

Refugee farmer development at Juniper Gardens Training Farm

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Abstract

The Juniper Gardens Training Farm is a partnership between Cultivate KC, Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas and the Kansas City, KS Housing Authority. The farm is in northeast Kansas City, KS in the middle of Kansas' oldest and largest public housing project. In 2020 the 9-acre site was home to a dozen community gardeners, 15 farm families in training, and three program graduates who lease plots and farm infrastructure for the growing season. The four-year farm incubation program (New Roots for Refugees), started in 2008, assists re-settled refugees in starting independent farm businesses on ¼ acre plots and provides four years of production, marketing, and business management skills through farm classes and one-on-one training from trained staff. As of 2019 we have graduated 32 farm families from the program, and over 80% of them are still growing and selling in the Kansas City Metro. Farmers in the program come from extremely different backgrounds, with varying levels of education, language and farming skills; thus, program training must remain dynamic to meet both farmer needs and the ever-changing agricultural environment they are growing in. We will present on our educational model, which has been developed to suit our refugee farmers, but can also be adapted to other non-English speakers and audiences with different educational levels. Training at Juniper Gardens starts in the winter with English classes, transitions into the spring with production planning and farm classes, and continues throughout the growing season with one-on-one field walks. Program funding is scaffolded in that trainees receive more financial assistance in the first year and this slowly decreases during their time in the program, so that by the fourth year they are prepared to incur these expenses once they are on their own. In the past year, more efforts have been made to scaffold the educational components of the program as well. English classes are offered at different levels based on skill level, frequency of field walks is based on years in the program and farmer preference, and farm classes vary in content based on skill and years in the program. One of the largest challenges is synchronizing all of the materials and data collection across different teaching methods (i.e., field walks, English classes, and farm classes). Throughout the years, our teaching methods have been altered and adapted, this presentation will focus on current best practices, but will also reflect on challenges and adaptation needs.

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INTRODUCTION

The structure of this manuscript is as follows: background about the farm site, information about the New Roots for Refugees program, structure of the program (a year in new roots, stair-stepped approach), followed by best practices and challenges.

FARM SITE

Juniper Gardens Training Farm, home site to New Roots for Refugees, is located minutes from downtown Kansas City. The farm is surrounded by both industrial and residential areas. The 9-acre site is owned and leased to us by the Kansas Housing Authority. Cultivate KC provides a shared greenhouse, washstand, coolers, and a few containers for equipment and supply storage. Each farmer has their own quarter acre plot that they farm for 4 years. 2020 was our 12th growing season at this site, we had 13 farmers-in-training on site, as well as 3 leasing graduates and 10 community gardeners. We have a tractor as well as several BCS walk-behind tractors and other

tools that the farmers have access to while on site. Cultivate KC operates an on-site seed and supply store that farmers can purchase from.

NEW ROOTS FOR REFUGEES PROGRAM

New Roots began in 2008 as a collaboration between Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas and Cultivate KC. Both organizations work to provide farmer training and market support to help farmers develop and maintain small farm businesses after graduation. This partnership really draws on the organizations' respective strengths; Catholic Charities does most of the refugee resettlement on the Kansas side, and has a lot of experience working with refugees, using interpreters, and teaching classes. Meanwhile Cultivate KC has a history of getting urban farming started in Kansas City, getting people involved in agriculture, training farmers, and managing farms.

Every year we train 13-16 farm families. Currently, there are seven languages spoken on the farm and four countries represented. To date the program has graduated 36 farmers, over 80% of these graduates are still farming. Farmers in the program sell through three sales outlets: farmers markets throughout the city and aggregated CSA and wholesale sales. Throughout their time in the program, we want farmers to learn about as many sales channels as possible, so that when they graduate, they can choose which sales outlets fit best with their family goals. In 2019 the total farm sales exceeded \$160,000. The dollar amount that a farmer makes generally increases throughout their time in the program. In the first year, they might only make a few thousand dollars and by year four some farmers near \$20,000 in sales.

