

If Vegetables Could Talk

How is urban agriculture shaping communities — and us?

By Lauren Snyder

“Eat your veggies. They’re good for you.”

Who knew that besides building strong bodies, a head of broccoli could build a community. Or that the humble parsnip could ignite a passion. Or that purpose could be found in the rainbow hues of peppers. For many, beauty and significance can be found in a flower. While only a percentage of the population will ever dirty their fingernails in a flowerbed, everyone eats.

There was a time where our industry was populated with those who grew vegetables like they grew flowers. Roadside stands seemed a timeless standby and shaking the hand that grew the food a nonchalant occurrence. But grocery stores got bigger, demand got higher and a system of economics begged away the roadside stand for the pursuit of grand-scale efficiency and immediacy. But with the rise in food-borne illness crises and a resurging awareness of humans ecological role and responsibility, growing food



BrightFarms is a hydroponic indoor growing operation that supplies local supermarkets.

no longer feels like purgatory but rather, a priceless privilege.

To start exploring this new wave of horticultural endeavors in urban and vertical farming is to fall down a rabbit hole of opportunists, tech geeks and a new generation of growers who may lack a legacy of horticultural experience but are well stocked in purpose, hustle and ambition. Of the motivating factors for this new movement, feeding local communities, solving the world hunger crises, growing with greater environmental consciousness and shortening the supply chain take center stage.

THE BIG GUYS ARE TAKING INTEREST. ARE YOU?

There are big stakes in the urbanized and high tech food movement; big stakes as in Google Ventures, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations and Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers. These and other general venture capitalist firms invested \$4.6 billion across 527 deals/projects in 2015 alone, representing a significant jump from the year prior. In the first half of 2016, deals grew 7 percent compared to the same span of time in 2015, while funding declined by 20 percent.

The rate of funding can be fickle as it relates to world markets, and this decline was seen across global venture capital markets. However, the number of interested investors grew by 52 percent as awareness of and interest in food e-commerce, biomaterials and biomechanicals, soil and crop technology and precision agriculture has increased. (Data provided by AgFunder).

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NOVEL APPROACH TO
ANTICIPATING
YOUR BUSINESS' NEEDS
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According to consumer market research firm Packaged Facts, a division of MarketResearch.com, locally produced foods are no longer being seen as a “quirky” part-time endeavor. Rather, locally produced foods are gaining ground in the country’s food- and retail-scape. In 2014, locally produced foods generated \$12 billion in sales, as estimated by Packaged Facts. This is hypothesized to increase and reach \$20 billion by 2019.

A November 2014 survey by Packaged Facts reveals even more. Among the U.S. adults surveyed, 53 percent sought out locally grown or produced foods. Of more significance? Almost half of the respondents indicated a willingness to pay up to 10 percent more for locally grown or produced foods. One in three offered that they’d be willing to pay up to 25 percent more for local foods. Respondents preferred the freshness from foods with less miles on them, often correlating freshness to a better taste. And about one third believe locally-produced foods are healthier.

THE URBAN FARM

Noah Link and Alex Bryan are industry outsiders (both having graduated from the University of Michigan with liberal arts degrees) with international experiences that have led them back to Detroit, Michigan. Together they founded Food Field, a four-acre

farm built on an abandoned school site. Since 2011 and the farm’s inception, they have added hoop houses, fruit trees, solar power, aquaponics, a shipping container house, and 1 to 2 acres of cultivated land. They produce for local markets, restaurants and a CSA.

Food Field is unique in that it is run entirely on solar power — and for the fact that it isn’t entirely sustained by microgreens. Because the farm occupies an entire block, Food Field is able to move enough volume through various outlets to break even. And in producing volume and an array of produce (namely tomatoes, greens, garlic and carrots), Link and Bryan are able to get creative with creating a practically self-sustaining operation that also includes tree fruit, bees and honey, meat and eggs, as well. This diversity is key to distinguishing themselves from other urban farms and in sustaining operations year-round.

Their mission makes a strong statement, saying, “We believe it is important to operate as a business to show that organic, urban agriculture can be economically viable. While sustainable farming and gardening does bring a variety of other benefits, we must be able to create an alternative and not merely a supplement to our industrialized food system.”

