Weekly Farmers Market Grows! Bridge Card, Project Fresh, & Double Up Food Bucks Take Hold.

In its second full season, the Wayne State Wednesday Market has become a regular feature of WSU’s campus during summer and fall. Despite weeks of blistering heat and enervating humidity in July and August this year, regular and new customers turned out with characteristic enthusiasm. They were richly rewarded for their labors: the heat and good rainfall earlier in the season have resulted in many harvests arriving at the market much earlier than usual.

The first 12 weeks of the Wednesday market saw more than 1,000 customers on average (1,241 for the first four weeks before the heat wave struck), each spending an average of $10 to $12. Customer counts are expected to rise when school starts back up. Bridge Card users, majority of them students, also together spent more than $300 each week. The Bridge Card allows impoverished individuals and households to buy food.

We also saw more Project Fresh coupons (Farmers Market Nutrition Program) this season, having already redeemed $230 at the market over its first four weeks (compared to $220 for the entire season last year). Project Fresh helps community members at greater risk of under-nutrition (children, pregnant and new mothers, and seniors) buy fruits and vegetables from Michigan farmers.

Farmers also earned more than $1,400 of Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) during the program’s first three weeks this season. DUFB matches Bridge Card spending at the market dollar for dollar (up to a maximum of $20 per customer per day), and is applicable for spending only at Detroit farmers markets and other select locations this year. DUFB is sponsored by the Fair Food Network which raised money through a variety of public and private sources. Browse www.doubleupfoodbucks.org.

Although the dollar figures involved in these programs are relatively modest, they represent an important benefit—convenient access to fresh, affordable, local food—to our customers, most of whom study or work at WSU. It’s yet another thing in which Wayne Staters can take pride, besides the fact that the university makes higher education more accessible to the region’s residents.

We’re also pleased to welcome new vendors at the market. Greg Willerer of Brother Nature Produce, who sold as part of the Grown in Detroit Cooperative last year, now sells salad mixes and ready-to-eat salads at his own booth. Sweet Potato Sensations, staffed by the always-cheerful Charice Thomas, is an African-American-owned Detroit business selling a variety of baked goods and ice cream made with sweet potatoes. The regulars from last year are still around, minus N. W. Kaltz and Sons and

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Editor’s note: Every Fall, SEEDLING contains a supplement in which SEED Wayne participants tell us why they choose to give time to the program and what they get out of it. We hope that their stories will inspire readers to volunteer for SEED Wayne and other sustainability initiatives on campus and in the city.

Scenes from the 2010 market. Bottom left, Youth Growing Detroit participants who bring their produce to the Grown in Detroit stall. Bottom right, frequent visitors, including young Lamont visiting with his adult relatives from Detroit Public Library.
Farmers Market, cont’d from Page 1

Nantais Farm. Grown in Detroit and D-Town Farm bring fresh, Detroit-grown produce to every market. Van Houtte Farms offers a wide variety of fruits and vegetables spread over two booths. Holtz Farm’s heirloom potatoes and tomatoes, onions, eggs, and other products also draw customers. Ridley Orchards is the market’s fruit station and includes multiple types of apples. Vang Family Farm’s ethnic vegetables used in Asian cuisines attract many international students and staff. And then there are the delectables in the form of Avalon breads, cookies, and bars; Bizzy Lizzy’s flourless cookies, muffins, and granola; Green Barn Llama’s desert sauces; and Green Toe Gardens’ raw, local honey. Detroit’s Russell Deli often has long lines as hungry lunch-goers await tasty soups and wraps.

To serve customers who wished to support the market but were unable to make it down every week, three students developed a market delivery pilot project called Farm Fresh Express. Sam Molnar, Stephanie Inson, and Jasmine Ligenza-Posante set up logistics to inform shoppers of the market’s inventory and take and deliver orders. Implementing tasks while also juggling work schedules posed challenges which were overcome with agility. A six-week trial period (July 7 through August 18), saw orders totaling just under $100 each week. Although customers served by the project were satisfied, the project’s labor-intensive nature and the intensity and variety of our marketing efforts.

Initially, we surmised that students’ absence and staff vacations during June and July were the most likely cause of the low counts. However, the August market, when the medical school was already two weeks into its semester, saw fewer customers than the one in July. Perhaps it’s that monthly markets are harder than weekly ones for customers to remember and incorporate into their food shopping routines. We plan to examine the causes for the low turnout at the School of Medicine Farmers Market so far this season and assess the best ways to capture the great potential that exists at the location, next year.

