Urban agriculture booming in Ohio

By Matt Ernst, independent writer

Kentucky’s neighbor to the north has the most Statistical Metropolitan Areas of any state besides California – and in between Ohio’s urban areas are plenty of farms. Now, urban agriculture is putting food production in more of Ohio’s cities, say extension educators at The Ohio State University.

Urban agriculture is not a new concept in Ohio, said Ohio State’s Mike Hogan, Extension Educator and Sustainable Agriculture Coordinator. Cleveland and Cuyahoga County have a long history of community land used for food production. “They have done a tremendous amount of work over a several year period to develop agricultural businesses with urban production systems,” he said.

Rust Belt cities, like Cleveland and Detroit, are ripe for urban farming due to land availability. Cleveland has long had a “Market Gardener Basic Training Program” to train growers selling at farmers markets, to restaurants, and through other direct market channels. The city also has a long history of not-for-profit community gardening, partnering with Extension to conduct community gardens since the 1970s.

Cleveland’s Ohio City Farm, a 6-acre site believed to be one of the country’s largest contiguous urban farms, combines high-value crop production for local farmers markets and restaurants with programs aimed at equipping refugee farmers to develop U.S. food businesses. Cleveland Crops, an Ohio City Farm tenant, sponsors programs teaching farm skills to de-

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developmentally disabled adults. “Ohio City Farm is a very successful enterprise – successful economically, environmentally, and even socially,” said Hogan.

Jacqueline Kowalski, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Educator for Cuyahoga County, said there are about 40 for-profit urban farms in Cleveland. “They are growing intensive, high-value vegetables like garlic, greens, beans, tomatoes,” she said. Farmers market sales are the most common route to profitability; sales to restaurants and through CSAs have increased.

Kowalski said new producers face the challenge of maximizing production, for as long as possible, from a small space. “Once you get the urban farm spot, it’s a couple years before the soil is really built up and ready,” she said. Some raised bed production is used, but more than half of Cleveland’s urban farms are using in-ground production. The city requires soil testing on all urban farming sites. “It’s all land being reclaimed by the individual farmers,” said Kowalski.

Cleveland has received some unique investments and donations toward developing urban farm infrastructure. In 2012, a $135,000 USDA pilot program allowed NRCS funding for hoop houses in Cuyahoga County, allowing more urban farms to extend their production season. Cleveland also received $135,000 in 2012 from AgriBank, CoBank and Farm Credit Services of Mid-America to help fund beginning urban farmers.

Mike Hogan said that other Ohio cities, like Columbus, are showing more urban ag interest. “Demand is very strong right now,” he said, noting that “local” drives Ohio entrepreneurs toward urban agriculture. “People want to develop ag businesses closer to where the food is marketed,” he said.

This winter, The Ohio State University Extension offered a “Master Urban Farmer” training program in Columbus. The program developed out of a two-year planning process looking at ways to serve and develop one disadvantaged neighborhood. The extension educators planned for 40 attendees; they instructed 60, with a waiting list of almost 30 more.

The seven-session Master Urban Farmer program instructed participants on everything from soil testing and season extension for urban sites to IPM and food safety. One session emphasized business planning for agricultural enterprises. Another entire session included a “Marketing Boot Camp,” showing participants how to do their marketing homework and execute a successful marketing plan. Hogan said the program will follow in other Ohio urban areas.

Hogan said Ohio’s most successful new urban agriculture enterprises focus on selling high-value vegetables, and some fruits, to restaurants focused on changing menus and local cuisine. The Ohio City Farm, in Cuyahoga County, caters to supplying such needs in the nearby eating and drinking district of Ohio City, a mile from downtown Cleveland.

Hogan said it is ironic and poignant that the Ohio City farm borders the Cuyahoga River – the river that caught fire in the 1970s before cleanup efforts improved river water quality.

Meet the Buyer Forum a plus for MarketReady graduates

By Kevin Heidemann, Extension Associate

MarketReady is a training program for producers exploring entry into commercial food markets. This program was launched in 2011 and has trained more than 500 individuals in Kentucky. In March of 2014, the MarketReady team hosted the first Kentucky MarketReady Meet the Buyer Forum for MarketReady graduates. In the first hour or so of the event, three panels of guest speakers were given a few minutes to speak about what they do and what they are looking for. One of these panels consisted of buyers and brokers of local food products for Fayette County Public Schools, Jefferson County Public Schools, Berea College, KHI Foods, and Louisville Farm to Table. Another panel consisted of buyers and chefs from
Marksbury, Bristol Bar and Grille in downtown Louisville, Alfalfa Restaurant in Lexington, and Louisville Farm to Table. The third panel consisted of buyers and various store managers from Whole Foods and Roby’s Country Garden. Representatives from the Kentucky Department of Agriculture (KDA) and the Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development (KCARD) were also present at the event to provide information, resources, services, and guidance.