Link adds, “We’re finding the right balance between growing high-value specialty crops for market, and scaling up for larger-scale CSA production. We have a great

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— Food Field mission statement



RecoveryPark Farms focuses on supplying a diverse mix of locally grown edibles to Detroit restaurants.

opportunity to do both here but still need to focus and streamline our production better.”

THE INNOVATIVE EMPLOYER

RecoveryPark Farms approaches urban agriculture from another angle. Hosted under the non-profit RecoveryPark, the Farms is actually a for-profit entity that focuses on supplying a diverse mix of locally grown edibles to Detroit restaurants. Says Michelle



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Lutz, the farm manager, “The Detroit food scene is undergoing a resurgence with a lot of talent, and chefs who care about using local products.” In her eyes, the restaurant market backed by creative and innovative

chefs has been underserved by local growers.

Also unique about RecoveryPark Farms is they employ people in recovery from various addictions or recently released from incarceration. RecoveryPark

Farms thus hopes to not only feed the local community, but also to provide meaningful work that offers an opportunity to develop meaningful professional skills. Lutz remembers a touching comment from one of their employees when

asked where he saw himself in a few years. The man excitedly replied, “I want your job!”

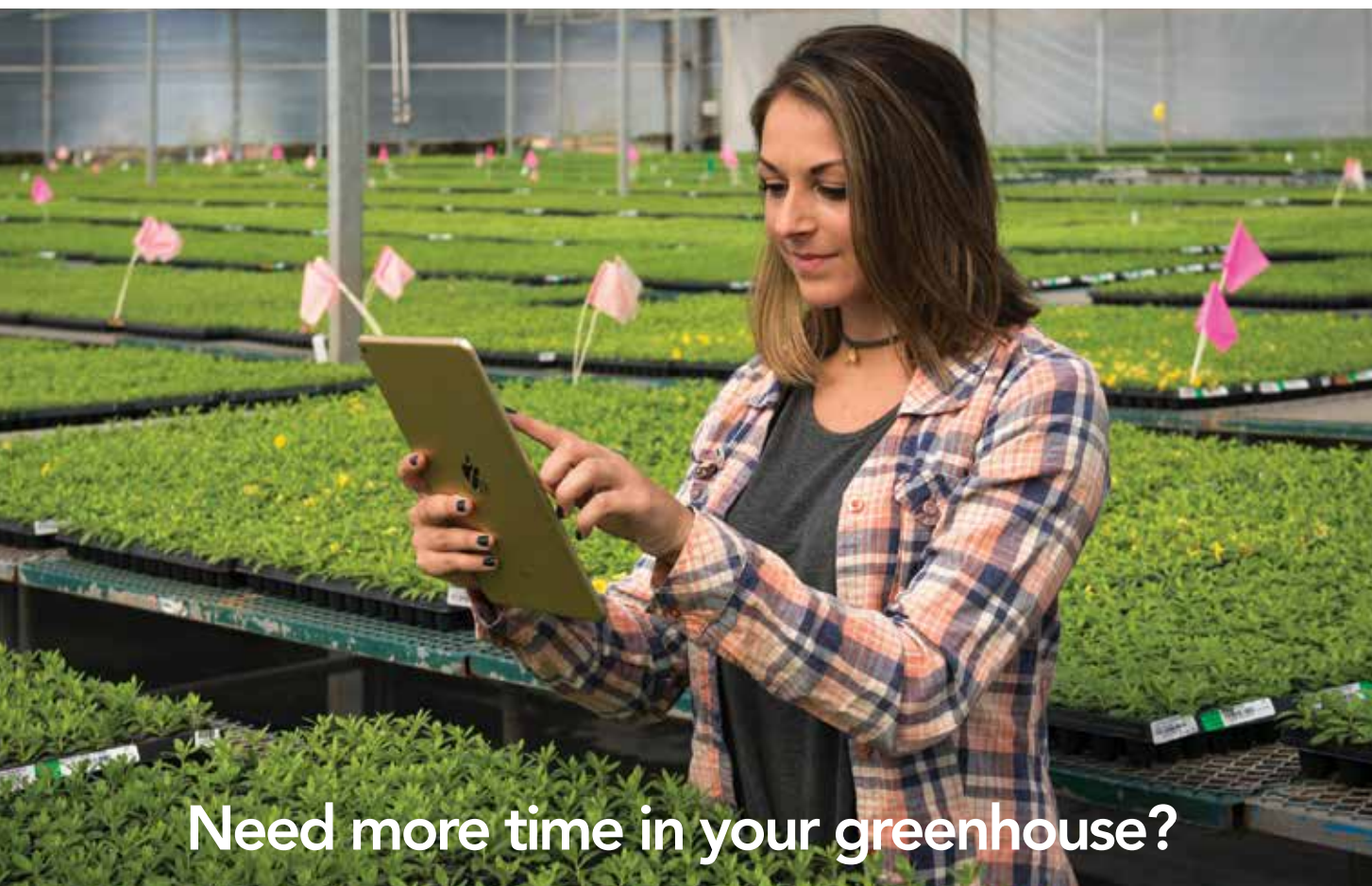
The farm is weeks away from expanding to 22 blocks totaling 105 acres and adding eight more structures and four more full-time employees (they currently have five). The master plan is 9 acres of soil-based systems under high tunnels coupled with 17 acres of greenhouse. That would equal 3 million square feet of greenhouse growing space. No shortage of ambition or opportunity here! The combination of hydroponic and high tech systems with the more traditional soil-based system is necessary for the product mix area chefs are looking for.

