

INTRODUCTION

Sole Food Street Farms was started to address two challenges—a social one and an agricultural one. Could the simple act of providing meaningful work through growing food in the city help folks dealing with long-term addiction, mental illness, and material poverty? Was it possible to create viable and credible agricultural enterprises on pavement or contaminated land in the heart of our cities?

There are many excellent examples throughout the world of garden-scale and personal food production in our cities—in front yards and backyards, on rooftops, in alleys, along railroad tracks and boulevards, and in community gardens. Humans are incredibly resourceful when it comes to basic survival; we also have a fundamental human drive to plant seeds, nurture soil, grow plants, and share the bounty. But in spite of the fact that the words “urban” and “agriculture” are now commonly used

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together, there are few examples that are production scale and truly agricultural.

For over a decade, Sole Food Street Farms has attempted to demonstrate that half-acre and larger plots of paved and unpaved urban land could provide production quantities of food, create full-time jobs, feed neighborhoods, and become successful economic enterprises. We farm on more than four acres of pavement, using thousands of growing boxes, and have a large urban orchard that produces persimmons, figs, quince, apples, pears, plums, and cherries. We harvest an average of 25 tons of food annually. We employ 20 people, have paid out several million dollars in wages, and, according to two university studies, for every dollar paid to our staff there is between \$2.25 and \$5.07 in savings to the broader society in the form of a social return on investment (SROI) (see page 92 for more on this).

Some parts of our grand experiment have worked; others have not. In that sense we see ourselves as another link in a 7,000-year agricultural history of trial and error. The difference is the urban context in which we work and the social mandate we have. We know that the majority of urban land in the world is either paved or too contaminated to safely grow food, and we have attempted to create strategies to operate within those challenges and to do it on a scale that is significant. We have worked with city governments, landowners, and the broader community to accomplish something truly remarkable that, to our knowledge, has never been done on this scale before.

Now we want to share what we have created with other urban farmers, city planners, and those who work in social services and with underserved communities. The pages that follow make up a “primer” or “tool kit” of sorts. We will discuss our techniques and

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philosophy and offer information on fundraising and marketing strategies. We will provide helpful documents like budgets, lease proposals, and planting and harvest plans. Finally, photographs of the farms we have created and the individuals with whom we work will help bring to life the realities, challenges, and rewards of this type of endeavor. We hope that our successes and, more importantly, our failures can provide a stable foundation for your efforts.

For a deeper look at Sole Food's innovative agricultural work and its social mission, including many stories about the challenges and triumphs of our staff members, check out the book *Street Farm: Growing Food, Jobs, and Hope on the Urban Frontier* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2016).

Many of the resources discussed in the pages that follow are available on our website; please visit solefoodfarms.com/farming-the-city/resources. To view or download, use the password **Farmingthecity_2018**.

CHAPTER 1: PLANNING

MISSION

Establishing a simple mission statement is essential for clarifying to both yourself and the world who you are and where you are going. A mission statement defines your goals and provides a reference point for everything you do as a business or organization. We have two mission statements—one for Sole Food Street Farms, which is the farming entity, and one for Cultivate Canada, which is the charity that wholly owns Sole Food Street Farms and oversees its operations and activities.

Sole Food's mission is to empower individuals with limited resources by providing jobs, agricultural training, and inclusion in a supportive community of farmers and food lovers.

Cultivate Canada is a registered charity established to demonstrate and interpret the vital connections between farming, land stewardship, and community well-being; to model the economic and social possibilities for small- and medium-scale urban and rural agricultural and forestry projects, to address disparities in

