



Volunteers work in the fields at the Oakland Avenue Urban Farm in Detroit, Michigan on July 17, 2023. *Daniel Mears*

DETROIT

Detroit farms, gardens still fighting for right to flourish



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Published 11:21 p.m. ET July 30, 2023 | Updated 2:27 p.m. ET July 31, 2023

Jerry Ann Hebron admits she openly participated in an illegal act for years in Detroit.

Her crime: operating a community garden on the empty lots next to the North End church where her mother was the longtime pastor.

"I was gangster farming for years," Hebron said.

She and more than a dozen residents started a community garden on 10 vacant lots owned by the city around 2008. The city refused to sell the lots for years, she said.

"The city kept thinking they could find a development deal" for the Oakland Avenue lots, Hebron said.

Then, in 2013, Detroit passed the Urban Agricultural Ordinance that legalized what Hebron and many Detroiters were already doing — farming and communal gardening. In the 10 years since the ordinance's passage, Hebron is

now part of a flourishing network of Detroit agriculturalists. There are 2,029 gardens and farms believed to be operating in Detroit, including 1,433 family, 383 community, 120 school and 93 market gardens or farms, according to a 2021 estimate by the nonprofit Keep Growing Detroit.

"It's far exceeded my expectations," said Detroit City Council President Pro Tem James Tate, who sponsored the urban agricultural ordinance a decade ago. "I'm proud of my fellow residents for transforming the landscape of so many vacant lots into something that is healthy and so beneficial."

Hebron now oversees 10 acres of land called the Oakland Avenue Urban Farm. Spread out over several blocks, dozens of community residents grow vegetables and fruit alongside small businesses that grow and sell produce or flowers. More than 30 different types of produce are grown.

The property is owned by a community land trust, which helps ensure the land will remain agricultural for a century. Most of the land became empty due to Detroit's long economic decline; the city eventually gained ownership due to tax foreclosures.

On a recent July morning, the farm was buzzing with dozens of people, from residents to several farm employees to students, working the land.

"The North End was kind of a scary place when we first started," Hebron said. "Now, we are the epitome of community development."

Hebron, executive director of the Oakland Avenue farm and the North End Christian Community Development Corporation, has received plenty of help through the years from such groups as the nonprofit Keep Growing Detroit, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, foundations, universities, businesses and the city.

Many Detroit agriculturalists have lofty goals: Creating a healthier, local food system; strengthening neighborhoods; and, more recently, providing buffers against gentrification, particularly in Black communities.

Many Detroit agriculturalists praise the strong network that has taken root in the city. Hebron was one of the 14 city residents and experts involved with agriculture interviewed by The News who said much more needs to be done to keep urban agriculture growing.

"The city may have legalized farming and gardening 10 years ago, but I don't know if overall they give it priority," Hebron said. "And I say this as someone who has had a lot of support in the past and a good relationship now with the city."

Trouble buying empty city land

In 2020, Hebron helped found the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund, which has raised more than \$100,000 that has assisted 121 agricultural ventures in the city.

"I got involved in the land fund because I get approached constantly by people who say they can't get the city to sell them the empty land in their neighborhoods" to start gardens or farms, Hebron said.

Buying empty land in the city usually means dealing with the Detroit Land Bank Authority. The agency owns more than 63,000 empty properties, making it the largest property owner in the city by far.

Difficulty in buying empty land is a prime example of why many critics say the city government can be as unpredictable as the weather. Nick Leonard, executive director of the Great Lakes Environmental Law Center, has offered legal advice to dozens of garden and farming start-ups in the past decade, though he said he is not as active as he once was.

"Land ownership is often the roadblock," Leonard said. "It's gotten better, but generally, if the city thought it had a chance to find more traditional development for empty land, it wouldn't sell to farmers."

It took Brother Nature Produce in North Corktown 13 years to convince the city to sell it the land that it first started to farm in 2003. That's when Greg Willerer first asked the neighbors on his block if they had any objections to him converting the empty lots to a farm.

"More than half of the block was kind of feral," Willerer said. For years, he and his wife, Olivia Hubert, had to deal with a nearby drug house. The couple routinely tried to buy the vacant land it had converted to a farm, less than one acre in total, from the city.

"In 2008, I just got the sense (city officials) were throwing out our paperwork," Willerer said.

With the help of the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund, Brother Nature officially purchased its land this March. The land fund helped with some money but also key legal assistance to seal the land purchase with the land bank.

"Farming may be legal, but it doesn't mean the city overall is supportive to farmers and growers," Hubert said.

Willerer described the city's attitude to agriculturalists this way: "It's like a stepchild with a parent who is just kind of indifferent."

