

A DETROIT URBAN FARM

Peck Produce, LLC was created in February 2011 by Noah Link and Alex Bryan. Both of them grew up in Laingsburg, Michigan and went on to work on various farms in Michigan, Colorado, New Hampshire, and abroad after graduating from the University of Michigan. Their farm, Food Field, sits on the old site of Peck Elementary in Detroit.

Ashley Cook: Noah, your last name is Link right?
Noah Link.

Noah Link: Right.

A: And, where are you originally from?

N: I am from Laingsburg, Michigan. It's a small town just North of Lansing.

A: Okay, and how long have you been living in Detroit?

N: I've been here for the last 7 years now.

A: So, you arrived in 2010. So that was around the time when the urban farming movement really began, right?

N: Well, I wouldn't say that. There's been urban

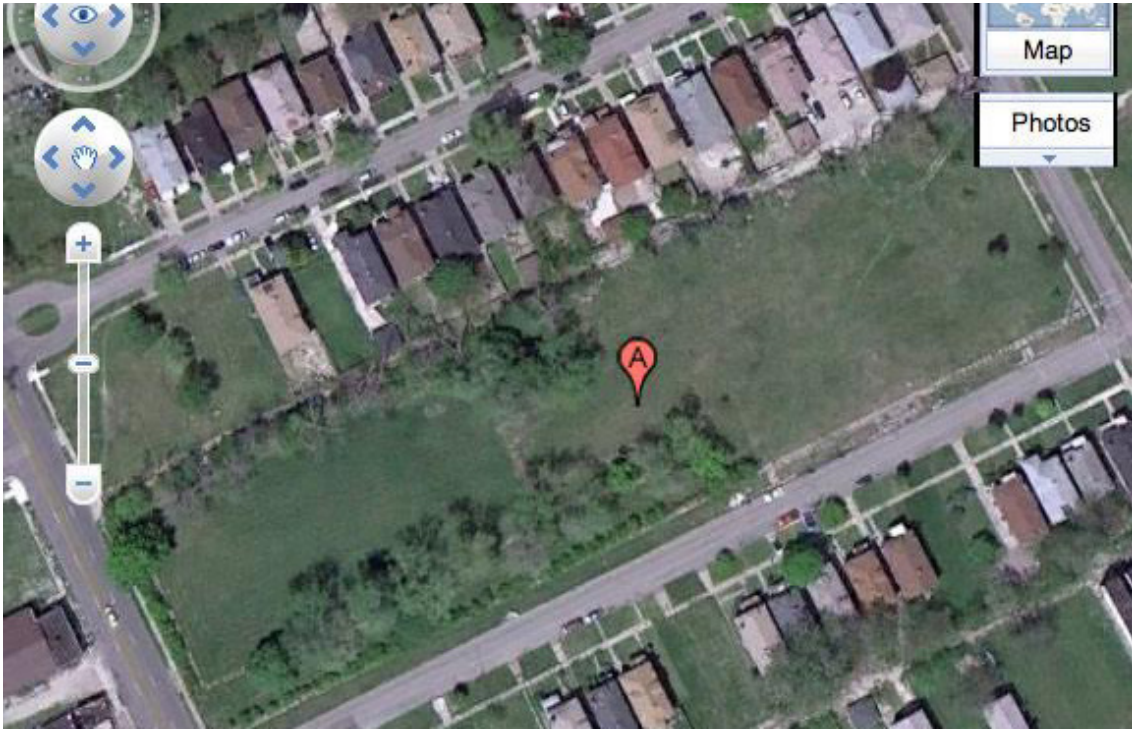
farming in the city for decades. Even 100 years ago mayor Pingree was encouraging urban farms for self sufficiency. When I moved here though, there was a lot of new buzz around urban farming and that was a part of what made me want to move here and start doing this.

A: What drove you to want to begin growing food?