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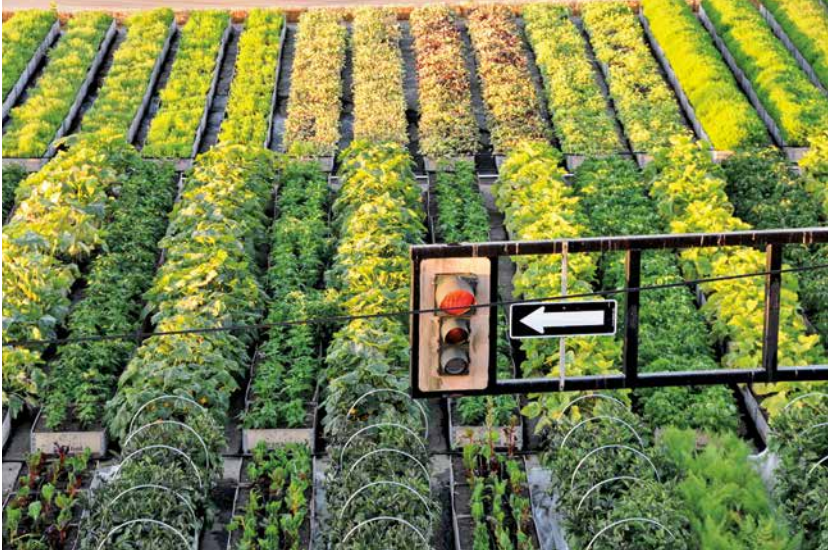
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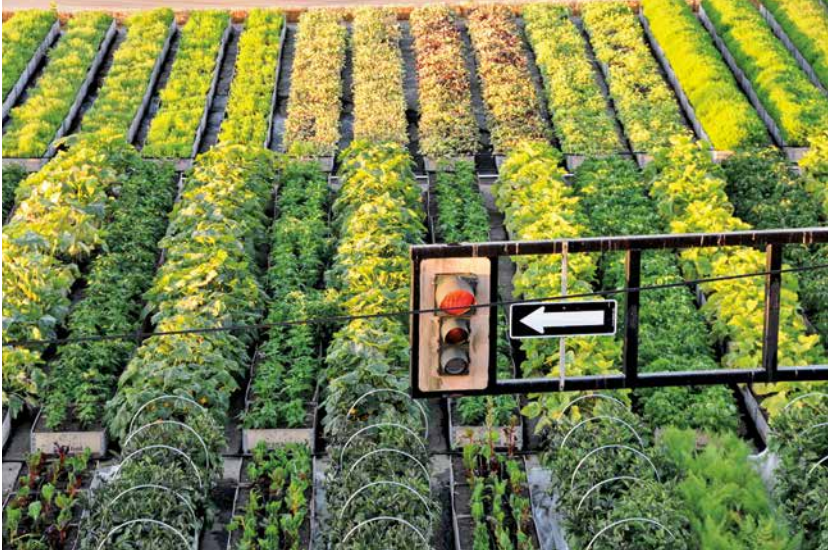
● *An aerial view of Sole Food's headquarters farm*

EXPERIENTIAL CAPITAL

There is a general belief that access to land is the biggest challenge for new farmers. I'm not sure I agree. While it is true that land—especially urban land—of any significant scale can be challenging to access, I think a greater challenge for beginning farmers is access to the knowledge and experience required to farm well and to run a farm business—otherwise known as experiential capital.

Experience can only come with time. Devoting several years apprenticing or working with an accomplished farmer is an excellent investment for any wannabe farmer. There is a long but somewhat vanishing tradition of this in other parts of the world, especially in Europe and Asia, and in other trades, like building and cooking. Although farm apprenticeships are available

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in North America, they are often not given the respect they deserve, and are fraught with unrealistic expectations, both on the part of apprentices and the farmers who are mentoring them.

That said, an extended apprenticeship period is the only way to gain the necessary experience to start your own farm and not have it crash and burn within the first few years. An extended apprenticeship period also allows you to work through numerous romantic ideas about farming, come to terms with the day-to-day realities of the work, and find out if it is really a profession you want to pursue. There have been many times when someone comes up to me and acknowledges that I have inspired them to buy a farm or start farming, and I am never quite sure whether to offer my congratulations or my condolences. Taking a few years to learn on someone else's farm allows you to make mistakes that a new farm could not recover from, learn what crops you like to grow, clarify your goals, and develop the skills required to succeed.

When seeking an apprenticeship, look for someone who has been farming for far more than 10 years, whose products are well respected; whose style, philosophy, scale, and approach aligns with where you want to go; and, last but not least, who is willing to have you learn at his or her expense. This will likely not be an urban farmer, as there are so few who are operating on a production scale or who have significant experience. When we started Sole Food, we relied on my experience in both large and small-scale rural and urban production, and applied it to the city. Seek out a rural or peri-urban grower (one who farms on the immediate outskirts of a city) who is well established and invest the time in learning from him or her. Devote several years entirely to learning and to gaining experience, putting skills and experience above financial gain. This may be the single most important investment you make.

FINANCIAL CAPITAL

Another hurdle for a beginning farmer is accessing the capital to purchase tools, equipment, irrigation supplies, seeds, etc., to carry a farm operation through the first three to five years that it takes to become stable. The startup costs can be significant depending on the size and scope of your operation—view a rough budget we drew up at Sole Food’s beginning at solefoodfarms.com/farming-the-city/resources (password Farming thecity_2018). While traditional sources of funding such as banks and similar institutions abound, it can be difficult to obtain a loan for a farm operation from these sources as the rates of return and financial profile of farms often do not fit into their normal criteria and expectations. Individual lenders and sources such as crowdfunding may be more receptive to the unique nature of small farm enterprises, especially if they have a social goal.

Because of our broader social mission, our employment model, and the fact that we are wholly owned by a registered charity, Sole Food is able to access funds through foundations and individual donors. If our only goal were an agricultural one, we would hire staff with those skills, as most farms do. Although we endeavor to operate like every farm, supporting our budget through the sales of our products, our social mandate and the challenges of the people we employ will never allow us to operate on the same playing field as other farms. Currently, about half of our annual budget is supported by the sale of farm products, and the other half through fundraising. Though the social benefits we accrue do not appear on the bottom line of our financial reports, they are significant.