Year-round program

The program is a year-round program. In February we start up all our farm classes and open up the greenhouse, we also help farmers fill out market applications. The farm classes take place once or twice a week, from February through March. These classes are taught in a classroom with interpreters present for the various language groups. We offer classes on topics such as: greenhouse production, food safety, sustainability, recordkeeping, sales and more.

Once April hits we transition from farm classes to one-on-one field walks with farmers. Farmers meet regularly (weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, depending on their year in the program) with Cultivate KC staff in their plots to assess production, ask questions, get advice, and share thoughts/reflections. Cultivate KC staff also checks in with farmers and helps them keep financial records for their farm business. Some markets begin to open in April, and aggregated sales (CSA and wholesale) begin in early/mid-May. Throughout their time in the program, farmers sell through three main sales outlets: farmer's markets, Community Supported Agriculture, and wholesale to restaurants. The latter two outlets are aggregated, meaning program staff purchases from all farmers in training and packs, delivers, and deals with marketing and invoicing. From April through October, farmers are mainly focused on sales and production, education is done through field walks, monthly all-farmer meetings, and occasional hands-on demonstrations/workshops.

In September and October, our season is starting to wind down and we begin to recruit new farmers into the program. We recruit refugees with some type of agricultural background – this could be subsistence farming, gardening, working on someone else's farm, or having sold produce at markets in their home countries. We mostly recruit by word of mouth, or through refugee resettlement organizations. Any interested farmer attends an informational meeting about the program; after it they are asked to go home, talk with their families, and think about whether they would like to join or not. If they are interested, they call program staff to schedule an interview.

October is the last month of field walks and marks the end of the CSA and wholesale sales. In November we sit down with each farmer individually and go through a thorough oral evaluation. We ask them to evaluate themselves, staff, as well as the program overall. These evaluations generally take about two hours per farmer to complete. During November, December and January Catholic Charities offers English classes to all of our farmers twice a week. Cultivate KC staff also meet with farmers for a production planning workshop and assist farmers in ordering seeds for the following season.

Stair-stepped approach

We take a stair-stepped approach with farmers; we recognize that in the first year there are a lot of barriers, learning curves and financial burdens that come with beginning farming. In the first year, the program covers most farmer costs, including: seeds, supplies, water, tillage, market fees, and even transportation to and from market. We never charge a fee for land while farmers are in the program. As the farmers progress in the program, they take on more financial responsibility: they pay half of their water bill in the second year, and all of it in the third and fourth. They begin to take on seed and supply costs in the second year. By year four they are paying their own market fees. The idea is that by year four, they understand what it takes financially to run their small farm business and they have a sense of independence.

BEST PRACTICES

The best practice that stands out most is **language access**. We offer interpretation during all farm classes, evaluations, and field-walks. Most of our teaching materials are heavily image-based, accompanied by English text. Important documents are translated into farmers native languages. This includes materials such as the land lease, farm rules, and harvest and washing Standards of Practice.

Timing is another best practice of ours; this is something that has taken a while to figure out. Mostly this refers to making decisions about when to teach a specific topic (i.e. during the growing season, before the growing season) and at which point in the program farmers receive education on specific topics. Some timing successes that we have discovered are that farm classes need to end by April, typically. As soon as farmers begin spending most of their time in the field, attendance at farm classes really declined. Moreover, we've learned that for farmers to fully grasp certain topics, the subject needs to be taught when it's applicable (i.e. teach pest and disease information when pests begin to show up, rather than in February, before planting has even started). Another example is that in the first year, we do not plan for the aggregated CSA with farmers – it is their first year doing any type of production planning or growing at scale – so we reserve this for second year farmers and beyond.

The pest management example touches on two main best practices, those being timing as well as **practicality**. Because we are working with adult learners, all education needs to be applicable, tangible, and hands-on – farmers want to be able to relate the content to their own personal experiences. We try to ensure that what we are teaching can be applied immediately or shortly thereafter (i.e. the greenhouse planting class happens either the week of or the week before the greenhouse opens).

