

## Detroit Keeps Growing

*Mahindra NATC was proud to award a \$20,000 grant to support Keep Growing Detroit's Garden Resource Program in 2015. This grant was used to provide seeds and transplants for hundreds of urban gardens in Detroit.*

There are over 1,400 urban farms and gardens operating in the city of Detroit today, and Keep Growing Detroit is a huge reason why. Providing support and training for both nascent and experienced gardeners, Keep Growing Detroit has, for ten years, been a primary force driving the growth of urban agriculture in Detroit. This is no surprise, as Keep Growing Detroit's co-director Ashley Atkinson's mission is an ambitious one. Atkinson has hopes of one day creating a "food sovereign" Detroit—a Detroit in which the majority of produce sold and consumed in the city is locally sourced and economically beneficial to city residents. Such a possibility seems more plausible now than ever, with Keep Growing emerging from a 2015 that saw the organization transform an additional 200 acres in Detroit into productive growing spaces.

Keep Growing Detroit achieves results through a robust network of programs, though perhaps none more important than their Garden Resource Program (GRP). For small yearly membership fees—\$10/year for family gardens, \$20/year for community or school gardens—Keep Growing Detroit provides GRP participants with seeds, vegetable transplants, technical assistance, and opportunities to sell produce in the city. Each year, through the GRP, Keep Growing donates 50,000 packs of seeds and 250,000 transplants, all of which are grown in greenhouses in the city of Detroit. The recipients of these resources are unconstrained, and the Garden Resource Program does not discriminate, "Wherever you want to grow food, we are here to support you."

Atkinson says, "We help people grow food in containers, on patios, in backyards, and community gardens. The important thing is that people grow food, because when people grow food, their relationship to food changes." These sentiments align with Atkinson's desire for a food sovereign Detroit. She, like many, believes that in growing fruits and vegetables, growers come to understand the energy and pride that go into, and result from, cultivating and eating healthy food.



*Keep Growing Detroit's Ashley Atkinson at Plum Street Market Garden*

So much of Keep Growing—and the urban ag movement in general—is about removing the disconnect between grower and consumer. The Urban Garden Education Series is another of Keep Growing's programs that empowers city residents to transition into growers. This year, the Urban Garden Education Series will host over 40 classes taught by local chefs and farmers. These classes range from teaching residents to grow and care for strawberries, to assembling garden irrigation systems, and even include lessons in beekeeping and mushroom cultivation. Averaging over 20 participants per session, the diversity of these courses helps keep Detroit residents interested and engaged in urban agriculture, while also helping to develop a community around the movement.

In addition to their offering of programs and services Keep Growing has its own 1.75 acre plot called the Plum Street Market Garden. Located in downtown Detroit, the site is used to train growers, engage volunteers, produce transplants for gardens across the city, and grow fresh fruits, vegetables, and flowers to sell at local farmers markets. Last year the site yielded over 9,000 pounds of produce including more than 20 varieties of tomatoes. Summer 2015 also saw the inception of the Plum street garden's Youth Urban Agriculture Apprenticeship program, an initiative that paired 5 emerging leaders of urban agriculture with Keep Growing staff to further sharpen their food and farming skills and become even more informed advocates for a food sovereign Detroit.

With only 12 full-time employees on staff, one marvels at the presence and impact of Keep Growing Detroit. Last year alone the organization had a hand in growing an estimated 550,000 lbs. of fresh produce in the City of Detroit. When one considers the math, and co-director Atkinson's commitment, it is not difficult to fathom a day when Detroit truly is food sovereign. At present there are 40 square miles of vacant land in Detroit; by utilizing just one fourth of that land to grow food (about 5,000 acres) Atkinson calculates that 70% of the vegetables and 40% of the fruit consumed by Detroiters could eventually come from within city limits. Due to the good work of organizations like Keep Growing Detroit that day could come sooner than we think.



*Entryway to Plum Street Market Garden*

*\*Mahindra's Urban Agricultural Grant Program, initiated in 2015, is committed to helping organizations like Keep Growing Detroit realize positive change in and around Detroit through the growth of healthy, sustainable food. Mahindra's urban agriculture grants are awarded annually. For more information visit [here](#).*