Overview

The Massachusetts Chapter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA/Mass) has been actively promoting organic agriculture, healthy soils and landscapes that feed our communities and restore our landscapes since 1982. In 2001 NOFA/Mass expanded its programming and resources to urban land and city communities with the development of a youth gardening initiative in Springfield, MA. Over nine years of commitment to this project, NOFA/Mass learned firsthand the complex challenges and opportunities of growing organic food in the city. After the thriving gardening program transitioned to independence in 2010, NOFA/Mass continued to support urban growers to ensure the success of healthy food production in cities in a new way. NOFA/Mass was best situated to provide technical farming assistance using soil building practices that emphasize mineral balancing and soil biology enhancement. Coupled with a growing movement in urban agriculture throughout the state, NOFA/Mass’s support offers strong practical skill building to ensure not only community success but also food production success.

The Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program is now a comprehensive training, mentoring, and technical assistance service for urban gardening projects and individuals. Over the course of multiple seasons, it builds long-lasting capacity in the community itself for soil building, ecological health, and effective and time-tested organic methods. With a living soil, an improved harvest, and trained growers, urban communities become the beneficiaries of improved access to nutrient rich local food, revitalized green spaces, empowered gardeners, and collective ownership of these and other social benefits.

Investment Opportunity

The NOFA/Mass Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program involves three seasons of intensive work with individual urban farm groups. The project includes soil testing and analysis, amendment recommendations and application, and a farm mentor directly assigned to facilitate the soil restoration strategy, implementation, and the teaching of organic farming techniques. NOFA/Mass is looking for an investment of $50,000 for the next three years in order to formalize the Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program into a statewide urban technical farming resource.

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The Need

The NOFA/Mass *Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program* has focused on the Mason Square neighborhood of Springfield, MA since 2014. The Mason Square neighborhood is a designated food desert. The rates of unemployment, low-income residents, and mental and physical health issues, including diet-related illnesses like diabetes, heart disease and obesity, are disproportionally high compared to the rest of the Massachusetts. The residents are predominately black and Latino.

This same neighborhood in Springfield, MA is the home to an increasing number of vacant and unused lots, with over 500 defaulting to city ownership. These parcels are tucked into the very neighborhoods where there are few open spaces for community activity, greater food insecurity, and higher crime rates. The Springfield Food Policy Council on Urban Agriculture claims significant barriers to gardening, despite the land availability, including lack of land tenure, lack of water access, soil contamination, lack of equipment, and insufficient capital or training.

The profile of Mason Square is not unique. Many urban communities have concurrent problems of food insecurity, open land, and racial and economic disparity. Comprehensive solutions for building health of people and land are complex. NOFA/Mass believes part of the solution can lie in the development of biologically active and balanced soils in which engaged residents can grow healthy vegetables.

Opportunity for Social Impact

The benefits of urban farming have been well-documented. These benefits are increased when soil is cared for and organic practices are used: uncontaminated soil for vegetable growth, increased nutrient availability for healthier food, green spaces with ecological health, and communities with the capacity to engage with the soil science of their land.

*Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program* led by NOFA/Mass can provide the following social impacts:

- Increased fresh vegetable and fruit supply and access in cities, increasing poundage and quality for consumption.
- Increased community interaction and collaboration.
- Increased local capacity for dealing with the soil ecosystem and caring for the land long-term.
- Improved bio-diverse spaces and habitats within cities, creating spaces for beneficial insects, amelioration of climatic extremes, and aesthetic beauty.
- Improved urban water supply by reducing rainwater runoff in sewers and reducing flood potential by instead retaining water in healthy, living soils, which can also improve water quality and recharge groundwater.
The Program

Specifically, the NOFA/Mass *Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program* Program offers the following:

- Education and resource on-phone or on-site technical assistance for urban grower.
- On-farm/garden workshops and consulting services to build agricultural skills of community members (staff, youth, gardeners) and to build soil through mineral and biological methods.
- Focused urban agriculture and soil health tracks at our summer and winter conference.
- 30 in-person farm mentor hours (per season) and 8 on-site workshop hours (per season).
- Mineral, physical and biological soil tests, analysis of results, and recommendations for amendments and practices.
- Technical assistance in carrying out improved soil and plant management systems.

Workshops and Trainings:

- Use of cover crops to build soil organic matter prior, post and in season.
- Minimal and no-till methods.
- In-season fertility, drenching and foliar feeding strategies to maximize photosynthesis.
- Mulching with locally sourced natural inputs.
- Season extension practices.