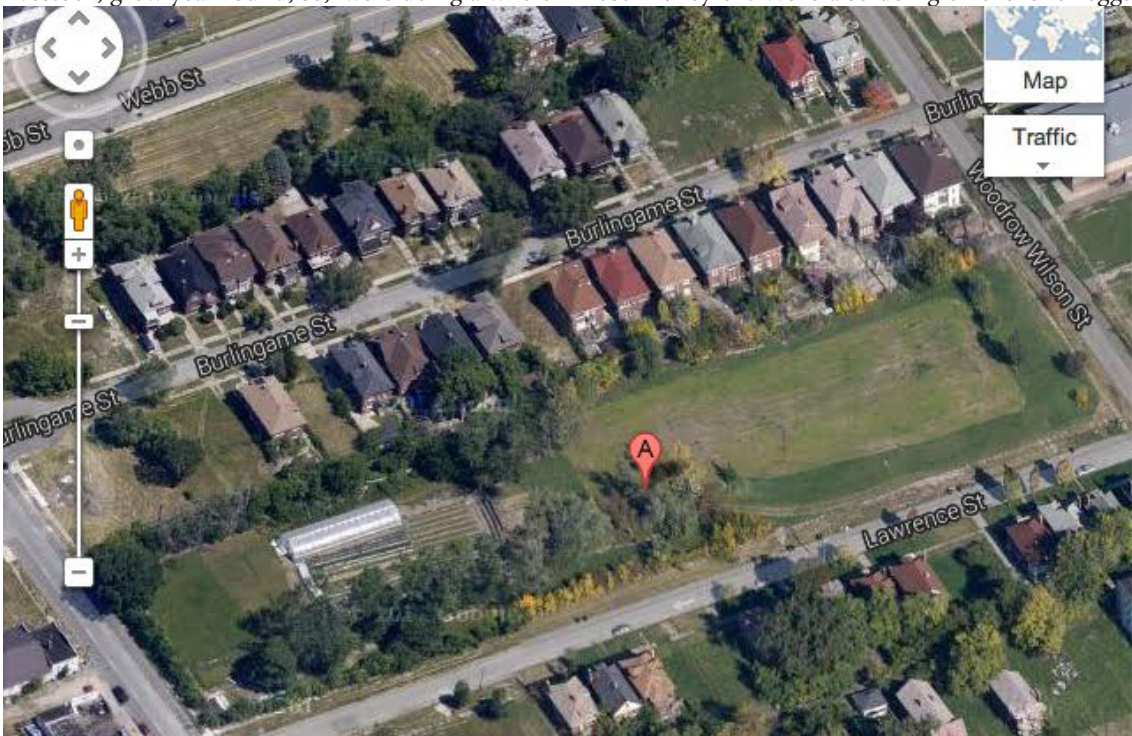
N: I got interested in food systems and agriculture in college. I went to University of Michigan and I spent a year studying abroad, learning about trade and agriculture and environment issues and visiting farms and villages in a lot of different countries and seeing what were the common issues that everyone was facing and how much of a need there was for just rebuilding the food system. I ended up back in Michigan after college, working on an organic farm, seeing that put into practice, and I really enjoyed doing that and I wanted to bring some of that to Detroit, since there is so much potential here.

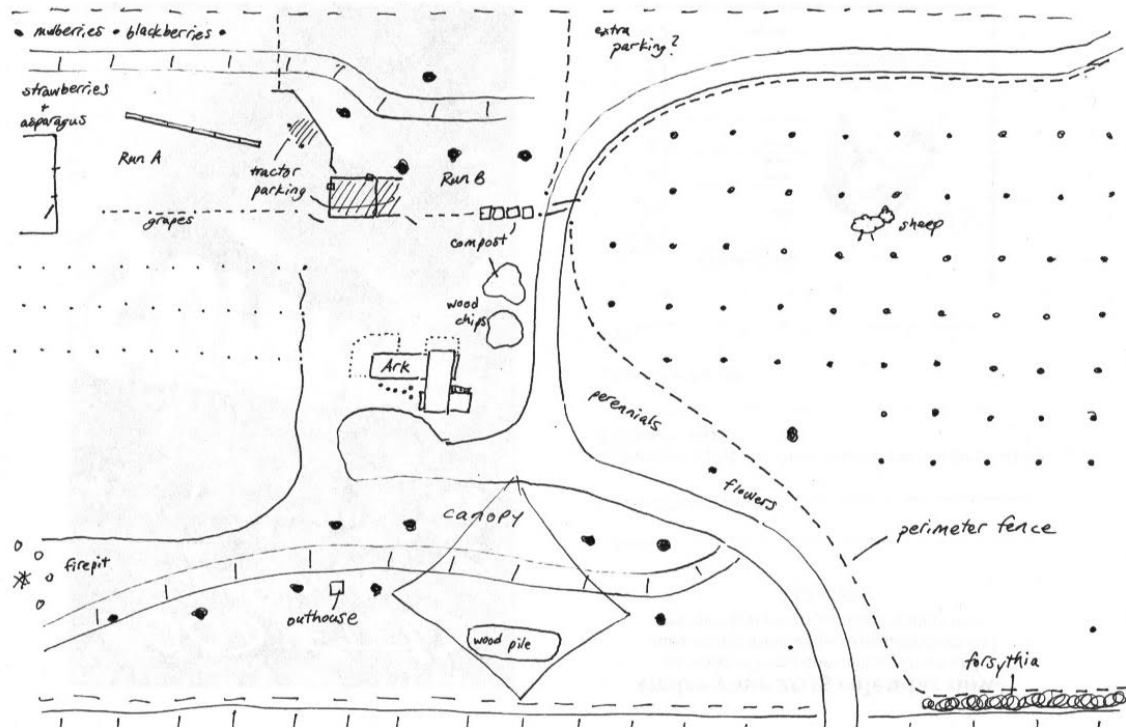
A: So when did you decide to start your own farm, Food Field? Did it begin as Food Field off the bat?