Another lesson—albeit a harder one —this season came from the School of Medicine (monthly—Third Thursday) Farmers Market. Despite the great success of two pilot markets last year suggesting possible attendance comparable to the main campus market, this market averaged only 770 customers over June-August. Many vendors barely were able to cover their costs of participating at the market. This low showing is puzzling given the density of people near the market location and the intensity and variety of our marketing efforts.

Below: Program leader Will Ahee and allotee Alieu Darboe welcome DAN bike tour members at SEED Wayne’s St. Andrew’s Garden on WSU’s campus. DAN Garden Tour visits St. Andrew’s Garden

On August 4, more than twenty members attending the annual Detroit Agriculture Network tour of gardens visited St. Andrew’s Allotment Garden as part of the midtown bike tour. They were among the approximately six hundred visitors who attended the tour.

The tour featured small and large gardens developed by Detroit groups to grow food and share it with neighbors, clean up neighborhoods and make them safer and more beautiful, and engage young people and seniors in urban agriculture. With Detroit’s economic downturn over the last couple of years, neighborhoods are witness to even greater distress. More Detroit lots become vacant as old, abandoned homes are demolished and newer ones are foreclosed. The gardens allow residents not only to put a brave face on the many challenges posed by the economy, but also to cope with them.

SEED Wayne’s Kami Pothukuchi and Melby Pearson and partner Professor Shawn McElmurry enjoyed the gardens featured on the mid-city tour encompassing Hamtramck and near-Northeast Detroit neighborhoods. Program Leader Will Ahee and St. Andrew’s allotee Alieu Darboe held the fort on campus to talk to tour visitors to our garden. Both groups experienced good dialogues and reported great satisfaction with the visits.

The annual tour is put on by the Detroit Agriculture Network with support from the Garden Resource Program Collaborative and the Greening of Detroit. It is led by Ashley Atkinson, who has maintained this great city tradition first started by David Hacker and then followed by Jason Fligger, both of the now defunct Hunger Action Coalition.
I am a student in Wayne State University’s School of Library and Information Science. I began volunteering with SEED Wayne in Fall 2009 as part of a class project to explore ways libraries can partner with community and/or nonprofit groups or campus groups with similar missions. I enjoyed the project so much that I continued on with SEED Wayne in 2010, both as a volunteer at the farmers market as well as a gardener at the St. Andrew’s Allotment Garden.

This season, I am growing tomatoes, melons, squash, cucumbers and more at the St. Andrew’s Garden, and am counting and surveying customers and helping with other tasks, for a few hours each week, at the Wayne State Wednesday Farmers Market.

I see my participation in SEED Wayne as a great chance to network with other students, faculty, and staff from WSU, as well as other workers and residents from the Midtown neighborhood, whom I meet at the farmers market. Often, the shoppers ask about my major or why I’m volunteering there. I explain that I am a library science student looking for ways that public and academic libraries can take on an active role in the community. They are almost always surprised that a library/librarian would branch out like that. This gives me an opportunity to let people know how libraries can be more than just a building with books and computers. Libraries are about helping a community’s residents cultivate skills and capacities to learn more about, and become more competent in, the world in which they live. This process can happen in many places and many ways.

This goal of libraries parallels a key SEED Wayne goal which is to cultivate people’s knowledge and capacity to create a more self-reliant and just community food system. Librarians can also help advance this goal. To me, the issues of food justice that SEED Wayne works to resolve are just as important as the education and information-access problems often found in urban, low-income areas that librarians work to resolve. I appreciate the opportunity to bridge the two issues and to spread awareness of the importance of libraries and food justice.

I met Kami Pothukuchi, SEED Wayne Director and Associate Professor of Urban Planning, in 2009. I had just joined the University as the Wood Shop Supervisor for the Art Department. She approached me to see if SEED Wayne could use the Wood Shop to build the garden beds used at St. Andrew’s Allotment Garden, and also if I could help install a sign for the Warrior Demonstration Garden.

Immediately I was intrigued. I had always heard about urban farming but didn’t know that it had already taken a foothold in Detroit. Detroit is rich with communities working to make a difference in our changing world. However, we rarely seem to hear about them. It seems to me that SEED Wayne is becoming a connecting thread within these communities, including those at the University.

Since Spring and Summer 2009 when we assembled the garden beds for St. Andrew’s Garden and two garden signs, I have volunteered my help on some of their other construction projects, like the garden on the rooftop of Parking Structure 5. Garden beds here are designed with polycarbonate roofs that capture and channel rainwater into barrels that irrigate the beds with a drip irrigation system.

