

In Northeast Baltimore, urban farmers help lift each other off the ground



Local farmers and volunteers work to erect the latest "high tunnel" greenhouse at the Real Food Farm in Northeast Baltimore. (kevin rector/baltimore sun)



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Though slowed by the thick mud left underfoot by Friday's heavy rains, about 20 local farmers and volunteers toiled away Saturday erecting the latest "high tunnel" greenhouse at the Real Food Farm in Northeast Baltimore.

The group's goal is to turn the small plot of land in Clifton Park into prime urban real estate for growing blackberries and raspberries, which they hope to one day sell cheaply in surrounding neighborhoods that have long been considered food deserts.

"It lets you grow more food in a smaller space more efficiently," farm manager Bryan Alexander, 28, said of the greenhouse they were building — a long structure made of metal piping and clear plastic, the eighth of its kind on the land. "We call them season-extension tools."

The Real Food Farm, nestled between old train tracks, the Reach Middle/High School campus and several sports fields, has been expanding its footprint since 2009, as urban farming has undergone growth in Baltimore and across the country.

Alexander said the greenhouse project — funded largely by the Abell Foundation and done in partnership with Future Harvest CASA — served both of the farm's main goals, which are to increase food access to local communities and to provide food and farming education to children and adults alike.

Several participants agreed.

"Eventually we hope to build a [greenhouse] system for ourselves. ... So I wanted to get the training now," said Floyd Godsey, 27, of West Baltimore, who works with #FixBaltimore and is involved in developing two community gardens, at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Walbrook and in the 200 block of S. Pulaski St. in Carrollton Ridge.

"The people in these areas, they recognize" they are in food deserts, Godsey said. "They see it, and they would like to see a change in their situation."

Often, sometimes for financial reasons, moving away isn't an option for families, so healthy food has to be moved in, he said.

Angela Lawson, 55, who just bought an old farm property in the 5200 block of Todd Ave. in Frankford in November, also hopes to build such greenhouses on her land — which she calls Pitchfork Urban Farm — and had come to familiarize herself with the process.

"I want to see how this gets done," said the former certified public accountant, who said she hopes to carry her love of planning and organization into her new farming life.

Warren Blue, 68, has been working his land in the 5600 block of McClean Blvd. in Northeast Baltimore for nearly 20 years, but in the last five years has started doing so full-time and selling his organic produce at farmers' markets.

He was there Saturday to lend a helping hand, having been in the construction business for years, because he believes in the farm's mission to teach Baltimore residents about farming and everything that goes into it, he said.

"Teaching the kids is very important, but also the grown folks. Most people are so used to getting canned food off the shelf, they don't know about fresh foods," he said. "Kids need to know where food is coming from."

Malik Cole, 18, of Parkside first started coming to the Real Food Farm when he attended the Reach school. Now a student pursuing a nursing career at the Community College of Baltimore County, he works part time at the farm.

Cole was at the center of the effort to raise the greenhouse Saturday, climbing a ladder with each new piece of metal frame.

He said working on the farm has changed his eating habits — "I definitely eat healthier. I definitely stopped going to McDonald's and KFC," he said — but has also given him a different outlook on the world.

"This is something new, something different that nobody from my generation is doing," he said. "I want to expand my horizons. I don't want to have the same mindset as everyone else. I want to be different."

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