Rethinking the Urban and Suburban Farm

Interest in urban and suburban agriculture is strong. The Obama administration has signaled its support for community-based food production by planting a vegetable garden on the grounds of the White House and committing the USDA to create community gardens at each of its facilities. At the local level, city officials and local residents continue to expand productive urban landscapes that preserve open space while producing food for local residents.

Despite increasing interest in urban and suburban agriculture, creative solutions are needed to overcome the obstacles of land scarcity and high cost, and provide land access to farmers in cities and suburbs. This presentation describes innovative land tenure arrangements created by residential developers, CSA members, co-housing residents, and entrepreneurial farmers to facilitate farming within densely populated communities. These include: (1) suburban subdivisions, like Prairie Crossing, that include a viable, working organic farm; (2) co-housing projects (e.g., Ecovillage Ithaca) that own and operate farms; (3) peri-urban farms like Angelic Organics that are partially owned by urban CSA members; (4) networked backyard micro-farms (e.g., My Farm); and (5) small plot city farms (e.g., Added Value).

This presentation explains how each model works, obstacles that have been overcome, and possibilities for replication. The case studies indicate that the land owners, neighbors, farmers, and consumers are committed to ensuring the production of high quality food, the well-being of the farmer and his/her family, environmentally sound farming techniques, and the viability of the farming enterprise. They suggest that networked, small-scale, intensively-farmed land in cities and at the metropolitan edge, owned by a combination of city residents, farmers, and suburbanites, may create a constituency for farmland protection, local food production, and safer and more humane agricultural practices, and serve as a viable strategy for expanding metropolitan agriculture.

Related Resources:

- The Suburban Farm: An innovative model for civic agriculture: http://www.ruaf.org/index.php?q=node/1679
- Ithaca Cohousing’s Westhaven Farm: http://www.westhavenfarm.net/
- My Farm: http://www.myfarmsf.com/
- Added Value: http://www.added-value.org/index.php