At times, Mayor Mike Duggan has expressed support for urban farming. As far back as 2018, he has described Eastern Market as an "economic engine" due to its role in supporting city growers. In December, he attended the opening of the farm-to-table restaurant Detroit Soul in the Jefferson Chalmers neighborhood.

He's also been supportive of efforts by U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow to create more funding for urban farmers from the federal farm bill. Stabenow is chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.

Land bank: 'We support urban farming'

For their part, Detroit Land Bank Authority officials said the land bank is not the agency that sets the priorities of who should be able to buy multiple lots of land.

"The land bank is not a planning entity," Alyssa Strickland-Knight, DLBA spokeswoman, told The News. "We do follow the city's lead on planning efforts. To the extent the city has identified areas where they are planning for housing or any other initiative, we do follow the city's lead."

"We support urban farming, but we have to support it responsibly and in line with the overall city goal," said Strickland-Knight, adding the land bank will try to redirect potential agriculturalists to other city properties they may be interested in buying.

Land bank CEO Tammy Daniels pointed out the agency is on a continuous learning curve: "We've added a lot of land-based friendly projects since 2020."

Among those projects are expanding residents' ability to buy empty lots within 500 feet of their homes. The previous policy limited the offer to adjacent side lots.

The land bank has also allowed more community groups to buy small sets of lots and has improved advertising those bundles of lots on its website.

"There are a lot more opportunities than have been in the past," Daniels said. "I hope that folks weren't discouraged by a previous interaction, and they'd be willing to reach out and talk to us."

Rules obstacles remain

Beyond land battles, many working farms like Rising Pheasant Farms on the city's east side said challenges with various city regulations remain. Rising Pheasant has been operating in Detroit for 15 years, which means it was operating before the 2013 ordinance made it formally legal.

"I would say the city is neutral," said owner Carolyn Leadley, who operates the farm with her husband, Jack VanDyke. "Over the years, it's been very confusing."

Getting city permission to build a new hoop house on their farm has been just as bewildering as it was eight years ago when they built their first hoop house, the couple said. A hoop house is a type of greenhouse, usually built with tubes and covered in heavy-duty, UV-resistant plastic.

They and other growers said they wish the city also would address water and sewage rates and overall establish more consistent policies for permitting various activities.

Like so many in the city's agricultural scene, Leadley and VanDyke remain passionate about what they do for a living. "It was pretty mind-blowing to pull that first carrot out of the ground; the intense aroma," Leadley said.

She also remains inspired by many Detroit growers:

"I can't really imagine a better place to learn about resilience," Leadley said. "There's all this community and knowledge."

The couple are among many city agriculturalists who support changing city ordinances to allow chickens, ducks and bees. The city is holding "listening sessions" on that issue now.

Council member Tate has been working on the proposed ordinance change for almost 10 years and is working to bring the issue this fall to the full council.

Rising imbalance on garden sites

The rising popularity of buying and growing locally produced food is starting to result in an imbalance on where gardens are cropping up in the city that many Detroit agriculturalists said they find disturbing.

A recent University of Michigan study found that in Detroit, a majority Black city, farms and gardens are much more prevalent in parts of the city that are gentrifying. That means the goal of many Black communities to regain land in their neighborhood to produce healthy food is being thwarted.

The UM study used remote sensing to map 478 home gardens and 130 community gardens across 56 neighborhoods. Study senior author Joshua Newell, an urban geographer at UM's School for Environment and Sustainability, collaborated with Jason Hawes, a doctoral student, and Dimitrios Gounaridis, a postdoctoral researcher, on the study that was published last year in the journal *Landscape and Urban Planning*.

"We found in the case of community gardens, the folks who had access to those gardens were wealthier, more educated and of a higher socioeconomic status," Hawes said in a UM press release. "They also tended to be clustered in non-Black neighborhoods. That's a really big deal in a city that's 78% Black."

It's a sign gardening and farming may be spreading beyond the Black-led institutions like churches and nonprofits, such as Oakland Avenue farm, that originally promoted it, Newell said.

The findings of the UM study don't surprise Winona Bynum, executive director of the Detroit Food Policy Council, a 23-member advisory board that formed in 2009. The council works to influence policy that ensures the development and maintenance of a sustainable and equitable food system. More educated and affluent communities tend to have better resources and ability to navigate the city bureaucracy to buy property and overcome legal barriers, Bynum said.

Ensuring that gardens and farms are a viable option for every Detroit community is the battle for the next 10 years, Bynum and others said. Advocates have to keep lobbying to refine the bureaucratic process, bolster the work being done by such nonprofits as Keep Growing Detroit and promote the benefits of urban agriculture.

"We have to keep showing the many benefits of urban gardens and farms," Bynum said. "They are important toward food security. They can help provide workforce training and jobs to neighborhoods. It can make Detroit more sustainable."

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