

Growing Farmers and Our Green Economy through Commercial Urban Agriculture Program

Growing Power, Inc. of Milwaukee, Wisconsin received \$75,769 to implement a commercial urban agriculture training program designed to train and mentor urban, peri-urban, and rural farmers, to improve their profitability and increase low-income consumers' access to healthy, nutritious, and locally produced food.

[Final Report FY09](#)



USDA/AMS FARMERS' MARKET PROMOTION PROGRAM GRANT FINAL REPORT
June 2011

Project Title: *Growing Farmers and Our Green Economy Through Commercial Urban Agriculture Program*

Agreement Number: 12-25-G-0987

Project Coordinator: Will Allen

Activity Period: September 28, 2009 – September 28, 2011

Funding Amount: \$75,769



The May 2010 graduation ceremony for that year's Commercial Urban Agriculture participants.

Project Summary

The *Growing Farmers and Our Green Economy through Commercial Urban Agriculture Program* (CUA) centered on a five-month long training program designed and conducted by Growing Power (GP) that provided opportunities for beginning and seasoned urban, rural and tribal farmers to sustainably produce, market, and sell their products in settings throughout the country. The project produced more community-based food enterprises to meet the needs of underserved populations in low-income communities. Rising energy costs, increasing

awareness of health issues related to poor nutrition, and a surge in the environmental movement has combined to create a growing interest in locally-produced food that this project sought to address. In addition, urban areas throughout the United States provide a new and unconventional setting for economically viable commercial agricultural enterprises. This program projected a future of vacant lots being transformed into working, commercially viable farms supplying low-income, food-insecure residents with healthier and more nutritious food choices. The goal of the program was to benefit beginning and seasoned farmers by making their enterprises profitable, consumers by making safe nutritious food accessible, and communities by contributing to a more vital economy and enhanced quality of life. FMPP resources were used to support CUA trainers and other GP staff, provide course materials and supplies – all to facilitate the development of individualized project development plans by CUA participants.

The objectives of the FMPP-funded program were to:

- Increase the direct marketing of agricultural products from producers to consumers in urban, rural and tribal settings, and to increase the number of commercial agricultural enterprises operating in these communities.
- Develop curriculum to be utilized by GP in present and future CUA trainings.
- Market the CUA program to GP's national target audiences and to the general media.
- Follow-up with CUA participants as they implement their business/marketing plans, tracking the impact of the program on farmers and consumers.
- Produce a train-the-trainer manual so that the program may be replicated.

The CUA reflects two aspects of GP's place in the US community food movement. First is its understanding, based on its own success, of how to generate revenue from grassroots, community-based and community-focused food production and distribution enterprises. The second is GP's realization that its long-standing "From the Ground Up" weekend trainings in Milwaukee, while effective introductions to GP's intensive food production techniques, are often not enough for those serious about starting a community food project as an individual or organization commitment. Thus the CUA represents a sort of "graduate school" for GP; for example, the development of a viable commercial food project is essentially a five-month expansion of the Community Food Project Planning workshop offered at each "From the Ground Up" training.

The CUA Program: Implementation

The CUA program was conducted by GP at its Community Food Center in Milwaukee on two separate occasions during the FMPP funding period: January-May, 2010 and January-May 2011. These marked the third and fourth times that GP conducted the CUA program, and the two years marked a significant watershed in that the numbers of participants (32 in 2010 and 35 in 2011) represented a significant increase – approximately double – from the first two years. This increase parallels both the growth of the

But despite the larger numbers, the basic educational structure and curriculum of the CUA program has been maintained over all four years. Each of the five monthly CUA sessions coincide with a GP weekend "From the Ground Up" trainings having participants from across the US. CUA participants convene for specialized trainings on Fridays for a full day and a half-day on Saturday. The specialized training topics include Community Food Project Planning, Dismantling Racism in the Food System, the Marketing of Food Products,

the Financial Management of Food Projects, and Engaging the Community in a Food Project. Instruction in these topics is built upon GP's practical experience, with the exception of Dismantling Racism, which is conducted by the Growing Food and Justice Initiative (an organization currently hosted by GP). The second half of Saturday and Sundays have the CUA participants joining the "From the Ground Up" participants for hand-on workshops on GP's intensive food production methods. The repeated opportunities to take workshops on aquaponics, composting/vermicomposting, or greenhouse production allowed CUA participants to master the technical aspects of the commercial farming projects they are developing.

Responsibilities for coordinating and implementing the CUA program were shared among GP's Milwaukee and Chicago staff. GP CEO Will Allen had oversight over the entire program. Erika Allen of GP Chicago managed the details of implementation, aided by Laurel Sims of GP Chicago. GP's Milwaukee Staff, including Tammy McIntyre GP's Financial Manager, handled training content and provided logistical support; this included meals from GP's kitchen.



2011 Commercial Urban Agriculture participants in a Project Planning exercise.

The CUA Program: Outputs & Outcomes

January-May, 2010

The 2010 CUA class had 32 participants, representing 18 separate entrepreneurial projects (it is common for an organization considering a community food project to send more than one representative in any year). They came from 13 states, the District of Columbia and Ontario. Approximately 60 percent of the participants were male. Nearly 75 percent represented socially-disadvantaged urban communities. Financial support for two participants (one did not complete the program) came from the Wisconsin Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

The project plans developed by the 2011 CUA class represented a range of approaches to creating a viable commercial food enterprise. These included:

- “Compost Cab” in Washington DC, an enterprise to collect compostable organic materials from residences, businesses and events.
- A business to create rooftop food-production gardens in Toronto.
- Small production gardens within a multi-family housing development in Parma, Ohio.
- A working urban farm and demonstration wetlands restoration site on surplus park land in Seattle.
- A permaculture design certification course to be offered primarily in Peru.