N: Yes, it started as what it is, it's grown over the past 7 years but it started in 2010. I had an old friend who also came to Michigan from Laingsburg who has also been traveling, working on organic farms, umm, both of us finding ourselves back in Michigan, and in 2010, decided to jump into the urban farming movement in Detroit, and do what we could do to help grow it to a bigger scale to be

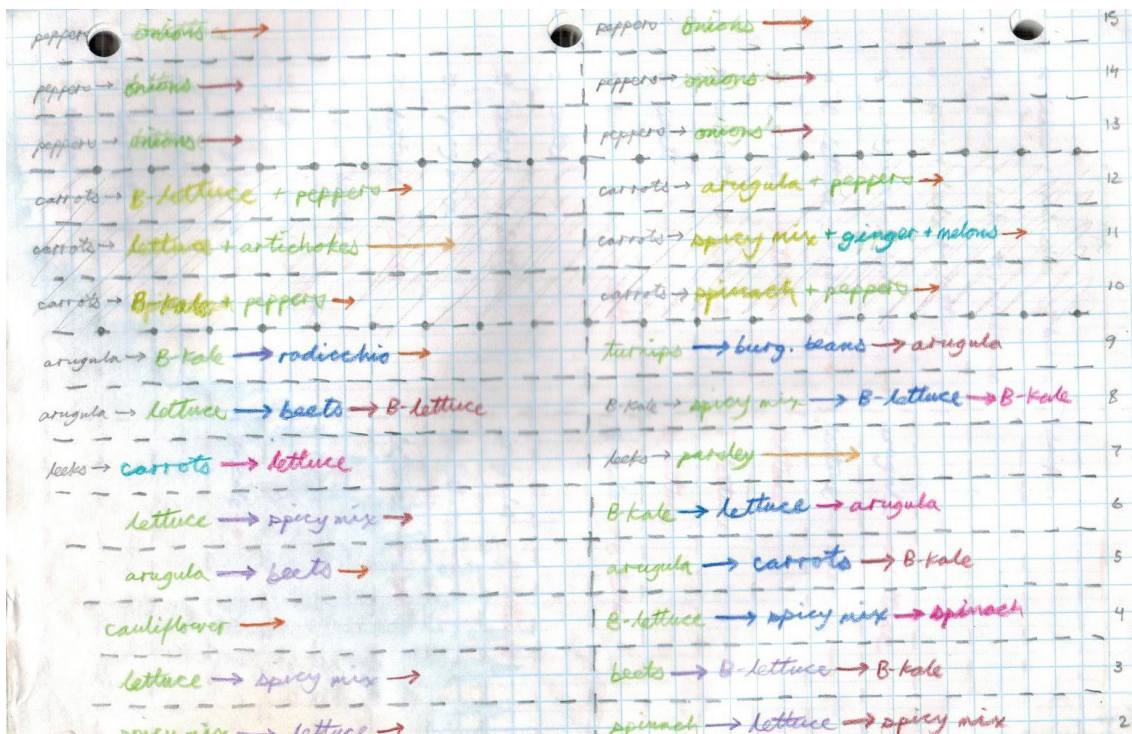


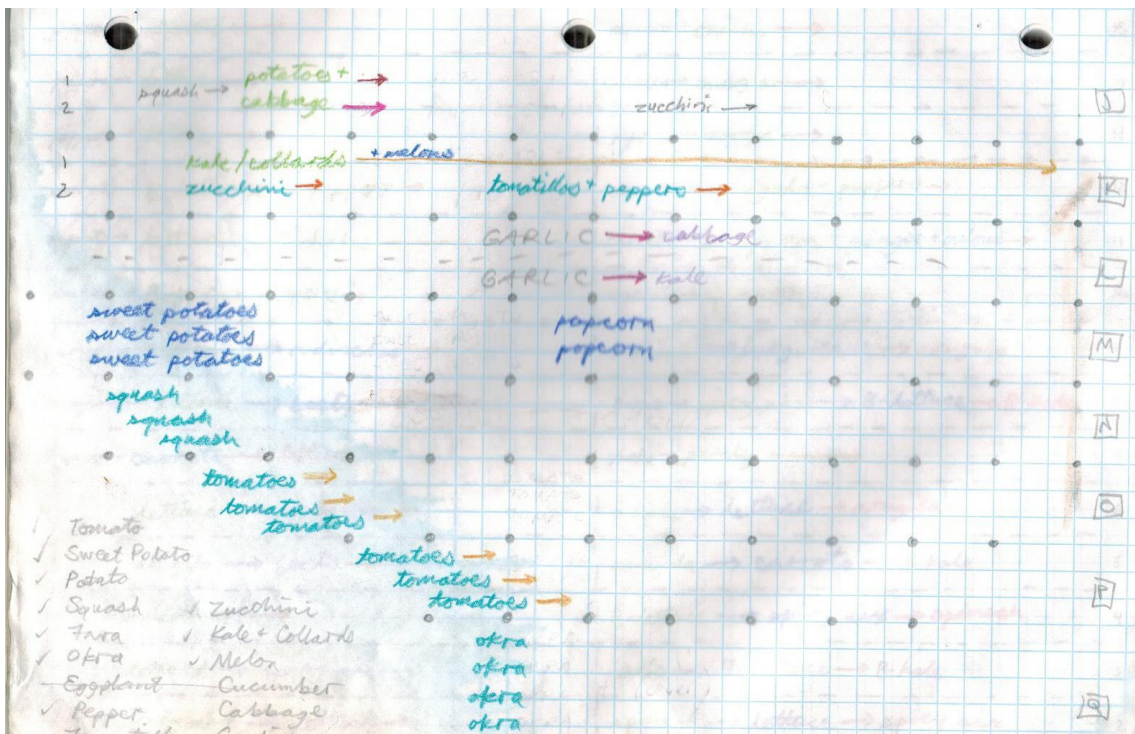
the same kind of seasonal crops, and we wanted to expand that to grow more primary crops, have livestock, grow year round, so, were doing a whole range of vegetables, and we've narrowed that down to the kinds of crops we know we can do and not lose money on. We're also doing chickens for eggs,





Sketches on paper for farm layouts.





Sketches on paper for farm layouts.

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growing more food in the city and making a good model for other kinds of small scale farms. So, that summer we started looking for property in the city, and writing up a business plan for an organic farm here, and got started growing here in 2011.

A: About how many urban farms are there in Detroit right now?

N: The movement is really big and widespread. I know a lot of the farms and gardens in the city, but I'm still finding out about new ones in the city that I have never seen or heard about before. And it depends on what you call a farm or a garden, but, in terms of what we're doing, there are things on all different scales, so, there are a couple of major projects that have been started in the last couple of years, recovery park farms that are happening with millions of dollars and multiple city blocks, square miles. And then the next scale down from that is what we're doing. We're on four acres here, there are a number of other farms that are growing on an acre or two or three, um, doing this part time or full time for a living. There are also some organizational farms, like Detroit Public Schools have a two to three acre farming site. There are non-profit farms that are also kind of on the same scale or close. Beyond that, there are hundreds of community gardens and backyard gardens, and guerrilla gardeners, and all different other kinds of projects.

A: Did you name your farm Food Field after Ford Field?

N: Yes, it's a play off of Ford Field.

A: When did Ford Field stop working, it's Comerica Park now, right?

N: No, no Ford Field is next to Comerica Park.

A: Oh, okay, oh wait, Ford Field, is it the football one? Oh, it's the football one! Ohhhh, okay. I thought it was the Tigers. I thought it was the abandoned field from the Detroit Tigers.

N: No, that's Navin field,. They're turning that into a police athletic league right now.

A: Oh really? Haa okay. Um, so, anyways, I am sure you learned so much about how to grow food from

this experience, more than you learned at U of M when you were studying there....