Seeking a loan from a bank or financial institution requires that you prepare a business case that demonstrates that your

operation will be financially viable and that you'll be able to repay that loan. I often think that writing those documents is like a test, a hurdle that lenders want you to go through to demonstrate that just by preparing such a document you have demonstrated the perseverance and tenacity that will also make your business work. The details presented in the document may be secondary to the fact that you actually created it.

A few good resources for farm business planning are:

Beginning Farmers: <http://www.beginningfarmers.org/farm-business-planning/>

Cornell University's Small Farms Program: <http://smallfarms.cornell.edu>

[/plan-your-farm/planning-funding-your-farm-business/sample-business-plans/](http://smallfarms.cornell.edu/plan-your-farm/planning-funding-your-farm-business/sample-business-plans/)

The Spruce: <https://www.thespruce.com/write-a-small-farm-business-plan-3016944>

Private loans from individuals, family members, or friends can be easier to negotiate and obtain, but can also be fraught with personal and relational challenges if those loans are not backed up with well-written agreements and repaid like any other loan.

It is essential when preparing any business case based on farming to be extremely conservative in the expectations you present. Unless you are a veteran farmer (and even if you are), there will be a steep learning curve, and you can expect it will be three to five years before your enterprise begins to show a return. Income projections should also reflect the vagaries of an unpredictable climate, of changing markets and prices, and of biological conditions that are both within and outside of your control.

Because of the social mandate of Sole Food and its charitable goals and umbrella, we are able to solicit and receive tax-deductible contributions. However, a nonprofit or charity structure

requires a heightened level of diligence and accountability when it comes to honoring the support from donors who stand by the organization's mission, and in staying true to that mission. Soliciting charitable funds is an art and a responsibility.

Every year we produce a simple report which presents some of our key accomplishments, some quotes from our staff, a snapshot of our finances, and some thoughts and projections for where we are going. View some of our past annual reports at solefoodfarms.com/farming-the-city/resources (use the password Farmingthecity_2018).

FUNDRAISING PRINCIPLES

- Raising money is about personal relationships: People give to other people more than to ideas or projects (even great ones).
- Think of fundraising as providing an opportunity for a donor, rather than a solicitation.
- Successful fundraising is best accomplished by the people who are most involved with and passionate about the work at hand. Professional fundraisers may be able to design campaigns or strategies, but they can never achieve what those in the trenches can.
- Familiarize yourself with the history of a particular donor or foundation. What do they like to support and in what amounts? Once you are clear about what capacity a particular donor has to give, ask at or slightly beyond that level.
- Fundraising events are often not the best way to raise money. They are wonderful for making friends, celebrating organizational achievements, and educating the public. Too often, though, they cost more to organize and put on than they

actually generate. Host events, but be realistic about what they can achieve.

- After you have received contributions, thank donors numerous times—and in various ways—and stay in touch with them.

SELECTING AND ACCESSING LAND

Finding and accessing land to set up your operations in a city can be a slow and, at times, difficult process. Begin your land search as soon as you have a solid business plan written and are seeking funding. Here are some thoughts on the process.

Farmers look at potential land with an eye to existing soil fertility, drainage, weed pressure, exposure, wind, access to water, access to supplies, proximity to markets, and so on. We train ourselves to read the land, understand what it means when certain weed communities are predominant, observe the growth habits of existing plant material, and employ both sensory observations (smell, feel) and laboratory analysis of native soils.

These instincts are valuable, but when considering a farm in the city, there are often the added constraints of contaminated soils, pavement, and extreme space restrictions. These constraints require an entirely different approach to more traditional food production strategies and techniques, and necessitate that we seek out different elements.

Ideally we look for a site that is a minimum of a half acre (about half the size of an American football field) and relatively flat, is fenced for security from theft and vandalism, is not shaded by high-rise office or apartment buildings, can be easily serviced by trucks or forklifts, and, assuming that the native soil is not usable, has land that is “capped” (covered) or paved over in order to

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avoid the health, legal, and permit issues that relate to soil contamination. (Many municipalities now provide soil contamination testing services for new farm or garden endeavors.)



● *The original wood growing boxes before filling them with soil at our farm at Pacific and Carrall Streets*



● *Our urban orchard at the corner of Main and Terminal Streets*

Urban land typically has a much higher value (in the narrow economic definition of the word) than the income that could be gained from farming. And so we seek out land in industrial parts of the city; land in areas that are less likely to be developed; land that will be tied up in legal, permit, or development issues (and therefore go unused) for a minimum of three years; or parking lots that are not fully utilized.

I have always believed that ownership is highly overrated as the dominant model for young and beginning farmers. Long-term leases (a minimum of 10 years) for open-field, rural farms are a better way to get started. It normally takes five years to get to know a piece of land, improve the soils, understand how the light and air moves across the land, and establish stability in a new