



## URBAN TREE CONNECTION

Urban Tree Connection (UTC) works with residents in Philadelphia's historically marginalized urban communities to transform abandoned open spaces into safe and functional places that inspire and promote positive human interaction. Founded in 1989 and incorporated in 1997, UTC works primarily with residents of West Philadelphia's Haddington neighborhood to develop community-driven greening and gardening projects on vacant land. Over the past 15 years, UTC has partnered with Haddington residents to redevelop 29 vacant lots, totaling more than 86,000 square feet of land. Together, we have repurposed these spaces for communal growing and gathering, produced and distributed sustainably grown vegetables in neighborhoods with food insecurity, and led participatory education workshops to multigenerational groups in the community on topics of health and wellness, gardening, and food and environmental justice.



*Urban Farming and Gardening:* In 2009, UTC and three block captains founded Neighborhood Foods Farm (NF) as a positive solution to food insecurity and the growing number of abandoned lots in the neighborhood. After significant remediation, NF is now a fully functioning  $\frac{3}{4}$  acre farm. We have also developed a community-based micro-farm in collaboration with First African Presbyterian Church, and 27 other vacant lots have been converted into pocket parks, communal growing plots, and educational spaces. Together, these sites comprise a neighborhood food system that annually produces over 12,000 pounds of sustainably grown vegetables.



*Community-Led Farm Stands:* Our produce is distributed through community-led farm markets in locations where residents have limited or no access to healthy produce. We engage customers with limited incomes, offering them produce at an affordable price, encouraging the use of subsidized payments like EBT/Access and senior vouchers. All of our farm stands are managed by neighborhood residents, and we provide workforce development training so Stand Managers can learn how to run a farm stand, handle food safely, and build a customer base.



*Community Education Programs:* Rooted in popular education methodologies, our education programs promote health, wellness, and leadership development. Youth programs include children's garden education and a paid Teen Apprenticeship where youth gain skills and mentorship in the areas of farming, leadership development, and food justice. For adults and families, we host monthly workshops and provide technical assistance and resources to local community gardeners. All community members are welcome to participate in our work-share program, where they volunteer at the farm in exchange for a share in the week's harvest.

Urban Tree Connection has also incubated Neighborhood Foods Coop, a community-led initiative of local residents who helped found Neighborhood Foods Farm and other community gardens. The group meets monthly to share resources, host community events, and run the Neighborhood Foods farm stand.



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exemptions, pathways to land security and ownership, and the need for transparent policies regarding the Land Bank's Strategic Plan and Disposition Policies.



*Impact & Growing Community Leadership:* Nykisha Madison (pictured far left) got involved with UTC in 2014 through her children, who took part in our gardening education programs. Nykisha's children attended programs at our Pearl Street garden, which is essentially their backyard. Nykisha is passionate about farming, community health, and wellness. She is particularly skilled in engaging neighborhood residents and developing partnerships. When encouraged by UTC's Garden Educator to attend our workshops, Nykisha found many kindred spirits who, like her, were already interested in growing food, but didn't know where to find space and support. The rest, as they say, is history! In 2015, Nykisha was hired by UTC to become the Garden Educator at Pearl Street garden, leading children's programming with the Veggie Kids (9-11 years old) and Sprouts (5-8 years old). The following spring, Nykisha took on more responsibilities as the Community Market Manager, where she now manages UTC's large USDA Farmer's Market Promotion grant. In this role, Nykisha has helped launch three new markets, trained over 13 residents to operate farm stands, and has cultivated partnerships with local community institutions to spread the word about the fresh, affordable and locally grown produce we are offering in Haddington. Nykisha continues to expand her leadership roles. In 2016, she was asked to join the Steering Committee of Pennsylvania Women's Agricultural Network.

*Forward Vision:* At UTC, we are reframing our understanding of why we engage in land reclamation and food work. We recognize the historical legacy and growing inequality around food and land access that strips communities of power, particularly those that are working class, poor, Black, and people of color. This current food system is broken – centering profit rather than health and livelihood, leaving people severely overweight, under-nourished, and suffering from diet-related illnesses and socio-economic stressors impacting quality of life. Haddington is an example of a vibrant, predominately Black (90%) neighborhood that faces these critical challenges. At UTC, we believe that community gardens and farms are a critical tool for building healthy neighborhoods and community power, particularly when the food production and distribution processes are democratized and when the community is leading the efforts. To get there, we are focusing our efforts on community leadership, skill development; and deep community engagement / stewardship through our community education programming – and primarily our Teen Apprenticeship Program.