N: Oh yeah, I did not get any practical experience at U of M. I learned many things that were kind of pushing me in this direction, but I don't have any formal background with farming. Beyond what I learned apprenticing, this was a huge learning experience.

A: And did you need to develop a relationship with the city in order to be able to do this? Did you need to get permission to use the land?

N: We own the land, which sets us apart from a lot of other people who are doing this in the city. We got really lucky when we were searching for property in the city and found this State of Michigan land bank and we were able to go through a really simple process to get the land at a really good price based on what we wanted to do here. We actually did not have to work with the city at all to get started.

A: Where is your farm located in the city? It's in the Boston Edison District, right?

N: We're a few blocks North of Boston Edison.

A: It's a good location.

N: It is, yes, so our neighborhood is close to the better maintained historic neighborhood, but once you cross Boston, it really changes and there's not a whole lot here. Most of the houses on this block are abandoned. We're away from all of the development that is happening in the city, so there's really not a lot of traffic here, not a whole lot of attention being paid to this part of the city, but we're also really close to everything we need to get to right off the highway, so it's a good central location.

A: It's kind of nice that you're away from most of the development, at least for a little while, right? Haha

N: It is, yeah, haha.

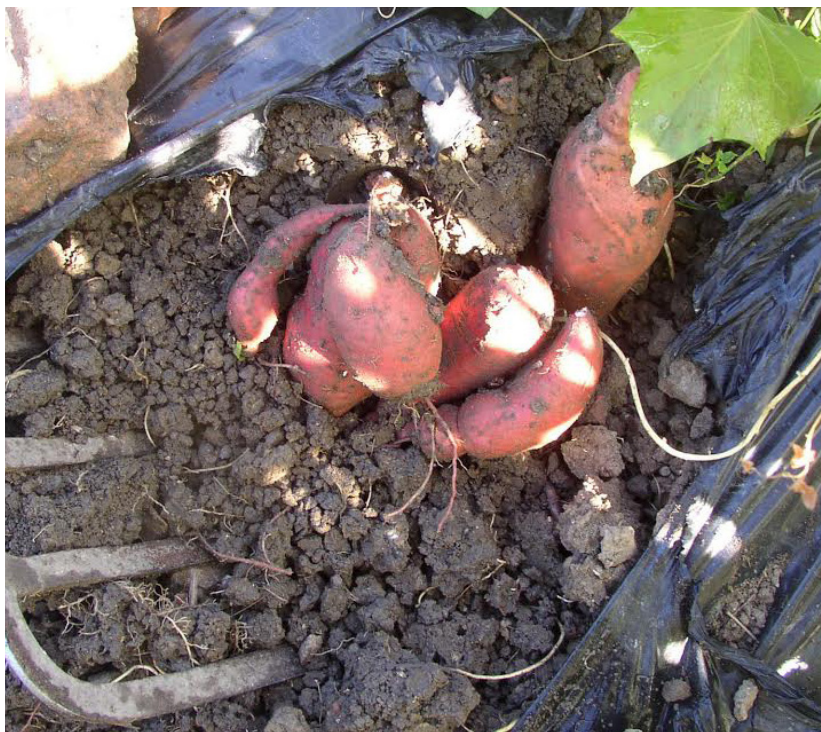
A: So, um, what kinds of things do you grow there?

N: We are growing some of everything and part of our plan was to have a really diverse farm in terms of what we are producing. There are so many gardens in the city that grow kale and tomatoes and





Garlic & sweet potatoes



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we have ducks for eggs now too, we have honeybees. We have some fruit trees, some mushrooms. We do year round production in the greenhouse.

A: Did you need to replenish the soil to get it ready to grow with?

N: Yep, the soil has been one of the biggest challenges growing here and probably the most important thing we were working with. We did make sure we were not working with contaminated soil, so we did a soil test before we even thought about buying the land. And this was an old school site, so we're not on top of an old industrial site, but we did find that the soil quality was pretty poor, we have some really ferocious perennial weeds that we have to deal with pretty much everyday out here.

A: Haha, it's what you're doing right now, right?

N: Yeah, and when we started planing our orchards, we found that on one half of the farm, where the school building was, the ground was just filled with all kinds of rubble that made planting out there really hard.

A: And you had to dig it up, get rid of it and put new soil?

