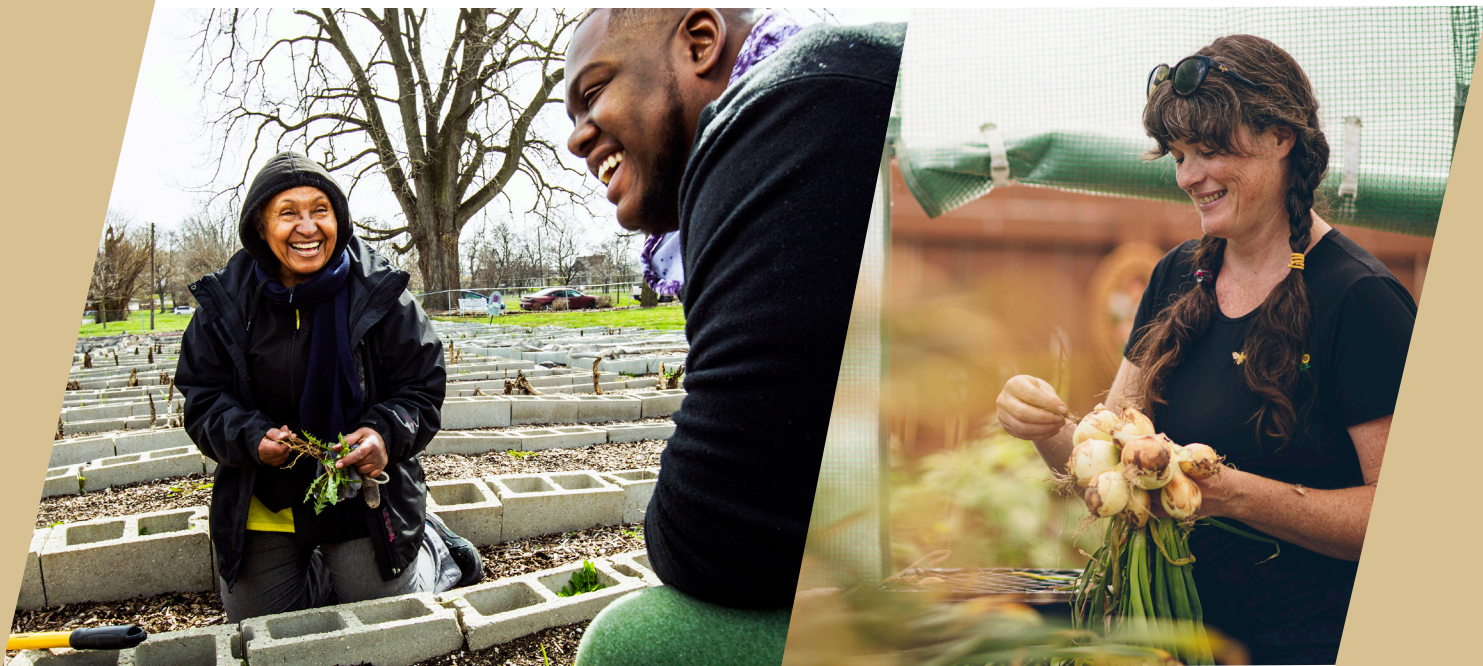


URBAN AGRICULTURE

**DEFINING SUCCESS:
URBAN AGRICULTURALISTS' PERSPECTIVES**

Diversified Farming and Food Systems
purdue.edu/dffs/
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HOW DO URBAN AGRICULTURALISTS

DEFINE SUCCESS?

Purdue Cooperative Extension is dedicated to helping agricultural enterprises succeed, but different types of stakeholders have different ideas of what “success” looks like. To better support urban agriculturalists, Purdue Extension conducted a needs assessment which culminated in an online survey. This bulletin is the last in a three-part series presenting the survey findings that sought to capture how these farmers define what successful urban agriculture (UA) looks like and how these endeavors may enrich their lives and the lives of their families and communities.



Extension

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WORKING *TOGETHER*

Community engagement in UA requires participation and buy-in that is dependent on the support of neighbors and communities working together. Each community is unique and engagement approaches may vary from place to place. Purdue Extension wants to understand the vision and goals of the community to develop inclusive approaches that will build capacity for new partnerships and innovation. Understanding the cultural backgrounds, neighborhood assets, and the community's history helps align programs and services with the needs, and wants, of community residents.

