

9-1-2010

## Homegrown in Detroit

Amy Oprean  
*Wayne State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/newscience>

---

### Recommended Citation

Oprean, Amy (2010) "Homegrown in Detroit," *New Science*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 12.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/newscience/vol18/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Science by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.



Oprean: Homegrown in Detroit



# Homegrown

by Amy Oprean

As cities across the country experiment with different approaches to urban agriculture and local food systems, one Wayne State researcher has become an important player in a city-wide movement to make Detroit the model city for food sustainability.

Kami Pothukuchi, Ph.D., associate professor of urban planning in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, is the director of SEED Wayne, a volunteer-based organization dedicated to building sustainable food systems on the campus of Wayne State University and in Detroit communities. Through a dedicated core group of staff, volunteers and community partners, SEED Wayne approaches its goal through research projects on and off campus that explore Detroit's potential for sustainability.

"We're working to figure out what a campus like Wayne State can do to support urban agriculture and sustainable food systems – and we're finding out that we can do a lot," Pothukuchi said.

A sustainable food system uses practices that are environmentally, economically and nutritionally beneficial to the local community; embody principles of social equity; and builds community capacity.

SEED Wayne's activities focus on improving community access to healthy food, strengthening the local economy by supporting local growers and encouraging people in the community to take an active role in decisions that affect their food systems. This is done through on-campus programs such as SEED Wayne's two urban gardens and a weekly farmers market, and off-campus projects in partnership with institutions that are



# in Detroit

well-established in the city's food system such as Eastern Market, the Capuchin Soup Kitchen and the Greening of Detroit.

An important component of SEED Wayne's projects is "action research" – documentation, analysis and experimentation to overcome the obstacles of the programs as they arise. "I think an important role of universities is to develop pilot programs to understand what is possible and demonstrate how ideas for sustainability can be carried out," she said. "There's no formula or model that we can use as a reference; we're creating the knowledge base right now."

One such working model is "healthy corner stores," a pilot program taking place in the neighborhood around the Capuchin Soup Kitchen on Detroit's east side. Pothukuchi connected three liquor stores with local produce distributors to test out the viability of selling fresh fruits and vegetables in a neighborhood that does not have a full-scale grocery store. The project hasn't gone without a fair share of challenges, including equipping stores not accustomed to selling produce and marketing the food. "People are not used to buying healthy food in corner stores," Pothukuchi said. "Part of our task is to help change the perception and make sure people are aware of what's available."

Pothukuchi hopes to incorporate "mobile markets," a program initiated by the Earth Works Urban Farm, in which volunteers buy produce from Eastern Market and deliver it to liquor stores to sell. "Once we have a few stores that are functioning well, we can build a distribution system," Pothukuchi said. "Then, with a little

W

"We're working to figure out what a campus like Wayne State can do to support urban agriculture and sustainable food systems – and we're finding out that we can do a lot."

— Dr. Kami Pothukuchi

entrepreneurship, the system could transform into a self-sustaining business."

SEED Wayne is also working with Shawn McElmurry, assistant professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering in the College of Engineering, to develop a roof top garden on a Wayne State parking structure. In addition to providing produce, this "green roof" would help reduce temperatures on the parking structure, reduce the reflective glare that contributes to global warming and absorb rainwater that would otherwise flood the storm water system. "There isn't another system out there that is lightweight, mitigates heat and wind and collects rainwater; we are designing it from scratch," Pothukuchi said.

The collaboration is also actively researching air-borne lead deposition in gardens, a proven health

## About Dr. Kami Pothukuchi:

Dr. Pothukuchi received her B.Arch from University of Mumbai, India. She received her M.U.P, M.Arch and Ph. D. in Urban, Technological, and Environmental Planning from the University of Michigan. She joined Wayne State University in 1998.

hazard to those working in the garden and eating its products. The results of the research will be of interest to the many organizations in Detroit working to turn much of the city's vacant land into farms and gardens.

"There's a lot of good news to be told when it comes to urban agriculture in Detroit," Pothukuchi said. "What we're doing at SEED Wayne is really one of many efforts. Detroit has a constellation of organizations that work collaboratively even as they have their own independent interests and initiatives in the community."

Research is a very important aspect of what SEED Wayne does, but so are education, engagement and operations. "With all of these components working together, we can succeed in engaging the community and improving the way people live right now, while also developing and testing models that can be applied to other neighborhoods of Detroit, and ultimately, other cities," Pothukuchi said.

To learn more, visit:

<http://www.clas.wayne.edu/seedwayne/>