N: No, we didn't have to remove soil or rehabilitate the site or anything like that. We're growing in the ground here. We've added a compost to feed all the crops we're growing and we've had to remove a lot of debris from parts of the farm. But were growing in the ground, we're not doing raised beds like a lot of the gardens in the city are.

A: Do you also collect rain water?

N: We do, we have four big tanks set up on the corners of our hoop house and that collects a lot of water when we get a good rain.

A: And what do you use it for? Do you drink it?

N: No, we also have city water hooked up. Umm, can you hold on for like two minutes? I have somebody who is taking off from the farm I need to pay.

A: Yep, sure.

N: Okay I'm back.

A: Okay, I was just asking if you collected rain water and what you used it for?

N: We use it for irrigation and we also have a aquaponics system in our greenhouse, so we use the rainwater we collect to add to that system.

A: And you don't drink it.

N: Well, we could drink the rainwater if we filtered everything really carefully and tested the water regularly.

A: What are some opportunities you have being an urban farmer in Detroit?

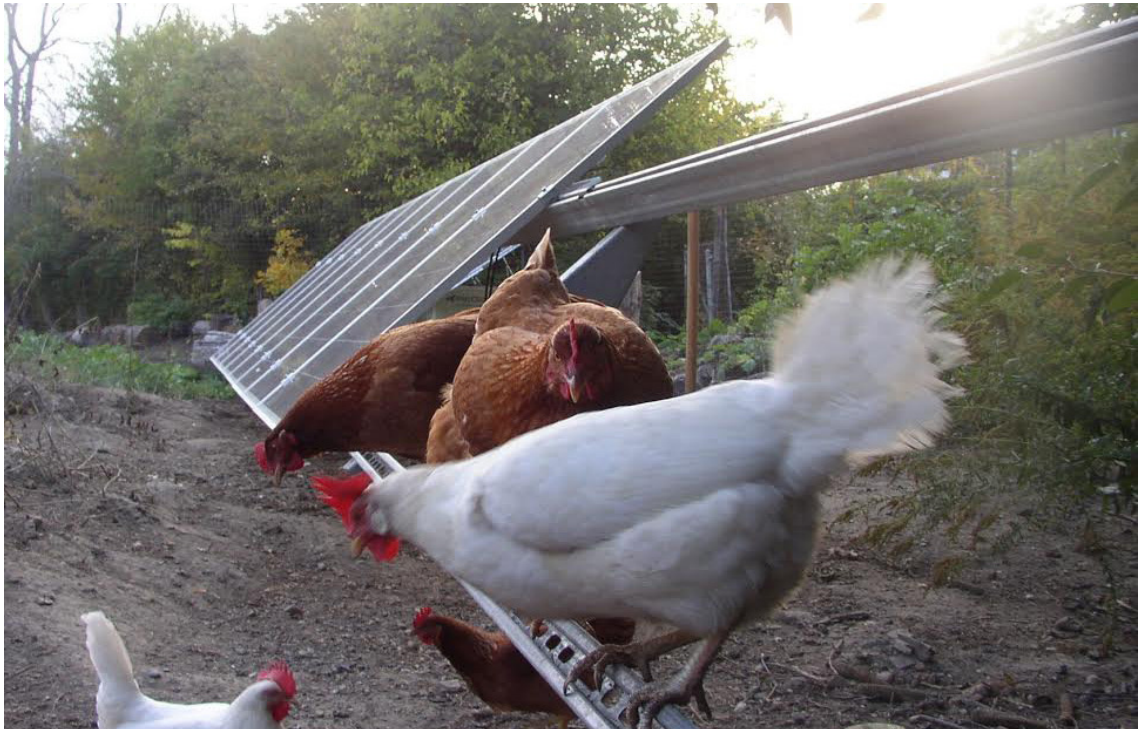
N: Um, you kinda make your own opportunities here and its a cool city to be in because there is a lot of opportunity to do different things. It's a really good environment to be farming in, because there's a really wide network of people who are growing and want to support each other. There are also a growing number of other businesses, restaurants, caterers, stores that are also part of this movement, who want to be supporting growers and vice versa. We're able to get into new markets and sell to new places, some new hyper-local grocery places too.

A: And Eastern Market?

N: We sell through a cooperative table at the market. We are working with other farms in the city to try to figure out a better option for us to have some kind of Eastern Market presence, but as a single vendor, it can be really expensive and time consuming to be at Eastern Market.

