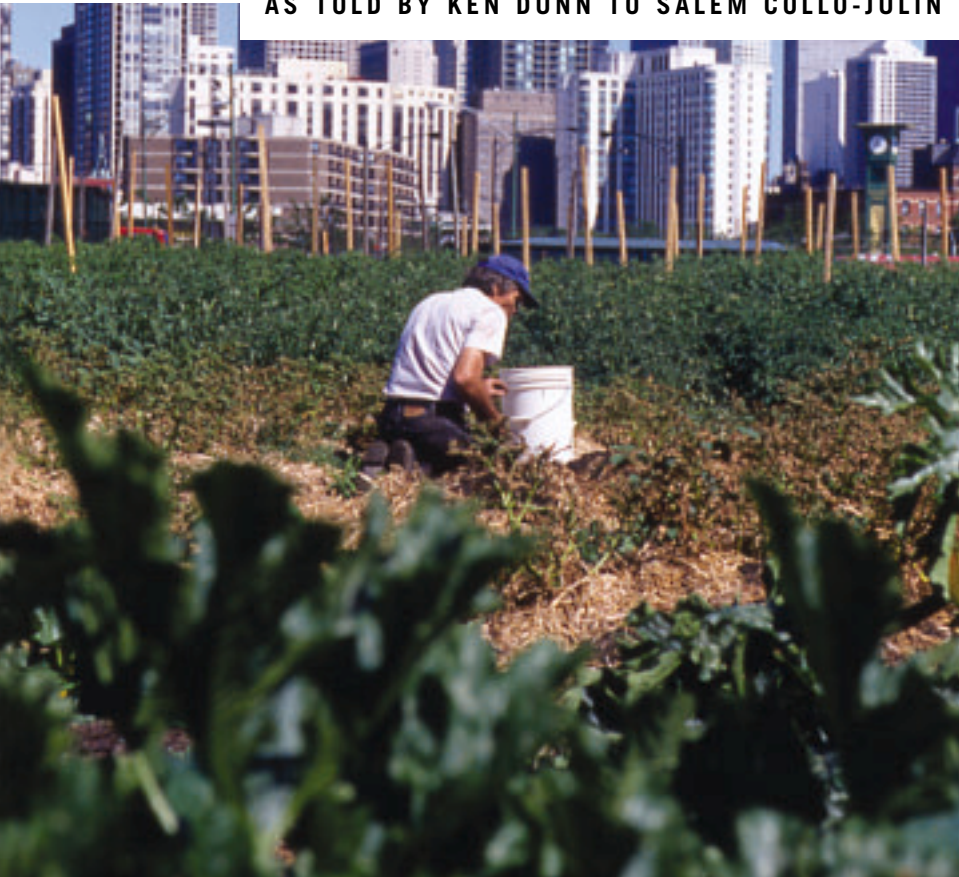


How to Make a City Farm

AS TOLD BY KEN DUNN TO SALEM COLLO-JULIN



Empty parcels of city land should be cleared, cultivated, and turned into economically and socially productive urban farms. I think if an investment were made into urban agriculture, full employment would enter communities where there is little, nutrition would be improved for everyone, and a mission would emerge—neighbors would contribute to the health and wealth of the city.

The Resource Center, our Chicago-based group that runs City Farm, started 30 years ago. We saw resources being wasted. We thought that these resources, if captured and used creatively, could be an element of building a higher quality of life.

Since then, we have become convinced that the entire dominant economy and culture is our enemy. We have to invent an alternative sustaining economy. When inventing this new economy, we try to refrain from participating in the other economy as much as possible, by moving toward producing our own “whatever.” This includes producing our own food.

Growing food means growing yourself—it is all part of a sustainable system. The dominant food system is quite unsustainable right now. Its production methods harm the environment consuming hydrocarbons and chemicals. The planet suffers, the farm workers that must use this machinery suffer, and residents at the dinner table end up harming themselves. This is why we feel that new food systems need to be developed.

I think that it is not obvious to everybody that our economy and political system is broken. However, more people are becoming aware that our food system is broken. Chemical agriculture is not good for the planet, the farm workers, or us.

So we sought an alternative, instead of trying to reform a broken system. It is a revolution of orienting people properly to the things they consume—introducing them to their own food system. The ideal is that people grow their own food. If they cannot do it themselves, they should at least know who did, and keep everything as local as possible. That is the context in which we view urban agriculture.

far left: Ken Dunn at the City Farm
Photo, Rorke Johnson

City Farm is one of the Resource Center's sustainable organic farms. It is in between Cabrini Green and the Gold Coast, the former, a place with many vacant lots and the latter, a place with resources to spare. We grow thirty varieties of tomatoes, beets, carrots, potatoes, lettuces, herbs, and melons. We sell the food from City Farm to the public, but our primary sales are to local chefs. Places like the restaurant at the Ritz-Carlton and the Frontera Grill like our tomatoes. So do we. The compost we use comes from restaurants we sell to, thus completing the cycle.

When I first came to Chicago, I was a graduate student, but very much aware that the university was not a place where one could find all the solutions. It seemed so strange that the city was so full of things that needed to be done and so full of people that needed something to do. Nobody was making the connection between them.

I was a graduate student in philosophy and I gave myself a test problem. If you are any good at philosophy, you can figure out what to do about this. I focused on the most external problem—people needing something to do, and things needing to be done.

This was thirty years ago. The first project that occurred to me: cans and bottles that were being thrown out by everybody on vacant lots and streets could in fact be income for individuals if we established a location that would buy from them. This buyback was my first project.

On most corners, there were guys drinking and throwing their empty bottles into vacant lots. So one weekend, I borrowed a Volkswagen from a friend and got some garbage cans and told these guys, "I have an idea. Work with me. Let us pick up all these bottles here and put them in these garbage cans. I will go sell them to the glass plant, and then I will come back in a couple of hours and we will split up the cash." And so they did it. I came back and paid them something like \$2.90 each—it was not much.

