

**Farmer Profile**  
**Healcrest Urban Community Farm**  
**Maria Graziani**

What is the best way to supply urban areas with fresh, local produce? How about growing it right down the street? That is what Maria Graziani is attempting to do on a few city blocks in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area (Allegheny County).

Maria began growing herbs in small garden plots, on about 50 square feet of land, behind her rented house. She also grows vegetables for family and friends. After beginning her own herbal products business, she now sells items such as salves, powders and soaps mainly at local festivals and by word of mouth.

According to Graziani, "After attending a PASA conference my interests grew to consider a larger urban farming project, maybe starting with an herb school." She was extremely interested in increasing the quality of fresh food available to those in urban environments. To that end, she has founded Healcrest Urban Community Farm and is in the process of purchasing 14 of 19 abandoned city lots. "I currently own four pieces and have secured three more. We are also in negotiations with the city of Pittsburgh and the Urban Redevelopment Authority to acquire more land," she says.

"No one had interest in developing the lots, which were mostly under absentee ownership," she continues "With some help I have formulated a plan to piece together the lots and buy them all in the next 5 to 6 years."

But there is still work to be done before this the land is suitable for growing fresh, local produce – mainly soil remediation. The lots Graziani hopes to develop into gardens have been used as an illegal dump in the past. Students from Slippery Rock University are using this area as a test site for urban soil health. Previous soil tests have shown high lead levels and detectable levels of arsenic.

Raised beds have been established in the areas where there was no trash, while contaminated areas are undergoing remediation in a variety of ways, including using principles Graziani learned at a PASA workshop on the soil food web and microbes. "We are using concepts I learned in the workshop to help remediate the soil with a microbial solution, turning the soil, adding compost, topsoil, leaf mulch and now planting spring cover crops (red clover and oats), which are taken out by the roots and put in the trash for landfill disposal. I have been using these principles the last 2-3 years and the lead levels have declined," she says.

Graziani has found allies at the University of Pittsburgh's Public Health Department, as well as the Bloomfield Garfield Corporation, and Slippery Rock University. Further development of the city lots into urban gardens will come via small grants, one of which will be used by the University of Pittsburgh's School of Engineering to put in a water source for the six raised beds currently in use. A

grant through the Allegheny County Health Department and an Action Housing Savings Grant is allowing further development the site. She will be seeking funding to create a large-scale rainwater collection system in the future. In the meantime a hoop house is being constructed to collect water.

“In 2005 about seven community members helped grow vegetables in several garden plots and we were able to hold several workshops on topics ranging from urban farming, composting, native plants and soil health,” continues Graziani.

“It is my hope to use the urban gardens as primarily an education center, possibly adding a market and gather local community members to ‘grow’ together,” she says. A large portion of the community in Garfield is working class on fixed incomes. “This is a great opportunity to teach people about fresh food,” Graziani said.

For more information about Healcrest Urban Community Farm, contact Maria Graziani at 412-362-1982 or [mothermoonbeam@aol.com](mailto:mothermoonbeam@aol.com).

**PASA:** What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

**Maria Graziani:** One of the most significant issues for agriculture is the urban dwellers lack of knowledge of the food system. We are plagued with a myriad of issues ranging from contaminated water and soil, growth hormones and antibiotics in food, cost of transporting food from far-off places, monopolization of food sources, not too mention, racist policies that make up food system standards which affect who has access to certain types of food and who is making decisions about our food.

The lack of education of some urban dwellers only contributes to the loss of the family farm and standards of healthy food. That is why urban farming is a critical issue in agriculture. The urban farm serves as not only a food source but also a catalyst for learning about food. Connecting the city, the largest sectors of food consumption, with farmers and farm issues brings our whole society to a new level of understanding, tolerance, inclusion, collectivity and sustainability.

**PASA:** What is unique about your farm?

**MG:** In Pittsburgh, like other rustbelt cities, the inner city urban environment is being abandoned for a life in the suburbs; therefore, urban settings are becoming dilapidated and plagued by decay. There are often a lack of facilities available to those who continue to reside in urban settings, in particular are grocery stores that provide access to fresh, healthy foods. Urban gardens and farms are cropping up to address a myriad of social problems affecting the urban community. One of the highest costs in urban gardens/farms, as the gardens grow, is the cost of using city water for plant watering. That is why we are looking

at rainwater collection systems.

**PASA:** How has your operation evolved over the years?

**MG:** We started with a series of empty urban lots that were covered in trash. Our workdays were chaotic- just putting out calls for volunteers - we weren't even able to build any gardens because of invasive overgrowth and trash. This coming year we will be putting in new garden spaces and our levels of toxins and heavy metals have already gone down due to cover-cropping, beneficial micro-organism use, raised beds and organic amendments. It is just beginning to turn into the Eden I hoped for and we are hoping for one of our largest grants this year - to build a sustainable rainwater collection and purification system. We hope to be a model for urban farmers - that your operation can be healthy, sustainable, affordable and a true learning center for urban dwellers about health, food security, nutrition, environment and farming.

**PASA:** Why did you join PASA?

**MG:** PASA has provided a huge portion of the education needed to get the sustainable farming part going in the gardens. We are dealing heavily in urban development issues but PASA's many programs such as the conference, field days, newsletters and other resources have helped me manifest an urban farm.