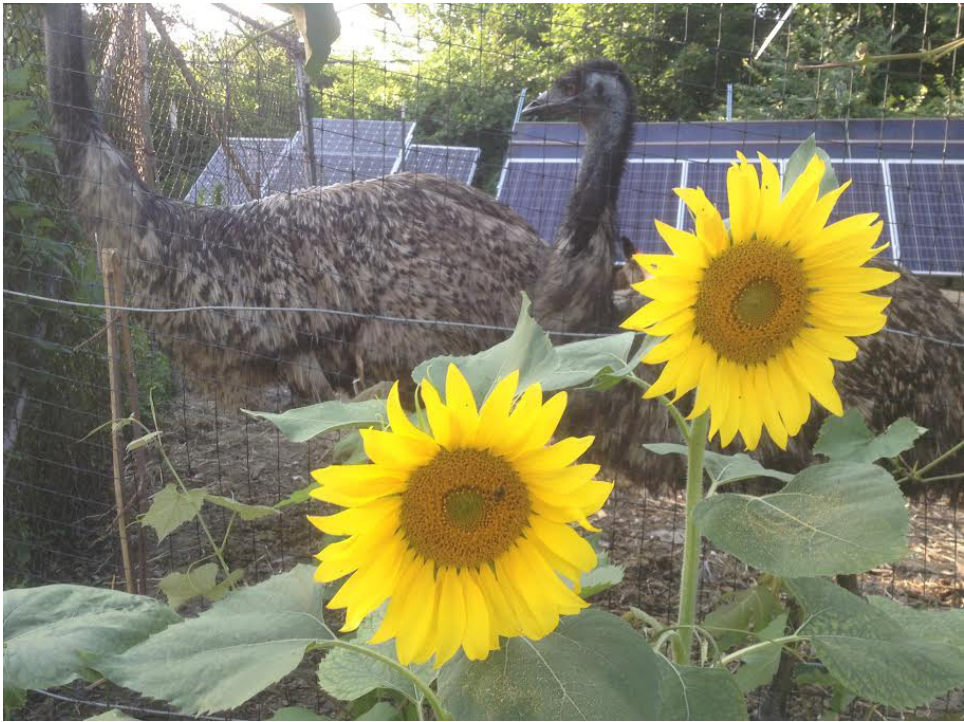
A: So you're more interested in working with businesses in the city.

N: Yes, we also have a cooperative CSA that we do. We are one of 6 farms in City Commons, and we do a CSA, Community Supported Agriculture, that runs from June through October. This is our 4th or 5th year being part of City Commons and we have about 100 members who pick up boxes of produce from us every week. We meet here at Food Field twice a week as a cooperative to pack out stuff up and go together to different pick up sites around the city, and then we coordinate all of the logistical, administrative stuff between us, to figure out the



Garlic & sweet potatoes







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finances and the membership list, the communications, marketing and all of that stuff. That is a cooperative thing that were doing outside of the direct sales that we're doing on our own.

A: So if I was a member, I would pay and then each week I would get fresh produce?

N: Yes, as a model, you would pay upfront to support the farm or a group of farms, and you get a selection of the best stuff that is in season all through the major growing season.

A: That's also a nice learning experience for people if you do it for a year, and you can learn about the different things are in season and when.

N: Yeah, its definitely a way to get more connected with where your food is coming from and what is seasonal and learn about new food you haven't tried before, new recipes, etc.

A: How does the surrounding community interact with your farm?

N: Wait, one second, I have some customers.

A: No problem....

N: Okay, that will probably be the last interaction.

A: No problem. I was just wondering, because I heard of some other farms that are kind of community based, or supported a lot by the community as far as time working there and stuff. Does that come into play at your farm?

N: Ours is not the same as other community farms in the city, so, I told you about our neighborhood. It's kind of empty, so we don't have a lot of community involvement. We are trying to get more neighbors out here to get produce or take them out to dinners or events we do. We also have some neighbors or neighborhood kids who come out and help or just play with the animals or hang out. But compared to other farms, we are focused primarily on production rather than community building. For us, it has just been a big challenge to keep everything going, since we're running it as a for profit farm, to be able to grow and sell enough to be able to pay the bills and pay the labor.

A: Understood. So, do you ever work with the

concept of the "time bank"?

N: We pay people in cash, or we have volunteers who come and work for part of the day and then take home extra produce. We're also happy to do work trade and that kind of thing, depending on what people need. We don't have any type of formal time bank thing, but you should talk to Alice, one of our other CSA growers. She works for a time bank in the city. I think a lot of people do the time bank informally, but it's interesting to see some more formal organized time banks set up like the one she runs.

