but we wanted to do more. Operating a small-scale, sustainable, urban farm is challenging, and we saw the potential to increase our impact, earn more revenue, and save money by working together.

A series of potlucks, a casual but focused Baltimore farming Google group, and a survey to assess shared values and priorities for action all helped direct the formation of our group. With support from an Open Society Institute fellowship and a USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education grant, the Farm Alliance began to take shape in fall 2011 with a full-time coordinator and some seed funding.

We started by interviewing and visiting groups of growers around the country already working on food access and urban farming issues, including Little City Growers Coop, Just Food, Seattle Tilth, Seattle Urban Farm Co-op, Cultivate



The logo combines Baltimore's cityscape with an award reminiscent of the finest state fair vegetables.

Kansas City, East Bay Urban Agriculture Alliance, Growing Power, and others. From this research we got big-picture ideas and specific tips. During winter 2011, we came up with a name, developed a logo and website, and identified our priorities for the growing season ahead.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Build trust one-on-one between members.** We have rough patches working together, but strong relationships between individual growers give us a foundation to work from.
- **Find the right time, but don't wait too long.** We had some disagreement about whether the group was ready to launch, but we ultimately decided to make our move when the funding and opportunity presented itself and let others join in later.
- **Take the time to document the process and formalize procedures.** We took awhile to write our by-laws, but a clear process was important when challenges arose.



Elisa Lane harvests carrots inside a high tunnel at Whitelock Community Farm.

Our members

- **LAND SIZE** Range from a neighbor's backyard or small vacant lot to 8 ½ acres, but most are ¼ – ½ acre.
- **LEGAL STRUCTURE** Mix of non-profits and for-profits.
- **STAFF** Most farms have one primary grower; some farms have Americorps members, college interns, or neighbors volunteering.
- **TYPES OF CROPS** Some growers specialize (honey, mushrooms, cut flowers, fish), but many grow diversified fruits and vegetables.
- **SALES OUTLETS** Restaurants, farmstands, mobile market, CSAs, corner stores, farmers markets.
- **EDUCATION PROGRAMS** Many farms have after-school programs, high school internships, school field trips, nutrition classes, community events, and other programs.

For a complete profile of each member, visit farmalliancebaltimore.org/the-farms.

Organization

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

We are a non-profit/cooperative hybrid where our board of directors is made up of member farms and we have an advisory committee composed of partner organizations. We have fiscal sponsorship through Civic Works, a Baltimore non-profit, which allowed us to hit the ground running and apply for grant funding. We may transition to becoming a legal cooperative in the future as our farms become more established and we develop more reliable funding streams.

MEMBERSHIP PROCESS & STANDARDS

All new members apply for a one-year provisional membership. Members must be growing in the city, adhere to a set of standards related to sustainable growing practices and food safety, and meet modest minimum sales requirements. A small committee of current members visits the farm and reviews the application before the group votes on admitting the applicant. After one year, the producer may be eligible for full membership.

BRANDING

We worked with local graphic and web designers and used a collaborative design process to create a name, logo, website, and a brand that we could all unite behind.



DATA

The coordinator collects monthly data on production, sales, and education from each farm. This helps illustrate the impact of urban farming in Baltimore and is useful when applying for funding (see page XX for a data summary).

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Find an organizational structure that fits the group and doesn't take too long to set up.** Coupling a member-run nonprofit structure with fiscal sponsorship through a likeminded organization worked well for us.
- **Make membership benefits and obligations scalable for different growers.** Our members can choose whether to participate in the farmers market, double dollars program, or restaurant sales, and each farm only pays towards programs they participate in.
- **Create a trial period for new members.** One year of provisional membership is an important way for both our growers and the Farm Alliance to see if the relationship is working well.
- **Unite your voice.** We have been able to build a stronger relationship with City government and get additional press coverage for many of our growers by having a unified brand and message.

Joint sales

SHARED MARKET STAND

Early on, we decided to pool our resources to staff and stock a shared stand at one of Baltimore’s busiest farmers markets since we each have limited inventory and time. Every week, participating growers circulate an email with what each farm is bringing, growers deliver their items and a detailed inventory sheet to a central walk-in fridge, members take turns staffing the stand, and we sell under our shared brand. All bunched items have color-coded rubber bands, and at the end of market we sort out how much each grower sold. Excess or shortfall is split proportionately between growers based on their earnings. In the first calendar year, we sold over \$40,000 of products, which was a significant new source of revenue for members.