In 2020, Purdue Extension began developing an UA needs assessment focused on individuals across Indiana who are involved in any type of UA operation. The purpose of this project was to:

1. **Better understand the urban agriculture production challenges across Indiana;**
2. **Identify community partners to help meet their needs; and**
3. **Generate programs and materials from Purdue Extension in preferred and accessible formats.**

The process began by hosting listening sessions in Allen, Lake, and Marion Counties. These sessions guided the development of the survey instrument, and UA practitioners provided suggestions for feedback and refinement. One theme that emerged was the variation in how success was defined by respondents. As a result, two open-ended questions were included in the survey:

1. **“What is the most successful UA production activity you have experienced?”; and**
2. **“What is your vision for your urban farm/ garden?”.**

Several community partners, including the Indiana Soil and Water Conservation Districts, the Indiana Natural Resources Conservation Service, and NGOs such as the Hoosier Young Farmer Coalition helped to distribute the survey. It is not known how many individuals received the survey; however, 207 respondents accessed the online tool. It was completed by 95 and partially completed by 28, representing 59.4% of the respondents that accessed the tool online.



Nathan Shoaf and Dr. Laura Ingwell compiled, organized, and coded the qualitative responses to identify common themes and salient points. Notions of success were divided into two categories: concrete, tangible forms of success such as increased yield and more intangible notions of success such as increased social cohesion. Frequently, respondents provided definitions that blended both categories. They not only thought of their own farms but also in terms of benefits to the larger community. Respondents' conceptions of UA success appeared to arise from their deep commitment to supporting sustainable agroecosystems and nurturing their communities.

The emergent themes of self-identified UA success encompassed the following areas:

- 1. Improving yields, increasing profits, and accessing high-value markets;**
- 2. Deriving a sense of satisfaction through continual learning, enhancing self-sufficiency, and enjoying the fruits of one's labors; and**
- 3. Nurturing one's family and community by increasing access to healthy, locally produced foods, strengthening social cohesion, and providing educational opportunities.**

“

SUCCESS is getting all of my products producing at a high quality/high yield and to replicate that season after season.

”





1

IMPROVING YIELDS, INCREASING PROFITS, AND ACCESSING HIGH-VALUE MARKETS.

Like most other types of agricultural enterprises, urban farmers strive to build commercially viable and economically self-sufficient operations. Production practices are influenced by farmer beliefs, values, and goals, and many simply want to be a financially successful farm business. For specialty crops, this often comes down to yield and access to high-value markets. The more producers grow, the more they have available to sell. Producing high quality products enables urban agriculturalists to command higher prices and sell in specialty markets.

Many respondents mentioned that choosing high-value crops or value-added products that have consistent demand have helped them thrive in their communities. Increasing land access has created new opportunities for some agriculturalists to expand their operation to serve more restaurants and farmers markets.

Incorporating sustainable farming practices such as composting, integrated pest management, and cover cropping have reduced operating costs for some farms and created opportunities to promote these practices to consumers who value them.

“

*I would like to become **MORE EFFICIENT** and/or get a much **HIGHER YIELD** with existing level of labor in order to make a profit.*

”

“

***SUCCESS** to me as a market gardener means making a profit, which I have failed to do in six years due to huge amount of labor required. That said, I feel very successful at **PROVIDING** a wide variety of vegetables to the **COMMUNITY**.*

”



“ **SUCCESS** is opening a jar of processed tomato sauce in January and it **TASTES LIKE SUMMER.** ”

2

DERIVING A SENSE OF SATISFACTION THROUGH INCREASED COMPETENCY AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY, PROVIDING FOR OTHERS, AND ENJOYING THE FRUITS OF ONE’S LABORS.

Some practitioners highlighted UA as a pathway to sought-after self-sufficiency:

“Our homestead **will provide the majority of our food** including veg, fruits, nuts, legumes, mushrooms, honey, eggs, and poultry. Our homestead will be as closed of a loop as possible **limiting the outside inputs** we bring in. Eventually (we will) grow our sales to help offset and ideally zero out the cost of homesteading activities.”

“For now, **our vision** is to turn our front yard into a productive vegetable, fruit, herb and flower ‘farm.’ Edible landscaping, **to feed ourselves, our neighbors** and sell/donate.”