Participation in the CUA program is one of the expectations of the organizations belonging to GP’s national network of Regional Outreach Training Centers (ROTCs). The 2010 class had representatives of seven of the then-12 ROTCs: Feed Denver, D-Town Farm (Detroit), Breaking New Grounds (Louisville), Rid-All Green Partnership (Cleveland), Our School at Blair Grocery (New Orleans), Women’s Environmental Initiative (Minnesota), and Mississippians Engaged in Greener Agriculture. The ROTC representatives typically considered their locations as their CUA development projects, even though GP’s expectation was that they would instead propose using the ROTC to incubate a separate revenue generating community food project.

January-May, 2011

The 2011 CUA class had 35 participants, representing 27 separate entrepreneurial projects, and coming from 15 states. As with the previous year, nearly 60 percent were male, and just over 75 percent were persons of color. Four Regional Outreach Training Centers were represented: Global Peace Initiatives (Indianapolis), Brooklyn Rescue Mission (New York City), Stiletto Gardens (Columbus, Ohio) and D-Town Farm (Detroit).

As in past years, the 2011 CUA projects were diverse in scope, intent and setting. They included:

- The expansion of an on-campus production at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside.
- Using compost and vermicompost to enhance the soil of the Nation of Islam’s production farm in New Buffalo, Michigan.
- A berry farm at a school for special needs children in Jacksonville, Florida.
- Developing a line of value-added products from white corn for consumption by members of the Oneida Tribe in Wisconsin.
- Developing a multi-site garden project leading to a Food/Life Center in Birmingham, Alabama.
- Developing an existing farmers’ market in Harlem into a vendor/producer cooperative.
- Creating a composting operation as a catalyst for more urban farming projects in Dallas.
- Creating an urban farm as part of the Houston Mosque of the Nation of Islam.

Project Outcomes

With the 2011 class completing their work just six weeks prior to this report, there has been no attempt to assess the outcomes of the CUA program on that particular group. The

2010 CUA class was surveyed in late Spring 2011, and provided data on their experience and the progress of their projects. Almost all of those responding (93 percent) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I believe the 2010 CUA program was an appropriate experience to bring me closer to my personal goals to farm commercially." Community engagement was stated as being of the greatest use over the year, more so than project planning, marketing or financial management. Two-thirds of the respondents reported making good progress on their projects over the first year, with all reporting the employment of composting/vermicomposting in their projects, with a slightly lower (89 percent) use of greenhouse production methods.

For the critical indicators of project funding and community partnerships, one-half of respondents reported receiving some funding during the year, but 93 percent reported establishing "significant community partnerships that will aid your work in the future." These partners included churches, other local urban agriculture projects, compostable waste providers, such as breweries and restaurants, local politicians, and architects willing to design structures for the project. And as an indicator of rapid progress, 58 percent of respondents reported that their project was generating some income after one year.

It is important to note that the CUA program, while administered separately from Growing Power's ROTC network, is a key support mechanism in helping GP extend its outreach training beyond Milwaukee. As mentioned earlier, CUA participation is a stated requirement in the five-year Memorandum of Understanding that each ROTC organization establishes with GP. Thus, maximizing the effect of the CUA program adds to the impact that participating ROTCs can have in their communities.

Growing Power's Performance Under the FMPP Grant

CUA participation requires a serious commitment on the part of participants, and their expectations for effective performance are high. As with most of Growing Power's outreach and training activities, participants consistently rated the experience highly, while giving GP mixed reviews as to its performance in implementing the activity. The knowledge level of GP staff with regards to CUA content areas is respected, and participants generally acknowledge the staff's dedication to the program and concern for their individual progress.

While an important activity, GP has no staff members for whom management and implementation of the CUA program is their primary responsibility. This, plus the fact that CUA sessions are run concurrently with "From the Ground Up" weekends (but in separate locations), when staff resources are already stretched, led to numerous occasions of confusion as to where and when CUA activities were to take place. The CUA program is still seen by GP as a work in progress, albeit an effective one. 2010 marked the first year that CUA sessions were held away from the GP site due to the greater number of participants, and this added to the logistical challenges. Things went somewhat more smoothly in 2011, but chronic problems of keeping to schedule remained, frustrating a number of participants.

Summary

During the two years of FMPP funding GP's CUA program continued to evolve as a "higher level" of GP outreach training; one driven by GP's firm belief in the ability – and need – for community-based food projects, especially those serving low-income communities, to be commercially viable. It remains a unique program in the time and resource commitments it

asks of participants. It has seeded a number of projects over four years, and serves as a backbone to GP's Regional Outreach Training Center network. The program, however, still has moments of disorganization that affect program delivery.

The decision after the second CUA year to allow participants greater exposure to GP's intensive food production methods and less hands-on, detailed development of individual projects has had generally positive results. The two FMPP-funded years saw this change in approach, and led to participants gaining a better balance between knowing how to conceive and manage a community food project, and being comfortable with the actual techniques for producing food for their communities.