

Urban Agriculture in New York City



I sat in on a fascinating discussion last month on the future of urban agriculture in New York City. There are, you may be surprised to learn, hundreds of farms and gardens in Gotham producing food. There are [school gardens](#), backyard gardens, and [community gardens](#), as well as [farms at NYC Housing Authority](#) complexes and commercial farms, as the [Urban Agriculture website](#) of NYC government shows. There are even rooftop farms like the highly successful [Brooklyn Grange](#). (Although there are no apple orchards in the Big Apple, there are [places within striking distance](#) where you can go to pick.)

I was coordinator for an *ad hoc* group, the Green Apple Coalition, way back in 1986. Some leading open space advocates with the NYC Audubon Society, the Trust for Public Land, and the Nature Conservancy, along with historic preservation non-profits like the Municipal Art Society and the NY Landmarks Conservancy, got together with scores of neighborhood groups to lobby for a statewide bond act to provide long-term funding for open space acquisition and historic preservation projects. The 1986 Environmental Quality Bond Act eventually provided \$250 million for these projects. Later on, in 1993, the state created a permanent entity for this sort of funding: the [Environmental Protection Fund](#). The fund has provided hundreds of millions more over the past quarter century for various open space, parks, waterfront revitalization, farmland protection and many other types of initiatives.

But I digress: The focus at the panel at CUNY last month was on the future of urban farming. We first heard from [Nevin Cohen](#) who is the Research Director for the Urban Food Policy Institute. He pointed out the need for a [comprehensive urban agriculture plan](#). Nevin is also one of the principles of the [Five Borough Farm](#) project. There are [many benefits](#) to urban farming, as detailed in this graphic:

METRICS FRAMEWORK

Many studies have shown links between the urban agriculture activities across the top row (such as cooking and nutrition classes, rainwater harvesting, farmers markets) and the health, social, economic, and ecological benefits on the left hand column (such as health eating, stormwater management, and social connections).

● Evidence-based links

Benefits

Health

Access to healthy food
Food-health literacy
Healthy eating
Physical activity

Social

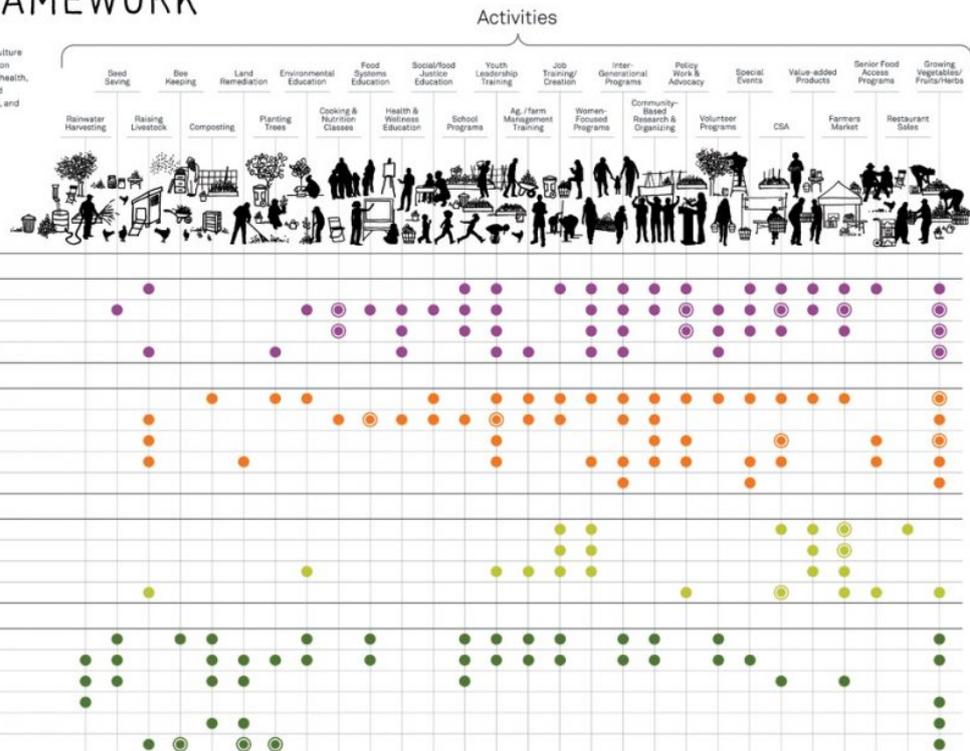
Empowerment & mobilization
Youth development & education
Food security
Safe spaces
Socially integrated aging

Economic

Local economic stimulation
Job growth
Job readiness
Food affordability

Ecological

Awareness of food systems ecology
Stewardship
Conservation
Storm water management
Soil improvement
Biodiversity & habitat improvement



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NYC's farms and gardens are already enhancing the social and physical environment, but would provide many further benefits if built out in a coordinated fashion with the many stakeholders from the government, private sector, non-profits, and community organizations taking part as players in a comprehensive plan. Urban ag, for one thing, can be an integral part of [green infrastructure](#).

The other worthies taking part in the program at CUNY were:

- **Raymond Figueroa, Jr.**, Taconic Faculty Fellow at the [Pratt Center for Community Development](#) and Visiting Faculty in Sustainable Environmental Systems, [Pratt Institute](#)
- **Aziz Dekhan**, Executive Director of [NYC Community Garden Coalition](#)
- **Onika Abraham**, Director of [Farm School NYC](#)
- **Ricky Stephens**, Co-Founder of [AgTech X](#)

Each of these had a cornucopia, as it were, of compelling things to add to Cohen's presentation. Some salient points included how farms and gardens enhance real estate values, how food justice is advanced when communities can grow their own, the [ecosystem services](#) provided by farms and gardens, and that there is a rural-urban connection via [green markets](#). There is, of course, an enormous role to be played by and for education in urban ag. In fact, you can even learn how to farm at Onika Abraham's shop: [Farm School NYC](#).

An approach to [a comprehensive plan is advancing in the NYC Council](#). It has great

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momentum. In the meantime, there are scores of vibrant initiatives throughout the five boroughs moving forward. There [is huge potential for urban agriculture globally](#), and not only big players, like [FAO](#) and the [World Bank](#), are engaged, but scores of NGOs and research institutes, like the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute, and local urban farmers and gardeners in thousands of cities are putting their backs into it, literally and figuratively.