3 year Program Goals:

- Organic Urban Agriculture technical assistance program available service state-wide for city growers.
- Development of impact measurement system that can effectively track soil improvements and vegetable production for urban growers.
- Additional land sites revitalized through the engagement of urban gardeners and farmers in relevant educational programming for land health and management recommendations.
- Train the Trainer Garden Educational Program established in Springfield, MA as a model for other cities.
- State-wide outreach to urban programs to offer program services, resources, and materials.
- Best practices document (see attached) distributed and edited as needed as best practices evolve.
- Urban agriculture and food access workshops at NOFA summer and NOFA/Mass winter conference: including Access in the Food System, Resources for Communities to Grow their own Food, Soil Toxicity, and others.

Ways to Invest

Financial: $50,000 program cost for years 2017-2020

- Measurement system for tracking overall IMPACT of soil revitalization for communities.
- Stipends for mentorships between farmers & gardeners.
- Soil restoration workshops at urban farms & gardens.
- Stipends and vouchers for soil conferences & workshops.
- Essential Soil Tests for urban garden land.
- Outreach and Communications resources to tell the story of soil and communities revitalized! Building the inspiration and sharing the information.

Contact

NOFA/Mass
www.nofamass.org
978-355-2853

Through education and advocacy, NOFA/Mass promotes organic agriculture to expand the production and availability of nutritious food from living soil for the health of individuals, communities, and the planet.

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With the establishing of backyard farms, community garden plots and CSAs in the cities, farmers are being born and are seeking to make a profit for the vegetables grown. But the great question is how do we, the urban farmers, produce veggies in the small places we exist in....

Toussaint Paskins
Youth Director of Gardening the Community

A Story of Community (and Soil) Revitalization

NOFA/Mass’s Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program began with Gardening the Community (GTC) in Springfield, MA.

Started in 2002, GTC is a youth agriculture project that benefits its community in multiple ways: increasing food access in food desert neighborhoods, focusing on youth development in a city with a significant high-school dropout rate, prioritizing community outreach and education in areas of high poverty and unemployment, and bringing life to a land that has been abandoned for decades. Through the years, as it fulfilled its comprehensive and broad mission, GTC identified the need for technical assistance with farming practices, specifically with soil revitalization.

The four garden parcels that GTC cultivates were once vacant lots that had been covered with nearly lifeless “fill”: a combination of sand, rocks, stones, and dirt. Initially, GTC tested the soil for contaminants and imported enough soil and compost to form raised beds. Each year, the staff and youth added more compost to the beds and gardened organically, but the soil still lacked vibrancy and resistance to drought, pest problems, and disease. GTC sought mentorship and further training in building the soil as well as fundamental organic farming practices.

NOFA/Mass partnered with GTC to start a focused soil restoration project for their gardens. In the course of three seasons, with soil testing, amending, farm mentorship on general organic practices, capacity building for staff and youth, soil health and farm resiliency improved. In the tenure of the Maximizing Soil and Food Quality in the City Program staff, youth participants, and community members have:

∞ Worked with two experienced farm mentors (total of 60 teaching hours).
∞ Participated in eight on-site soil and farming workshops.
∞ Attended NOFA summer and winter farming conferences (2013-2016) and greatly increased their capacity and knowledge of soil science and organic practices.

Between the 2013 and 2014 season, there was a 60% growth in production. GTC can see and recognize the difference in the soil. In 2017, GTC hopes to begin growing on another parcel - one that they purchased from the city in 2015! With so much experience under their belt, GTC is following the steps of soil care they’ve learned. In this process, NOFA/Mass continues to be a resource for GTC as it implements and strengthens the strategies highlighted in the years of mentorship and training.

“Daniel taught me how to farm. Before I only knew how to garden. I learned about the 3 seasons of growing and how farming is about strategy and planning how to properly use beds to grow throughout all seasons.” — Toussaint Paskins

Speaking about Jonathan Bates, the NOFA/Mass sponsored consultant, “Since partnering with NOFA/Mass to begin the initial process of the soil amendment work, Jonathan stepped in and has been imperative to the continued process over the last 2-3 years. Working with Jonathan allowed for continued innovation on the sites, including applying cutting edge nutrient amendments, the introduction of unique native species of plants (and where to buy them), and workshops with our youth that were technically and environmentally sound plus at a level they all could understand. Additionally Jonathan’s background in permaculture has informed the work on Hancock St, and been a great help with how we are developing our Walnut St site.” — Ibrahim Ali, GTC Co-director

Check out GTC’s success at www.gardeningthecommunity.org