Following the morning panels of guest speakers, all of the buyers, chefs, brokers, and representatives were given their own meeting stations. Participants had a good idea of who they should meet with after the panels. Participants were then instructed to sit at a station for a speed dating style activity. Every 15 minutes, for more than an hour and a half, participants would rotate to another station to meet with different buyers and representatives. This ensured that all of our participants had time to at least speak with all of the parties they intended to. Producers were given a worksheet to keep track of buyers they met, their contact information, what types of products they were seeking, what growing methods they prefer, and their delivery schedules. Buyers were given worksheets to track producers they spoke with, their contact information, their growing methods, products they offer, and the specific products they were interested in purchasing from them. All participants were also encouraged to visit with the representatives from KCARD and KDA to learn about programs, funding opportunities, resources, business planning, and any other types of assistance or guidance they offer. Following this activity, a lunch catered by Alfalfa Restaurant included as much locally sourced ingredients as possible, and allowed more time for networking.

Finally, program evaluation forms were given to everyone who attended the event to gather information about the effectiveness of the program, track business relationships and personal contacts made, obtain background information, and obtain suggestions for improvements. Overall, 29 producers attended the event, with 19 guest panelists (buyers, chefs, managers, etc.), and 5 representatives from KDA and KCARD. Of the 53 total individuals that attended, 39 returned completed program evaluation surveys (73.6%).

The survey first asked respondents to indicate the overall usefulness of the program for their business, the usefulness of the buyer panels, and the usefulness of the speed dating activity. Overall, the event was rated as very useful by 90% of attendees, and as somewhat useful by 10%. The guest speaker panel was indicated as very useful by 63% of those who attended, and as somewhat useful by the other 37%. Finally, the speed dating activity was rated as very useful by 89%, and as somewhat useful by 11%. After these questions, the survey asked everyone to indicate whether or not they made any new business relationships, and to indicate about how many they made. Participants were also asked to indicate if they made any new personal contacts at the event that might benefit their business in the future.

In total, 37 respondents (97%) indicated that they did make new business relationships at the event. A total of 122 new business contacts were made that day, an average of 3 to 4 new business contacts per person. Furthermore, 36 (95%) of the respondents indicated they made new personal contacts that might benefit their business in the future. These individuals made a total of 138 new personal contacts, which is an average of about 4 contacts per person.

The survey asked participants for ways to improve the event, and asked them to indicate what they liked most about it. Some of the responses to these questions are listed below:

**Best ways to improve the event:**
- “Maybe something that would be organized by region & locality”
- “Continue to reach out to different growers & possibly have this 2-3 times a year”

**Things I liked most:**
- “Moved easily and focused on connecting buyers and producers. Simple objectives.”
• “Very beneficial for producer & buyer of all sizes/forms, etc. Made great connections.”

To aid in understanding the type(s) of production practiced by those who attended the event, producers were asked to indicate the focus of their current production. Many of the producers who attended this event had diverse operations, which is indicated in Table 1 below. This table doesn’t add up to 100% because many of the producers stated they were producing an array of products (i.e., produce, value-added products, etc.). Those who indicated they are producing other types of products stated they were producing macaroni, honey, eggs, and more.

Producers were then asked to indicate what markets they were primarily hoping to begin selling through before the event, and what markets they primarily hoped to begin selling through after the event. These figures can be seen in Table 2 below. This question is useful in understanding behavioral changes that may have occurred at the training. Sometimes the market a producer intends to target just won’t work out for various reasons. One of the main goals of the MarketReady Producer Training program is to connect the right producer with the right market. MarketReady intentionally provides producers with enough information about various markets for them to truly understand what markets are likely to fit with their unique situation; for example, the overall business model, product mix, delivery capabilities, and scale of production would all be factors in deciding which markets work best for a particular producer. Some producers who attended this event may have decided to steer away from marketing to grocery and wholesale markets. Conversely, some producers may have decided to direct their marketing efforts toward foodservice markets.

In conclusion, the MarketReady Graduate Meet the Buyer Forum proved to be a success for both the diverse producers and the various buyers who attended. This event facilitated many new business relationships and beneficial personal relationships for the vast majority of those who responded to our survey. The speed dating activity proved to be very well received by almost all those who attended. The program, overall, was also seen as being very useful for the vast majority of those who participated. In the future, we might lengthen the speed dating activity and invite a more diverse group of buyers from across the state. We might also consider conducting multiple events in different regions of the state. We intend to conduct a six-month followup survey with respondents who indicated they would allow us to do so; this will give us deeper insights into the impacts of this event.

Meet Dr. Nicole Ward Gauthier

Dr. Nicole Ward Gauthier is an Extension specialist in the Department of Plant Pathology at the University of Kentucky. She is responsible for outreach and research of diseases of ornamentals and fruit crops across the state. As part of her Extension duties, Nicole provides growers with disease management recommendations including the identification, biology, and management of pathological organisms. Her publications range from traditional fact sheets to spray guides and social media updates.
– all of which are intended to provide growers and other professionals with quick disease management solutions.

