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Betting the Farm

An ambitious warehouse farm crops up in Bridgeport

By Harrison Smith

January 19, 2011



Ellis Calvin

Darion Crawford, compost manager, is pointing down the length of Iron Street Farm. I'm standing with him on the roof of a warehouse in industrial Bridgeport, just across the street from PepsiCo Chicago and just across the river from the smokestacks of some industrial plant. A gray smear of exhaust is rising up from the stacks, settling next to the Willis Tower in the northeast.

“At first we thought, ‘Oh, rooftop: rooftop garden.’ It’ll probably end up being wind systems and solar energy, though,” says Darion. He’s dressed in various shades of white, black, and gray, and most everything’s pretty pale and gray from the roof—the skyline on the horizon is colorless (save for the blinking red lights at the top of the Willis), and then there’s the Chicago River, half-frozen on the other side of the farm’s eastern wall. The river’s just visible from our spot on the roof, but in between it and the warehouse there’s a dark pile of something ominous. “Weird story there,” he says, pointing down at the something. “We got it from some guy who kept getting a bunch of tickets from the cops for having manure in the back of his truck.”

The manure is sitting near what may become a row of “hoop houses,” semi-cylindrical green houses that the farm plans to build in the space between the warehouse and the river. There’s only one hoop house standing now, though, and even that has yet to be finished: the two-by-four wood and PVC structure in place still needs to be covered with polygal, a greenhouse covering.

Iron Street Farm is a work in progress. When Growing Power—the Milwaukee-based non-profit that runs the farm—moved in this past August, the building was in pretty bad shape. “There was a lot of vandalism and graffiti from people who were snooping around,” says Crawford. Previously functioning as a warehouse for a pallet company, the building stood vacant for some time before being purchased by Growing Power this past year. A window is still broken on the stairs leading to the second floor, an office space whose walls Growing Power has had to repaint as many as six times due to the cold. It’s already chipping again in a couple of places, as the

heat's been intermittent on the second floor. The heating system finally seems stable, but carpeting and the tiling of the office space ceiling still need to be redone. "That's our next step," Crawford tells me as we walk back inside, where a small celebration—tacos—is going on in one of the office rooms: it's the end of Growing Power's involvement in the state's Put Illinois to Work program, which helped allow the organization to have, at one point, 150 employees at its Iron Street location. The number has since dwindled to around 20 as the temporary jobs have been phased out.

Downstairs on the warehouse floor are the "worm bins," coffin-sized wooden boxes for "vermiculture." Vermiculture, composting with worms, has become Darion's area of expertise. Compost—vegetable and food waste—is collected from neighborhood restaurants, groceries, and bakeries and then brought to Iron Street to be consolidated in bins outside. The compost bins, wooden pallet structures made to keep animals from nesting in the banana peel-laden waste, are made with the help of neighborhood kids, mostly students at nearby high schools. "Kids are involved in every stage of what we do," says Darion. In the building of bins, hoop houses, and bee boxes, in the tending of the produce soon to grow, and in the painting of murals of vegetables on the outside of the former warehouse, kids and community members are involved in every stage. Growing Power's other farming projects in the city (located in Cabrini-Green, Grant Park, and Jackson Park) are collaborating with restaurants like the West Loop's Publican and Blackbird in selling produce and buying waste for compost, all of which is part of the organization's vision of "inspiring communities to build sustainable food systems that are equitable and ecologically sound," as stated by their website.

Once placed into bins, the compost is allowed to break down for nine months before being transferred inside to the worm bins. For every two wheelbarrows of compost, one to two densely packed buckets of red wiggler worms are added to further break down the compost and supply it with nutrient-rich "worm casters" (a.k.a. "worm manure" or the non-chickpea "worm humus"). After the worms have eaten everything they can the compost is ready to be used in the hoop houses as a fertilizer. The worms, having done their part, are removed from the fertilizer via banana: a window screen is set on top of the worm bin, a bin of soil on top of that. The top bin, separated from the bottom by the window screen, is scattered with bananas and other mushy fruits to attract the worms. The worms, starved for mush, are able to move through the screen and to the top. The bottom bin is then taken to the hoop house, where it is used as fertilizer to grow sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuces, and even dandelion (for salads—"it tastes so bad," says Darion).

The first hoop house should be finished in a couple of weeks, and when completed it will allow for crops to be grown year-round (although it is debatable whether or not dandelion can be called 'crop'). A crop of tilapia and perch is also set to grow by March, as Growing Power plans to introduce aquaponics (defined on their website as "the symbiotic cultivation of plants and aquatic animals in a re-circulating system") to the farm with the construction of three-to-four foot-high tanks on the warehouse floor.

The organization has big plans. On January 15 Growing Power held its first urban agriculture workshop of the year in Milwaukee, with classes on such topics as aquaponics and solar power. On March 14, thirty students will come to Iron Street Farm for After School Matters' "Building A New Urban Farm for Chicago" program, the farm's first major event. After School Matters is a twenty year-old organization that, according to Michael Crowley, its program quality liaison, "provides high-quality out-of-school-time opportunities to Chicago teens across the city." Before After School Matters arrives, the ceiling and carpets still need to be redone, the aquaponics need to be installed, and the first hoop house needs to be completed. It's only been a few months since the farm was launched, though, and Growing Power has the necessary leadership and resources to succeed. Will Allen, its founder and CEO, was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2008 (an honor that includes a \$500,000 stipend) and was named to Time Magazine's yearly list of the world's hundred most influential people in 2010.

Urban agriculture seems to be on the rise in Chicago: in October the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) released GO TO 2040, a plan for "sustainable prosperity" that included a section calling for the promotion of "sustainable local food." On December 8, Mayor Daley introduced a zoning amendment to City Council that would incorporate urban agriculture projects into Chicago's Zoning Code. In a news release Daley was quoted as saying that "by amending the code to comprehensively address agriculture as a recognized land use in Chicago, city residents, businesses and government agencies will be better prepared to support its continued growth".

The impact of the zoning amendment is under debate in City Hall and within Chicago's urban agriculture community. Erika Allen, Growing Power's project

manager for Chicago, was quoted in a January 3 article in the Chicago Tribune as saying that “if [the zoning amendment] passes, our work would be over...We couldn’t do any of our projects. They’re all over the size limit.” [Allen was unable to be interviewed in time for this story.]

The Iron Street Farm is a pale farm now, a thing not quite there. It’s difficult to imagine hundreds of tanked fish swimming inside of a former industrial warehouse, or that outside, snow may be falling on ten hoop greenhouses, each of which (if completed) will have a yearly production of five pounds of produce per foot. Inside, 52 wooden worm bins are lined in rows across the eastern wall of the warehouse floor, empty; 28 True Temper wheelbarrows are leaned against another wall, orange and red. Bee boxes are waiting to be assembled on the second floor. There’s a soil smell and it’s cold. Things to be done, and Darion knows it.

Back on the roof there’s a tree growing. Somehow it’s rooted itself in—without soil or worm humus—on the roof of a former industrial warehouse. Noticing it there Darion smiles and tells me, “You know, we’ve got some busted pipes. This tree might be the problem.”