

# Street Farm: Growing Food, Jobs, and Hope on the Urban Frontier

By Michael Ableman; Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, Vermont

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**F**armer and author Michael Ableman writes about the specifics of urban farming but also reflects upon the bigger lessons he has learned as a veteran nonprofit organizer of food-related organizations. The combination offers something to readers interested in food issues as well as to those involved in organizations with other charitable missions.

In 2009, the Vancouver nonprofit United We Can approached Ableman about establishing urban farms in that city's Downtown Eastside area. The region encompasses some of Vancouver's most challenged neighborhoods, and one goal was to bring fresh food and jobs to the people who lived there. Ableman partnered with United We Can's Seann Dory to carry out the project. The result is Sole Food Farms, a total of five acres divided among four separate locations.

Part of what makes Sole Food Farms remarkable is that all crops are planted in large movable containers arranged on pavement where gas stations, restaurants, industrial areas, and the like once operated. Unlikely as it may seem, this was the most realistic approach. Finding urban areas with soil healthy enough for direct planting was virtually impossible. Also, as in most big cities, real estate is at a premium. Development or sale of the properties is always a possibility, so planting movable crops was practical.

Today, the farms generate 25 tons of fresh produce per year which is sold locally at five farmers' markets and to more than thirty restaurants. The group also operates a community supported agriculture program and donates up to \$20,000 worth of produce per year to community kitchens. There are 25 employees from the neighborhoods, several of whom have worked with the program from the beginning. Sole Food Farms is one of North America's largest urban farm initiatives. One of the farms is planted in fruit trees and is sometimes referred to as the largest urban orchard in the world. Ableman isn't

sure about that, however, he does speculate that it is the largest urban orchard planted in containers.

Experienced in both urban and rural farming, Ableman's narrative on making Sole Food Farms a reality is interspersed with his observations and insights on issues that are common to most charitable nonprofit organizations.

**Write it down.** Ableman says that writing one's goals and intentions in detail is a powerful act that makes you think clearly about where you want to go and how to get there. In doing so, "... you open up possibilities for help to arrive in many ways and from many directions."

**If necessary, rewrite your vision.** As Ableman and Dory began to excavate the layers of complexity in making the farms a reality, they encountered several false starts, but they rewrote their vision, sought the necessary support, and kept moving forward.

**Maintain good relationships.** In the case of Sole Food Farms, good relationships with landlords have been crucial. "Leases are merely the documents that present a set of legal terms; relationships secure those terms and provide a supportive environment for the work," says Ableman. Fostering good relationships with donors

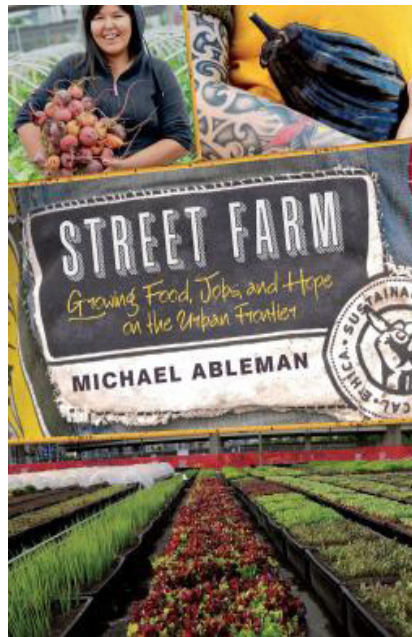
and advisors is, of course, also crucial, along with educating them about your work.

**Diverse partnerships are essential.** Ableman says that urban agriculture is "the ultimate social, political, nutritional, and financial collaboration between municipal government, private and public landowners, foundations and individual funders, and the community of eaters we supply."

**Resist pressure to cut corners.** Under time pressure to get the first crops planted, Ableman consented to use thin plywood planters that came apart within a year in the damp Vancouver weather.

**Be aware of visibility.** The farms' crops and hoop houses are visible to the public from train tracks,

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highway overpasses, and other vantage points which spreads awareness of the project. But the disintegrating plywood boxes made a shabby appearance. A generous supporter covered the cost of new, more durable boxes.

### **Accept workers' challenges.**

Workers at Sole Food Farms may struggle daily with addiction, mental illness, homelessness, and poverty. While some drift away, others find stability there and develop work skills and knowledge. Ableman admits it "...can be difficult to let go and allow those you have mentored to go on and surpass you. But it's what keeps the world spinning..."

*Street Farm* includes captivating color photographs of the farms and its workers. Some views show ranks of lush planters on expansive parking lots bounded by streets, train tracks, and Vancouver's towering citiscape. Others are unexpectedly artistic such as one that frames an extravagantly tattooed arm cradling a flawless eggplant.

Although Sole Food Farms has had many successes, the enterprise is not yet self-supporting. Ableman is too experienced to be starry-eyed. He writes as a realist who has learned from mistakes, who moves the organization forward one day at a time, who applies expertise, expects hard work, and knows that successes may be smaller than hoped for but are still to be savored. Even for readers not involved in food issues, *Street Farm* is an engaging story of hard work, formidable odds, and abundant possibilities.

Iowa. At the Buchanan Community Foundation there is the Edna Mae and Don Adams Scholarship Fund that awards "financial assistance to students from East Buchanan Community Schools and Independence Community Schools pursuing higher education."

A funder that is oriented toward private schools in Iowa is the "school tuition organization", or STO, which is an Iowa charitable organization that is exempt from federal taxation under section 501(c)(3) and which does all of the following: (1) Allocates at least ninety percent of its annual revenue in tuition grants for children to allow them to attend a qualified school of their parents' choice, (2) Only awards tuition grants to children who reside in Iowa, (3) Provides tuition grants to students without limiting availability to only students of one school, (4) Only provides tuition grants to eligible students, and (5) Prepares an annual reviewed financial statement certified by a public accounting firm. (Iowa Code 422.115(6)(c))

An example of an STO in Iowa is the Northwest Iowa Christian School Tuition Organization. The organization covers sixteen schools. Iowa taxpayers who donate to STOs are eligible for a tax credit equal to 65 percent of the total contribution. The Iowa Department of Revenue did a study of the effectiveness of the STO in Iowa in 2012 and found that over 46,000 scholarships with a value of \$41 million were awarded under the STO program since 2006. (See <https://tax.iowa.gov/sites/files/idr/STO%20Evaluation%20Study.pdf> )

Iowa also has a number of organizations that provide oversight and guidance for various educational disciplines. The Iowa Alliance for Arts Education was created in the 1980's when "restricted state funds for school districts... resulted in massive layoffs of art and music

teachers especially at the elementary level." The group works to keep arts and music programs going in Iowa schools.

Another such organization is the Iowa Council for the Social Studies. Its primary efforts are dedicated to professional development for teachers of social studies. Various employees within the school system have support organizations such as the School Administrators of Iowa, and Iowa Technology and Education Connection.

Support systems are in place in our state to encourage learning beyond the classroom. The Iowa Afterschool Alliance (IAA) exists so that "children, youth, and



families will have access to quality out-of-school time opportunities in their community." The IAA website lists a number of active programs around the state such as literacy, STEM, the arts, and assistance with homework. (See <https://www.iowaafterschoolalliance.org/afterschool-programs/>)

Iowa's Department of Education issued a summary of survey findings on the benefits, issues, and demands related to after school programs in Iowa. (The report is available at <https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/Afterschool%20in%20Iowa%20Summary%20Report.pdf>)

Public schools and universities fulfill many educational needs in Iowa. Iowa's nonprofits are also central players in providing funding and expanding the learning of our children and young adults.