

Fair Food for All

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Healthy food and clean water are the foundations of life. Our current food system threatens these foundations and puts our ability to produce food in the future at risk: pesticides and chemical fertilizers are altering our soil and water; we are losing natural diversity of the plants and animals we eat; workers are being exploited; and the long distances food travels are unnecessarily using up fossil fuels. We need to change the food system to ensure that the next generation will be able to feed itself.

United States farm policies provide massive subsidies for corn and soy production, fueling the food industry. They supply manufacturers with low-cost ingredients that are processed into unhealthy sweeteners and oils, and cheap grain for the feedlots that fatten livestock. The resulting food is high in calories, low in nutritional value and tends to be the cheapest and most available; it is what's often served in public institutions, such as schools.

Even though food seems to be everywhere as we are saturated by

advertising and overwhelmed by choices, options for healthy food are often quite limited. While it may be easy to find a fast food restaurant or chips and soda at a corner store, people in both urban and rural areas alike may have difficulty getting to a store selling fresh fruits and vegetables. The challenges of simply getting to a well-stocked market coupled with the higher cost of quality food are exacerbated by poverty. Lack of access to quality foods contributes to unhealthy diets and the growing epidemic of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. These health problems, found disproportionately in poor communities, can interfere with people's ability to work and learn.

Philadelphia has the second lowest number of supermarkets per capita of all major cities in the US. Many of its residents are plagued by physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy food. The Mill Creek neighborhood of West Philadelphia is a residential area, predominantly African-American (97%), with 36% of residents living in poverty. Following demolition of the entire block of homes at 49th



and Brown Streets in the 1960s, the Brown Street Community Garden was established on part of the site to provide neighbors with garden space. Today, the garden helps to sustain self-reliance as it is still an important source of fresh food for the community gardeners who grow food for their own consumption and to share with family, friends, and neighbors.

In 2005, the Mill Creek Farm was founded on the adjacent parcel of vacant land, renewing a blighted lot that had attracted dumping and was overgrown with weeds. The Philadelphia Water Department and other partners supported the project as part of a stormwater management strategy to decrease runoff and flooding. The Mill Creek Farm is an educational urban farm dedicated to improving local access to fresh produce, building a healthy community and environment, and promoting a just and sustainable food system.

We at Mill Creek Farm are committed to “food justice”—we believe that all people have a right to affordable, healthy, high-quality, culturally ap-

propriate food. We believe that food should be accessible through ecologically sound systems that are community-controlled and socially just.

We know that the further produce travels from where it is grown, the more vitamins and nutrients it loses. Fresh food tastes better and is more nutritious. Buying locally-grown food reduces impact on climate change and helps build stronger local economies.

The Mill Creek Farm grows vegetables, fruits, and herbs without the use of chemical fertilizers or pesticides. We grow many varieties and as we talk directly with our customers, we are able to respond to their preferences. Most of them live in the immediate neighborhood and many have southern roots, a culture of growing food, and knowledge and appreciation of freshness—especially fresh okra.

We sell our (low-priced) fresh produce directly to neighborhood residents through farm stands as well as to a nearby food co-operative. We donate regularly to neighborhood food cupboards, accept SNAP benefits (Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program or food stamps), and participate in the Farmers Market Nutrition Program, helping seniors and families receiving WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) benefits to obtain fresh produce.

Our complex national food system, along with an aging and shrinking population of farmers and gardeners, increasingly disconnects people from their food. Mill Creek's farm-based learning programs reconnect visitors with the origins of their food. We work with schools and other community organizations, offer internships, and are open to youth from the neighborhood that help, explore, and learn. Offering hands-on experiences like harvesting and tasting food fresh from the field fosters the development of healthy eating habits critical to disease prevention, and encourages awareness of and caring for both the environment and the community.

Mill Creek Farm hosts workshops to exchange skills and tools and create opportunities to learn about the positive impacts of the farm on the urban environment, including:

decreasing stormwater runoff, air pollution, noise, and extreme temperature while increasing carbon sequestration, energy conservation, and quality of life. We engage volunteers, sharing resources and knowledge of farming and sustainable practices in support of people growing their own food.

The Mill Creek Farm is part of a growing movement to retake control of our food system through innovative, creative solutions in order to provide a better world for the next generation.

Johanna Rosen & Jade Walker founded the Mill Creek Farm in 2005. Both have extensive experience growing food as well as in educational settings. Implementing its mission through farm-based learning programs, The Mill Creek Farm cultivates and distributes fresh produce and demonstrates providing for basic needs through ecological technologies and creative resource use.

millcreekurbanfarm.org