Many of the farming techniques that are being tried on campus are blending some old ideas with the new. Doing this always creates new problems to solve. But by solving them, new ideas come to life. By solving the problems that arise in creating new farming techniques, new ideas come to life. Robert Taormina is the Supervisor of the Wood Shop at the James Pearson Duffy Department of Art and Art History.
Connecting with SEED Wayne makes me feel like I’m making a difference. Danny Vahaba is a student who volunteers at the Wayne State University Farmers Markets.

I got involved with SEED Wayne because I thought it was a magnificent idea that could use some support. I have lived near campus for the greater part of three years now. When word got out in 2008 that there’d be a farmers’ market on campus, I knew that I wanted to be a part of it. It’s been great to get to know the local farmers in Detroit and from the surrounding region. It’s a great feeling being able to see the people that are producing the food you eat.

Additionally, I got involved with SEED Wayne because there is no comparable student organization that lends a hand to the city, on the issues that SEED Wayne addresses and with the approach that the program takes.

Volunteering with student organizations has played a large role in my academic career. SEED Wayne has taught me about things—for example, why it is important to build agriculture and food systems in the city and the surrounding region—that I might not have been exposed to if I was not involved. It has also allowed me to meet and get to know an eclectic bunch of students, faculty, and staff at Wayne State whom I might not have otherwise had the pleasure of meeting.

Since taking up residency as a student, connecting myself to SEED Wayne, and being able to help out the citizens of Detroit and students of Wayne State University through SEED Wayne’s various projects such as the farmers’ market and the gardens around campus, makes me feel like I’m making a difference. SEED Wayne is definitely one of the most meaningful groups that I’ve had the fortune of being a part of.

Readers are invited to submit news on teaching, research, engagement, or operations of interest to SEED Wayne. To learn more, write to k.pothukuchi@wayne.edu

My participation in SEED Wayne has helped me better understand the need for more and better food options in this city.

Charles Lisee is a student who volunteers in the campus gardens, WSU Farmers Markets, & Detroit FRESH. Recently, he was hired by SEED Wayne for a few hours weekly; he continues to volunteer as well.

As a student who moved to the area to attend Wayne State University, my soul was searching for an outlet in which I could get involved, and to which I could contribute my skills while learning new ones. I found these opportunities when I began to volunteer for SEED Wayne. I continue to participate in SEED Wayne—this is my second year—because it rings true to my need to contribute to the greater good that the organization advances on campus and in the community.

My involvement started with volunteering at St. Andrew’s Allotment and Warrior Demonstration Gardens and the WSU Farmers Markets in 2009. This year, along with a few other students, I leased a bed at St. Andrew’s Garden. I continue to give time to the farmers markets and Detroit FRESH, the Healthy Corner Stores Project.

I have found that working in the garden and getting my hands in the dirt is good therapy, it gives me a sense of being connected to Mother Earth and the amazing grace that she provides. It feels good knowing that I am reducing my carbon footprint and treating my body with respect by not ingesting pesticides, herbicides and other harmful chemicals. I feel a great sense of accomplishment and satisfaction when I harvest a vegetable that started out as a seed. There is nothing more delicate than watching a seed grow into a plant and that plant producing delicious, edible vegetables that I share with friends, family, and neighbors in celebration.

My participation in SEED Wayne has helped me better understand the need for more and better food options in this city. I see the joy and delight on shoppers’ faces as they handle, select, and purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at the farmers market. In walking up and down Detroit’s neighborhoods that are underserved by grocery stores to encourage residents to ask for fresh produce in their corner stores, I am struck by what it means to have few decent food choices available nearby.

Through these experiences, I know that I am making a difference in not only my life but also in the lives of other students, neighbors, and community members. It’s a pleasure to share with others the fresh, local food alternatives and the independence they create from the status-quo, corporate food systems that are simply in it for profit.
Campus and Community Gardeners meet over Food

On July 19, gardener-members of the Garden Resource Program Collaborative from nearby neighborhoods visited with SEED Wayne gardeners at the St. Andrew’s Allotment Garden on campus. Produce from St. Andrew’s Garden was barbecued on site along with hot dogs and burgers; many members also brought dishes to pass. This potluck is one of many organized by the GRPC to bring together gardeners in the city to share experiences with one another while celebrating and sharing their harvests. The barbecue helped showcase SEED Wayne’s activities, including the farmers market, the gardens, and Detroit FRESH. Most if not all of the visitors had already been to the farmers market. They also admired the efforts of St. Andrew’s gardeners. In turn, SEED Wayne members learned more about the GRPC and the many events and workshops it organizes over the season.