I was just pleased, as an academic, that I had devised a successful project. And as I was walking away, one of them said, "Uh, where do we work on Monday?" I spun around, and thought a very academic reply, "No, you do not understand. I am just providing ideas, not solutions." But I could not say that. So I just sort

of stood blankly for a few seconds, and then I said, "I will get back to you."

So I went back. I did not want to go out with a van and do this thing all the time. I wanted something that was commensurate with the problem—that was more than just me. I put together a schedule of times and locations and distributed copies to the guys. At 9:00 on Saturday morning, I would be at this corner, and at 9:30, I would be four blocks away. I established a route around the community that they would all know, and they could pass out the schedules to all of their friends.

I went out and bought a larger truck and a scale, and I ended up bringing \$200 worth of bottles to the plant on the first day. It was a success. There really was a willing group of collectors. There were plenty of bottles. And that was the first embodiment of the Resource Center. This program continues under contract with the City of Chicago and the Chicago Housing Authority.

While I was still a student, I spent my Saturdays running this route, until I realized that running the route could be a regular job. So I hired one of the guys that had been very responsible. And he was the first employee of the Resource Center. You see, that is the basic concept. Is there a human resource that is overlooked or wasted? Is there a material resource that is overlooked or wasted? And can there be a connection between the two?

Pleased with having devised this, I started to think, okay, now what do we have? A clean, vacant lot. And that is a material resource. Is there a population appropriate to that? There



The City Farm with Cabrini Green in the background
Photo, Rorke Johnson

were a lot of retired or unemployed people in the communities that hosted these vacant lots. I tried to think of ways of bringing them together.

The first thing that occurred to me would be to farm these lots. We could not just throw plants in the earth, though. You want to enrich the soil first, but how do you do it? We did not want to go to Monsanto or other chemical companies for chemical fertilizers. We wanted to think organic. We started collecting weeds and grass and other organic materials and started a compost site.

It is true that doing compost instead of buying chemicals was an outgrowth of having no budget. However, in my child-



Tomatoes, fresh from the City Farm
Photo, Rorke Johnson

hood, our family had farms. I am a native to Kansas. I ran the family farm for a few years, before I decided that mechanized agriculture, with chemicals, was just wrong. At the time I did not yet know what was right.

I began helping on the family farm in 1948. Things were natural and organic then. Then the forces of more mechanization and more payments to the bank appeared. We had to buy chemical fertilizers and then we had to spray to protect our investment. I started before commercial agriculture, or corporate agriculture, tried to take over. While working on the farm, I

introduced mechanization and chemicals to keep the farm viable in our dominant economy. And then I realized we have gotten away from responsible use of the soil.

My dad got our farm soon after he left high school from the bank for almost nothing because it had really been destroyed and nobody could farm it. Rows of trees 30 feet tall were in a dune. My first years of farming were spent bringing health back to the farm. We did it by getting stands of alfalfa and clover established.

I came to questioning chemical agriculture mostly because of its expense. We kept needing more and more equipment and then more and more debt to keep up with the equipment. Then I became aware of the dangers—of course, as you are using this stuff, you have to read the labels. Sometimes it seemed to bother you to wear the mask and gloves that were recommended, but I knew our neighbors did not protect themselves.

Then the question occurred to me—is this stuff actually harming farmers? I had no sense at this time that it might be harming the food. Going to chemical fertilizers definitely harmed the soil. It created an impoverishment—a soil without organic matter. That is what started the Dust Bowl.

We ended the devastation of our soil by growing strictly organic matter for several years straight and just plowing it under. Then I made the mistake of bringing us back to chemical agriculture, harvesting and taking away the organic matter and putting down the chemicals. My Kansas farm was actually relatively successful. Our family was making our bank payments. But I saw a lot of farmers that were not successful because they did not do it all as carefully as we did.

So that is my background—to be quite natural, start simple, and make one's own compost to enrich the soil. Back then, I think very few people had any notion that being “organic” could be marketed to others. We just knew that we did not want to go back to chemical fertilizers because they made the soil poor. The pesticides, insecticides, and herbicides were a danger for the farmer and the land.

The first gardening the Resource Center did was in these vacant lots. People who lived on the block, or who hung out in the area would help create compost, clean the sites, and plant. We



called that project “Turn A Lot Around.” Pun intended. This was the early 1970s.

Now we have grown, named the project more ambitiously City Farm and have several other sites in the city that sustain a few jobs. But city support is crucial if our program is to grow. Selling the produce pays for maintenance and a salary for the workers, but the start-up costs are big.

The average cost of turning an acre of wasteland into productive farmland is about \$20,000. We have suggested to the city that, given the advantages to the municipality of lots being productive and being used for job creation, the city should invest in the initial emptying and enriching the soil. From there on, it can be a self-sustaining farm. The city has initially been positive about City Farm, but they have not committed to new locations at this point. They are looking for a five-acre site, but there are many hurdles.

I think the time has come for Chicago to commit to the idea of urban agriculture on a citywide scale. Chicago has 6000 acres of unused land. 42,000 full-time jobs could be supported by the land if all of it were cultivated. City Farm gives more than food and jobs. It allows people to produce for themselves. Local ownership means that everybody nearby has a stake in the success of a farm. Entire neighborhoods are being transformed.

Our civilization can be so unimaginative. We think that someone else is going to take care of everything. It does not take much to realize that if someone is hanging around making bottles empty, someone else can show them where the glass factory is that wants empty bottles. That is what making a City Farm is about. There are communities where the only commerce and jobs are in the drug trade. What if it were in agricultural production?