Additionally, her program includes applied and fundamental research on fruit rots of apple. Molecular diagnostics combined with field research is being used to better understand latent infections and also to time fungicide applications for efficacy and efficiency.

Nicole earned her B.S. in Horticulture Science and her Ph.D. in Plant Pathology from Louisiana State University. She also owned her own landscape business in Louisiana, in which she installed landscapes, irrigation, low voltage lighting, and water features. She joined the UK College of Agriculture, Food and Environment in 2011.

Nicole looks forward to working with county Extension agents, growers, and other stakeholders around the state. Her publications can be found on her Web page, while alerts and notifications can be found on her on Facebook, Twitter, or Blogspot sites.

She can be contacted at nicole.ward@uky.edu, 859.218.0720 or 859.797.3333.

Updated profiles: high tunnel strawberries and brambles

Two of our high tunnel crop profiles have been recently updated with current pest management information. Dr. Nicole Ward Gauthier, Extension Plant Pathologist, revised these Center for Crop Diversification profiles to reflect up-to-date research knowledge. High tunnels are polyethylene-covered unheated structures over planting beds. Also known as hoop houses, high tunnels can be used to extend the production season of a wide variety of crops in Kentucky, including strawberries and brambles. High tunnels provide protection from unfavorable weather conditions, including wind, hail, frost, and excessive rainfall. This can translate into a better survival rate of plants, as well as earlier berries. Over the last several years, researchers at the University of Ken-ucky have learned more about pest and disease issues that can occur in a high tunnel environment. Generally, some diseases that plague field-grown strawberries and brambles may be less of a threat in high tunnels. However, increased humidity may result in increased risk for other diseases. Because high tunnels are technically considered greenhouse environments, there are limited numbers of pesticides and fungicides available to deal with these issues. Relative humidity in high tunnels can be abnormally high, even though there is no rainfall inside tunnels. This can create an environment favorable for diseases such as Botrytis gray mold or Botrytis blossom blight, powdery mildew, rust and anthracnose. Insects can also create unique problems in a high tunnel environment, where confined conditions are favorable to pests that don’t traditionally provide problems in open fields. Frequent scouting to monitor insect populations and disease is essential for keeping these problems manageable. Pruning, sanitation, and weed control are very important in pest control when growing in high tunnels. Check out our revised crop profiles here: http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/introsheets/hightunnelstrawberries.pdf and http://www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/introsheets/hightunnelbrambles.pdf

Organic industry on the grow

Organic agriculture produces products using methods that avoid many synthetic materials, and work to sustain the environment. Certified organic farmers, ranchers and food processors follow a set of standards, defined by the National Organic Program (NOP) to produce organic foods and fiber. In late March 2014, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced new figures that show domestic and global growth in the organic industry. Across the globe, there are now over 25,000 certified organic operations in more than 120 countries. “Consumer demand for organic products has grown exponentially over the past decade,” said Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack; in 2013, USDA helped 763 producers become certified organic. The industry in the United States today includes 18,513 certified organic farms and businesses. USDA has new and expanded efforts to connect organic farmers and businesses with
resources to help the industry continue to grow. The 2014 farm bill also includes a few provisions that will support the organic community:

- $20 million annually for dedicated organic research, Extension programs and education
- $11.5 million annually for certification cost-share assistance
- $5 million for a technology upgrade of the NOP to provide up-to-date information about certified organic operations across the supply chain
- $5 million to fund data collection on organic agriculture
- Expanded options for organic crop insurance to protect farmers
- Expanded exemptions for organic producers who are paying into commodity “check off” programs
- Authority for USDA to consider an application for the organic sector to establish its own “check off”
- Improved enforcement authority for the NOP to conduct investigations


*Adapted from USDA News Release No. 0043.14*

**Farming for Cash workshops**

Farming for Cash is a program that works to educate beginning farmers about farming, marketing, and managing products that should bring relatively quick income in an informal workshop setting. May workshops will be on microprocessing. These workshops will be conducted by the Kentucky Department of Public Health’s Food Safety Branch. This is a unique opportunity to ask any questions you have regarding processing, cooking at farmers markets, and cooking at home. If you have questions or concerns, please contact richard.bryant@kysu.edu or 502-330-8676.

**Workshop schedule:**

May 20th, Russell County Extension Office, 2688 S. Hwy 127, Russell Springs, KY 42642. Phone: 270.866.4477.

May 27th, Jefferson County Extension Office, 810 Barret Avenue, Louisville, KY 40204. Phone: 502.569.2344.

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Thanks for reading, and please contact Miranda at miranda.hileman@uky.edu if you are interested in subscribing to our online newsletter.

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