Many urban agriculturalists derive satisfaction in the doing, learning, nurturing, and problem solving inherent in UA. Of course, urban agriculturalists relish the fruits of their labors.

“ *Beekeeping is the most successful UA production with which I have been involved. Success means **GROWTH**, learning/ gaining something from the experience, and **PRODUCING RESULTS**, such as honey, produce, vegetables, and/or an educational program.* ”





3

NURTURING ONE'S FAMILY AND COMMUNITY BY INCREASING ACCESS TO HEALTHY, LOCALLY PRODUCED FOODS, STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION, AND PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Increasing access to healthy, locally produced foods

Urban agriculture provides opportunities to improve outcomes related to health by increasing the consumption of fresh produce and engaging in outdoor recreation and physical activity. Most respondents noted that their farms and gardens increase community access to healthy, locally-grown food that can change eating habits for their families, friends, and neighbors. Other farmers described their successes, mission, and vision with an emphasis on sharing food produced within their communities and teaching others how to grow their own food. Some practitioners highlighted UA as a pathway to sought-after self-sufficiency:

"Success means **providing healthy foods** for family and friends who are unable to grow or produce their own."

"We grow food on several lots for residents in neighborhoods experiencing **access to quality food** issues, helping them by providing resources to glean fruit, herbs, and vegetables."

“

We help in the **CREATION** of community gardens, a food forest, and we'll **TEACH** people to eat from their gardens all year through food preservation. As an urban grower, we have been successful in getting people to **GROW THEIR OWN** food at home as well as in a community.

”

“

*I am able to grow my own fresh foods and **HELP CHANGE** the eating habits of my family and friends.*

”



“ **SUCCESS** is also having the opportunity to engage with community members and **LIFT UP** other farmers. ”

Strengthening social cohesion

UA knits communities together by bringing the farm to the local community in a welcoming, inclusive space. Connecting communities to local food production can extend beyond the farm by selling produce and value-added products at local farmer's markets. Farmers are also building social capital and community cohesion through community-supported agriculture (CSA). This is a unique direct-marketing opportunity in which consumers pledge support to farmers by sharing the benefits and risks of local food production.

Many UA farms and gardens also function as a canvas for other events including high school graduations, weddings, and yoga classes. They might also be nonprofit organizations with specific educational goals or various community-focused objectives which enhance social cohesion.

Providing educational opportunities

Urban farms and gardens can provide locations and opportunities for experiential, hands-on learning and build farmer networks for knowledge sharing between experienced and novice growers. Importantly, successful urban farms and gardens provide critical training opportunities for beginning farmers and budding entrepreneurs.



Many respondents noted that an important part of their farming successes was their desire to use their farms and gardens as a welcoming environment to teach youth about sustainable growing practices and personal health.

Conclusion

Urban agriculture provides many social benefits. Extension can play a crucial role by providing valuable information, resources, and support to enhance urban farming practices. Urban agriculture also presents unique challenges due to limited space and resources. Therefore, Extension must tailor services and support to address these specific needs while helping farmers increase productivity, sustainability, and the overall success of their farming operations.

“

*In my school garden's fledgling season (2020), we saw small but **POWERFUL INTERACTIONS** through simple relationship-building. Students stopped by to socialize, but ended up nibbling on new foods as we enjoyed each other's company. These interactions are the **PERFECT** way to casually teach about our sustainable growing practices, diversity for pollinators and wildlife, and personal health.*

”

“

*As a school garden for children with special needs, our goal is not yield. Instead, we want the garden to be a place for our children to feel **RELAXED**, full of **QUESTIONS** about all things gardening (soil, insects, worms, snakes, plants, food, etc.), and **EXCITED** to try new foods.*

”

SURVEY INSIGHTS

01 Economic development

Urban agriculture can improve economic wellbeing for communities, create employment, generate income, connect local businesses, diversify local economies, and reduce food costs.

02 Diversifying farming and food systems

Urban agriculturalists face challenges related to limited space and resources while balancing crop productivity, sustainability, and social missions.

03 Community cohesion

Urban farms and gardens in culturally diverse communities create opportunities to share healthy, local foods, build cohesion, and improve food security.

04 Education and health

Urban agriculture education programs can strengthen youth civic engagement and increase multigenerational learning opportunities, as well as benefit the physical and mental health of communities in multiple ways.



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