Lutz, who also took an a-traditional route to horticulture, concentrates extensively cultivating plants *and* relationships. “We need to collaborate with chefs and walk in the door with creative ideas,” she says. “We need to keep exciting each other, challenging each other, creating with each other. Once we form that relationship, we can sustain each other ... I love when a chef just wants to walk through the greenhouse and get inspired. Those relationships make a difference.”

THE PARADIGM SHIFTER

Another company is doing more than making a difference in the local community. They’re making a difference in the retail produce supply chain and shattering paradigms doing it. Paul Lightfoot, CEO of BrightFarms since 2010, helped champion an alternative route in the retail produce supply chain where inefficiencies are eliminated and where farmers, the environment, and consumer health are prioritized.

What resulted is BrightFarms, a high-tech, hydroponic indoor edible growing operation that supplies local supermarkets and shrinks the supply chain within tens of miles rather than across the country — and hundreds of thousands of miles. The business model is simple, “We put up the money, build the facility, find,



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nurture and support the local farmer. The supermarket merely commits to buying the better produce at a set price for a certain number of years. We need to meet or beat market pricing, and we do it by having a shorter and simpler supply chain,” explains Lightfoot.

BrightFarms has locations in Bucks County, Pennsylvania (serving the Pennsylvania and New Jersey markets), Culpeper County, Virginia (serving the greater D.C. market) and Rochelle, Illinois (serving the Chicagoland market). While supermarkets first saw the idea of long-term contracts for produce as crazy, Lightfoot made his way up the supermarket executive chain to convince the C-suite that this was a good idea as it meant better customer loyalty, greater market share, and better sales. They’re proving their point with supermarket partners such as Ahold USA in the D.C. area and Roundy’s Supermarkets, a wholly-owned subsidiary

of the Kroger Co., throughout Chicagoland, and have plans for many more partnerships with forward thinking supermarket chains throughout the United States.

One of the things that makes BrightFarms remarkable beyond its business model is its attention to efficient operation practices. Their hydroponic greenhouses are “designed to conserve land, water, eliminate agricultural runoff, and reduce greenhouse gas emission from transportation.

Plus, each farm creates green-collar jobs for local farmers and keep more dollars in the community.” Says Lightfoot, “Before I knew anything, I thought I’d get a great grower and be off to the races. But the production side of things is much different than the grower side of things. I might have an expert who knows exactly what to do to make plant thrive. While important, it’s not enough. I need someone who understands manufacturing. We are *farming*, but our processes look a lot like a lean manufacturer’s.”

Having come from a law background and then worked with software and IT, Lightfoot notes that production and a manufacturing mentality is a distinguishable area of opportunity within horticulture businesses, noting that “We need excellence in growing *and* production. Whatever your weakest point is is the speed at which you’ll go.”

OPPORTUNITY

The edible trend poses a remarkable opportunity for many in the horticulture industry to get back to their roots, with so many of today’s greenhouse businesses having been founded on the shoulders of fruit and vegetable operations. But today’s edible market looks distinctly more urban than it did 50, 60, 80 years ago. It’s lean, it’s fast, it’s high-tech, and it’s innovative. And what’s more, it’s being run by a new kind of horticulturist, the kind that doesn’t just bloom where they’re planted. They thrive. *gpn*

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