A: How do you think that the urban farming movement is influencing the new developments that are happening in Detroit right now?

N: Well, I think that it's getting a lot of attention and it's part of this growing awareness about our food systems and the benefit of local food, local economies and sustainable growing. More people are taking that into account. I will say that there are a lot of businesses and efforts in the city that are kind of capitalizing on this interest in urban farming without actually supporting urban farmers.

A: What do you mean?

N: Well, the city will talk about all the exciting things happening in Detroit and talk about the urban farming movement, and all the people who are involved with that and all the benefits, but then they'll come back to Detroit and not do anything to actually support to growers, or they are even protecting policies that deny farmers access to land, or maintain enforcement on certain things that deal with blight and zoning and those kinds of things.

A: I could see that, yeah.

N: On the other side, there are also tons of businesses that are doing as much as they can to support the urban farming movement in the city and are opening up specifically around what farms like us are doing.

A: I want to ask you another kind of long question; many people I am surrounded by at the moment are speaking about what it means to envision a future anymore. There seems to be a kind of blight of imagination that allows us to produce an idea of the





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future. I know that sounds kind of strange, but I think that it has something to do with the kinds of films we are seeing about the future, and how most of the time it is this dystopian landscape or cityscape, similar to what Detroit looked like about 10 years ago actually. Haha. You know?

N: Right, haha.

A: And I, um, I'm kind of interested in how things are changing there. I was living and working in the city for a while before I moved to Geneva in 2014, and after I moved to Geneva, suddenly, it seems like there is now a much more distinct push towards imagining a future for Detroit. Something that as moved past this kind of dystopic landscape, where there is no hope. It's almost like the city as lived in a science fiction film already, and we are ready now to move out of it to something new. I think a lot of it is because of things like urban farming and a lot of the other community based initiatives that are happening in the city. Do you think that as well?

N: Yeah, I think you're right. So, Detroit is kind of ahead of a lot of other cities, in terms of already sort of hitting rock bottom and needing to then imagine a future and that's part of what makes it really great to live here, because people are constantly thinking about what the future of Detroit looks like, by necessity, and really looking critically at what is happening in the city and what kind of future we want it to be. Do we want to be encouraging the kinds of developments we are seeing now? Do we want to be rebuilding the neighborhoods? Do we need to be thinking strategically? Like Detroit Future City project, in terms of new kinds of neighborhoods, um, that incorporate mixed use and urban farms and low income and high income housing, and retail and blue green infrastructure and all that stuff. It's good that we're talking about that kind of stuff. It's nice that we are all talking about what comes next, although not everybody in the city agrees, there is a lot of resistance to change still.

A: I only did two interviews with people from Detroit so far, you and the East Side Riders, this custom bike club that comes out of the East Side. They play a big role in the custom bike movement that is happening in the city right now. In both these interviews, I wanted to speak about Detroit and how it has gone through so much and it is continuously

going through a lot, but it had a period of about 50 years where time seemed to stand still. The fact that we had this moment allowed the city to now plan for a future in more critical and careful way. There seems to be a lot of community influence and influence from the locals and native Detroiters who are there on the way that the city develops. It is quite beautiful, for instance how they are working with the old historical buildings. Instead of flattening them out and building something new, they are renovating them. It is keeping the spirit of Detroit there, and it's history. I'm interested in talking about how to protect what is happening now and allowing that to lay a foundation as Detroit continues to develop into the future.

N: Yeah, I think it's the kind of city where it's a lot more difficult to just live complacently without thinking about what's happening in the city and to go about your life. Everyone here is really involved in one way or another with what's happening in the city as a whole.

- Interview between Ashley Cook and Noah Link, July 2017

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Food Field is now run by Noah Link, Alex Bryan, Nick Jones and a dog named Henry.

“Our goal is to join in the revitalization of Detroit by developing a successful, community-based business and to meet the need for local, affordable, sustainably produced food here. We believe in a triple bottom line setting environmental, social, and economic goals, all of which an urban farm contributes to. Our priority is to produce fresh, healthy, and delicious food while improving the neighborhood and creating economic opportunities.

We believe it is important to operate as a business to show that organic, urban agriculture can be economically viable. While sustainable farming and gardening does bring a variety of other benefits, we must be able to create an alternative and not merely a supplement to our industrialized food system.”

<http://www.foodfielddetroit.com/>

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