Skill level is a somewhat less developed best practice that we will continue to adapt and improve upon. Farmers in the program come from very different backgrounds, with different goals, dreams, and skill levels. It has been difficult to meet each farmer at their level during program-level education (such as farm classes) but our hope is that we can provide classes that are intended for farmers at different levels. Currently, we have some classes that are only intended for first years, as

well as courses that are intended for farmers further along in the program (CSA and Wholesale II, and the series of graduation classes, which are geared at preparing farmers for transitioning out of the program).

Lastly, the **format** of how we teach subjects is an important best practice: we use typical classroom settings, small group meetings (usually by language group or year in the program), as well as individual meetings. Using a combination of these formats has been successful. We reserve specific formats for certain activities – classroom settings are for farm classes and larger group meetings (CSA meetings, monthly all-farmer meetings), small group settings are mostly used for production planning and seed ordering, and one-on-ones are used during field-walks, evaluations, recordkeeping meetings, and any personally requested meetings. There is value in all formats, and the combination allows us to foster information sharing, group dynamics, group learning, while still being able to check in with farmers individually and support their personal needs and learning objectives.

CHALLENGES

While **language access** is one of our best practices, it is also a major challenge. Within our program, we do a lot to break down this barrier, however, many of the resources available in our region (such as extension services, workshops, and written publications) are still not accessible to farmers who do not speak and/or read English. This is something that we would like to tackle as a program – we would like to offer interpretation at existing workshops and conferences and provide “training to trainers” on how to use plain language and teach in ways that allow for interpretation.

Another challenge we are constantly up against is how to make the program as **farmer centric** as possible. In addition to being able to offer education and support for farmers at different levels, we recognize that farmers come into the program with different goals and expectations. Some farmers are interested in diversification, livestock farming, flower growing; some love direct sales, some would prefer only wholesale, and in terms of business size – some farmers aim to make farming their full-time job, while others are more interested in being market gardeners or farming for themselves and their families. We are constantly trying to adapt our support and teaching to fulfill these various needs. In addition to those thoughts, this year we have begun planning and preparing for a “Farmer Leadership Team” because we would like farmers to be more involved in decision making.

As aforementioned, New Roots for Refugees is a year-round program with many elements. Sometimes there is a lack of **synchronization** between all the elements that go on at different times of the year. For example, when we are teaching specific things in the early spring farm classes, are these items being talked about again during mid-season field walks? Are the materials covered in English classes relevant and reflective of farmers needs during the main growing and selling season? It takes a lot of detail and planning to ensure that all program elements line up with one another.

With the 2020 season wrapped up, we have graduated 36 farmers, and train between 14-16 farmers per year. With the number of graduates at over double of farmers-in-training, we have come to realize that we need to provide more **graduate support**. To do this, we are conducting comprehensive surveys with graduates from our program to identify their post-graduation needs. In addition to this, we have hired a part-time graduate support specialist that will be the go-to for graduates. Program graduates still have access to the seed store and bulk orders, but we would like to increase their involvement in education – by inviting them to farm classes, hands-on demonstrations, and workshops, and possibly having them teach farmers-in-training or offer site tours to them.

The last challenge is **business training** – when the program first started, it consisted of a few women who wanted to garden and grow food. But as the program has grown, and income earned from farming has increased, there is a need for more education around business and financial management. There are many complex topics that our staff do not have the capacity to teach, these include: filing farm taxes, farm accounting, labor management, and farm financing. To address this challenge, we create partnerships and relationships with folks that have more expertise in this field, perhaps at some point we will hire a farm business instructor/professional.

CONCLUSION

The New Roots for Refugees program has trained refugee farmers for 12 growing seasons; 36 farm families have graduated from the program, with over 80% of them still farming. The program takes a stair-stepped approach with farmers and offers training and education throughout the year. Several best practices of the program include language access, timing and practicality of education, options for different skill levels, and various educational formats. The major challenges include language access, creating a farmer-centric program, synchronization of program elements and content, post-graduate support, and business training.