COLLECTIVE RESTAURANT SALES

In our second season, we launched an online market through Local Orbit—a customizable web-based marketplace—to manage our restaurant sales. Members were already selling some items to local restaurants, but now we can offer one easy delivery and payment for our buyers. We offer weekly delivery and list products from half a dozen growers. This is our newest program, and some ongoing challenges include listing enough quantity and diversity for buyers, getting consistent weekly orders, and finding the right customers.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Start small and flexible.** We discussed launching a market stand and restaurant sales in our first season, but wisely decided to take on one component at a time. The market stand is much more flexible and forgiving and has been a great way to work together, increase sales outlets, and reach new consumers.
- **Plan carefully.** We developed a system to distribute any shortfall or excess and honed our inventory system for the market stand with agreed-upon prices and units for each crop.
- **Complement, don't compete.** Customers always complement the diversity at our market stand, which happens somewhat naturally, but we would like to do more joint crop planning in the future.
- **Brand the market stand.** With rotating staff and so many farms in the mix, it's important to have big banners and a distinct look to the stand. A shared stand is a trade off between less branding for each individual farm but access to new markets and increased sales outlets.



Tara Megos talks to customers at Hidden Harvest Farm, one of five urban farm stands accepting nutrition benefits.

Double dollars program

IN OUR FIRST SEASON, we operated a shared machine to accept credit, debit, and EBT (food stamps) cards at on-site neighborhood farm stands. While we did only a small volume of sales on the machine, we figured out a rotating schedule, an accounting process, and accepted nutrition benefits for the first time at many urban farms.

In our second season, we secured funding for a double dollars incentive program to increase purchasing power for customers receiving nutrition benefits. We now match purchases made with EBT, WIC Fruit & Vegetable Checks, and Farmers' Market Nutrition Program coupons up to the first \$10. For example, if a customer spends \$10 of their benefits, they receive \$20 of produce.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Start small and grow slowly.** It was important to figure out how to administer the machine before adding the incentive program. Handing off the machine every week can be challenging, and clear communication is important.
- **Outreach is time-consuming and a long-term commitment.** We have found that neighborhood farmstands and the double dollars program take a lot of time to promote and need multiple seasons to attract customers.

Connor Horne uses a wheel hoe at Real Food Farm. This and other tools are available to members through a shared tool bank.



Shared tools & equipment



SINCE OUR MEMBER FARMS are located so close together, there was a strong interest in sharing tools to save money and increase efficiency. We identified tools that were more expensive (\$100–\$1,000) and relatively practical to share between farms. To raise money, we teamed up with generous local chefs to hold a series of outdoor dinners featuring urban-grown products.

We bought a used shed, and we got some tools donated and purchased others. The collection currently includes a precision seeder, 4-point seeder, wheel hoe, high-quality gas mower, several string trimmers, 2 broadforks, and some hand tools. A cooperative seed-starting greenhouse is planned for early spring 2014.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Take time to build strong systems for shared resources.** We use an online spreadsheet to track tool check-outs, but struggle to keep it updated and still need to develop a reliable system for ongoing maintenance and repairs.
- **Support new growers with shared tools.** Our newest farms benefit the most from these shared resources and get to try out many different tools before investing in their own.

Vinnie Bevivino from Chesapeake Compost Works leads a community composting workshop at Whitelock Community Farm.

Training

- **WORKSHOPS** We teamed up with several local organizations to offer panels and workshops on urban farming. Topics include legal issues, marketing, growing methods, urban soils, and more.
- **RESOURCE GUIDE** Using farmalliancebaltimore.org as a platform, we posted video recordings, useful links, a how-to guide for starting a farm, and more information for prospective urban farmers. Making information accessible is one step to growing the urban agriculture movement.
- **HANDS-ON TRAINING FOR MEMBERS** We held several hands-on workshops on topics such as tool selection and harvest methods, nutrition education, and nutrient management based on member requests.



LESSONS LEARNED

- **Tap into regional expertise.** Some of our biggest successes have come from partnering with rural growers and connecting with existing agricultural resources and organizations such as Extension and the local Beginning Farmer Training Program. Urban growing is a newer spin on farming, but many of the principles of sustainable, small-scale agriculture apply.
- **Fill in the gaps and offer new information where needed.** We have helped develop trainings and resources in response to specific unmet needs such as nutrient management planning for small-scale growers (a Maryland statewide requirement) and easy-to-understand resources about animal husbandry regulations.
- **Grow the movement.** We have found that making information accessible and available is one of the first steps to building a more inclusive urban agriculture movement.

By the numbers

SINCE JUNE 2012, WE COLLECTIVELY:

- Harvested **38,902** pounds of product
- Coordinated **10,983** volunteer hours
- Generated **\$165,756** in sales (including over **\$61,475** at our shared farmers market stand and **\$11,147** through our collective online restaurant sales)
- Hosted **5,334** students on our farms

Looking forward

THE FARM ALLIANCE is still a young organization, and we continue to adapt our programs to better support our member farms. This winter we will put up a cooperative seed-starting greenhouse, continue to operate our shared market stand, and prepare for the season ahead.

Some areas our members would like to explore in the future include collective supply purchasing, health insurance, liability insurance, expanding farmer training opportunities, and expanding joint sales. Each winter we evaluate the previous season and set priorities for the upcoming one.

It is our hope that some of our successes, challenges, and lessons learned can serve other groups of small growers wanting to build their own farmer-driven networks. We look forward to strengthening the urban agriculture movement here in Baltimore and connecting with growers around the country.

