



Rhode Island's

"Growing" Economy

by Wendy Faxon

Serving Rhode Islanders in economically challenged urban neighborhoods where fresh produce is scarce, Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT), in Providence, is making fresh, nutritious food abundant and affordable so that everyone, regardless of income, can eat well and live well. The organization's reach has expanded over 38 years through a number of community-focused initiatives.

Community Gardening

SCLT owns and manages 20 community gardens, and its website hosts information about 30 additional gardens that are part of the Providence Community Garden Network. These gardens produce food for roughly 3,000 people every year. SCLT provides agricultural resources, training and other support to gardens in the Providence Community Garden Network, which are owned by local agencies, churches and schools. Anyone interested in joining one of these gardens can get in touch through SCLT's Community Gardens web page SouthSideCLT.org/community-gardens. Many of these gardens have wait lists.

Farming

SCLT reclaims land, mostly urban, for beginning farmers to grow healthy (chemical-free) produce for farmers markets, food businesses, restaurants and CSAs. The organization owns and manages three production farms in Providence and Pawtucket, practicing and demonstrating bio-intensive, small-scale agricultural production.

The oldest urban farm in Rhode Island, City Farm is located in South Providence. It operates all season long, creating a revenue stream for SCLT. Hundreds of youth, volunteers and beginning farmers go there to learn about planting, growing and harvesting food. Over the past three decades, neighborhood children have engaged in lessons about plants and plant life cycles, while adults have benefited from gardening workshops and farm apprenticeships, learning to produce high-yield crops in small spaces. In addition, City Farm operates the largest food scrap composting site in Providence, diverting 50,000 pounds of food and other organic waste from the landfill per year.

Managed by SCLT under a long-term lease, Urban Edge Farm (UEF) is a state-owned property comprising 50 acres in Cranston, 20 of which are now cultivated. Ten farmers share equipment and other resources at UEF. With more acreage recently cleared, four additional farmers will soon sublease new plots. Many urban farmers are now growing in community gardens while waiting for farmland to open up at UEF, so they can expand their businesses.

Manton Bend Community Farm is a combination community garden and urban farm developed in cooperation with the City of Providence's Lots of Hope project. The farm plots are currently sublet to the African Alliance of Rhode Island (AARI). Many of these growers raise Central African vegetables, such as bitter ball and amaranth, to sell at the Armory Park Farmers Market and the Wintertime Farmers Market. Farm Fresh RI provides SCLT-affiliated growers access to farmer's markets in nine urban neighborhoods, which allows urban farmers to sell their freshly picked local produce direct to urban consumers. The Broad Street Market features the specialty produce of Southeast Asian growers.

Youth Programs

In yet another initiative to grow urban farming jobs, SCLT provides paid, part-time jobs for local high school youth, helping them learn about food equity and regenerative farming practices, as well as nutrition and diet-related chronic diseases. Part of such a job requires assisting with the delivery of gardening and nutrition programs for younger students, grades pre-K through 8.

At Somerset Hayward (Youth Enterprise) Farm, in Providence, youth staff are learning farm management, from crop planning to marketing and sales. Many of



their neighbors lacked transportation and were unable to access fresh produce, so two years ago the youth came up with the idea of creating a CSA to sell their produce directly to their neighbors. They had to learn about advertising and logistics to make their idea work, and they had to develop entrepreneurial skills, which was the whole reason behind creating the farm in the first place. Additionally, food system internships are available to young adults, introducing them to careers in food and agriculture.

Partnerships

According to the USDA, farmland in Rhode Island is more expensive than in most other states in the country, making it necessary for beginning farmers to partner with landowners. SCLT's Land Access Workgroup connects people seeking farmland with Rhode Island landowners that want to lease or sell their farmland to keep it in production and protect it from development. Project partners include Young Farmer Network, RI Department of Environmental Management, RI Land Trust Council, Northern RI Conservation District and Land for Good.

Food Processing

Through its GROW! Campaign, SCLT recently bought a 12,000-square-foot, two-story building at 404 Broad Street, overlooking its Youth Enterprise Farm. The building will hold an FDA-compliant food processing facility on the first floor and retail spaces to be rented to food enterprises, bringing more healthy produce and good jobs to Providence's South Side. Leasing income will help offset the building's operating costs. There will be ample room for SCLT staff and expanding programs on the second floor, including a youth entrepreneurship center, where youth staff will develop workforce skills and food system awareness and lead workshops for peers and South Side residents.

Jenny Boone, grants and communications manager for SCLT, says, "The new building will increase SCLT's capacity to make more healthy food available in Providence and increase jobs for residents of this neighborhood."

Learn more at SouthSideCLT.org. Join, volunteer, donate, GROW!