St. Andrew’s gardeners also organize potlucks throughout the season during which students offer workshops on a variety of topics of interest.

2nd Annual Farm Tour Inspires and Challenges

On August 15, 38 SEED Wayne student members and friends from partner organizations AVI Foodsystems, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, Earthworks Urban Farm, and the Garden Resource Program Collaborative toured three farms that participate in the WSU Farmers Markets, and Maple Creek, the region’s first community supported agriculture (CSA) farm.

Starting with Brother Nature Farm in Detroit, the group visited Van Houtte Farms and Vang Family Farm, ending up at Maple Creek Farm, which is a USDA-certified organic farm.

The tour was educational, awe-inspiring, and challenging all at the same time. It showcased the significant effort, creativity, and commitment on the part of farmers to grow and sell food locally. All had devised specific strategies to earn revenues over the season. They also challenged us to think about the manifold barriers small farmers faced and personal sacrifices they themselves endured.

For example, Michelle and Danny Lutz of Maple Creek were heart-breakingly forthright about their relative poverty despite a basic livelihood for farmers being at the core of the CSA concept. “A couple of weeks like this—hot and no rain—and we’ll go under,” warned Michelle.

Mark Your Calendars and Spread the Word

September

September 11, 5 to 8 PM: Earthworks Urban Farm Annual Harvest Dinner. Reserve your seat soon; for details, call 313-579-2100, x204, or browse www.csldetroit.org/EWG

September 25, 12 noon to 6 PM: Detroit Black Community Food Security Network Harvest Festival. At D-Town Farm. www.detroitblackfoodsecurity.org

October

October 1, 5:00 PM: 3rd Annual SEED Wayne Harvest Dinner. SEED Wayne members/partners get priority for limited seating. Free for WSU students, with valid WSU ID; $5 for all others. To reserve a seat, write w.ahee@wayne.edu

October 15-17: Great Lakes Bioneers Conference. Marygrove College, browse www.glbd.org

November

Date TBD: Putting the gardens to bed, Warrior Demonstration Garden and St. Andrew’s Allotment Garden. For details (forthcoming), browse www.clas.wayne.edu/seedwayne

The Garden Resource Program Collaborative offers a variety of workshops related to agriculture, Sept-Dec. Browse www.detroitagriculture.org
An important goal of Detroit FRESH is to connect the 22 corner stores that participate in the program to residents who live nearby, to inform residents of the availability of fresh produce in the stores and encourage them to buy produce from there—as last minute additions to meals or healthier substitutes for candy or chips.

Our strategy for community outreach in the initial program design was threefold: one, store-based marketing to shoppers to encourage them to inform neighbors about the availability of fresh produce; two, outreach to nearby churches, schools, and other neighborhood institutions to inform residents about the program and seek feedback; and three, door-to-door organizing to inform residents of the availability of fresh produce in nearby stores and learn about their experiences with the stores.

Our attempts to implement these elements, however, confronted several challenges in the neighborhoods containing participating stores. One, given the many crises that neighborhood institutions in Detroit are addressing, it was harder to engage leaders than originally anticipated. The ones we connected to were understandably reluctant to post fliers advertising the availability of fresh produce in liquor stores that continue to be purveyors of a variety of addictive substances.

As a result of these experiences, our community outreach strategy has now been sharpened into two major thrusts beyond store-based marketing. One is a broad citywide outreach approach to inform community leaders—including religious leaders—about Detroit FRESH more generally, and seek their input and feedback to improve the program. The other is a more neighborhood-focused approach that urges residents, including youth, to both ask for fresh food in their neighborhood stores as well as to consume more fresh produce by substituting fresh fruits and vegetables for candy and chips and other types of junk foods typically purchased in these stores. This strategy is starting to yield results.

Over the last several weeks, program leaders Christa Powell, Mebby Pearson, and more recently Charles Lisee, along with director Kami Pothukuchi have spoken to many community groups and at public agency forums to inform leaders, gain feedback and seek new partners, while also canvassing store neighborhoods to learn more about how residents interact with corner stores and to encourage them to see these stores as sources of fresh and healthy foods. These dialogues have produced ideas for new neighborhoods in which to consider recruiting stores, new avenues for community outreach, and new sources for fresh produce for the stores.