

An Overview of Urban Agriculture in New York State

New York State Urban Agriculture at a Glance

Table 1. A Snapshot of the Diverse Scale and Types of Urban Agriculture in New York State in 2022

City	Number Commercial Urban Farms	Number Community Gardens	CEA	Official Urban Agricultural or Garden Network	Urban Agricultural Governance	Urban Agricultural Public School Education or Programming
Albany/Troy	5	55 <i>40 operated as part of Capital Roots</i>	Developing <i>Examples: Microgreens Urban Farm; Radix</i>	Capital Roots	Urban Agriculture Subcommittee <i>Within the Mayor's Office of Sustainability</i>	Some school gardens managed by the Vegetable Project
Buffalo	13	83 <i>Supported by Grassroots Gardens</i>	Developing	Grassroots Gardens; Greater Buffalo Urban Growers (GBUG)	Buffalo Green Code Project <i>Managed by the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning</i>	27 school gardens managed by Grassroots Gardens
New York City	27+	600+ <i>555+ through GreenThumb (NYCHA: 25)</i>	Established <i>Examples: Oko Farms, Gotham Greens, Square Roots</i>	GreenThumb <i>Managed by NYC Parks</i>	NYC Office of Urban Agriculture	150 operated by Grow NYC Programs with Edible Schoolyard, NY Sun Works, and Randall's Island Urban Farm
Rochester	0	102 <i>14 through Taproot Collective; 82 garden permits and 6 teaching gardens through the City of Rochester</i>	Developing <i>Example: Clearwater Organic Farms</i>	490 Farmers Network	ROC City Home Grown; Office of Community Wealth Building (community garden program on city-owned vacant lots)	Some school farms funded via Cornell Cooperative Extension or local grants like the Master Gardener School Grant
Syracuse	1+	28 <i>Supported by Syracuse Grows</i>	Nascent	Syracuse Grows	Within the city's Planning Division (i.e. ReZone)	Some schools with gardens

Case Studies

To further illustrate urban agriculture as it is practiced in New York, select producers provided a peek behind the curtain of their growing operations. The following case studies highlight:

- Radix Ecological Sustainability Center in Albany, NY
- Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) in Buffalo, NY
- Oko Farms in New York, NY
- Aerial Springs Community Garden in Rochester, NY
- Brady Farm in Syracuse, NY

The time and input of the urban growers representing each operation was instrumental to the development of this study, and these contributions are much appreciated.

Taken as a whole, these case studies illustrate the great diversity inherent to urban agriculture in New York State. Each featured operation reinforces the idea that, although urban agriculture is not monolithic, they share the ability to generate a multitude of direct and indirect benefits. This diversity challenges attempts to define urban agriculture as an aggregate, which may complicate the development of policy seeking to expand urban agriculture. However, diversity also creates more resilient food systems that can respond nimbly to local situations, contexts, and even crises. For this reason, policymakers and administrators should embrace the complexity of urban agriculture and build flexibility into policy and executive frameworks.

Case Study A: Radix Ecological Sustainability Center Albany, NY

Achieving just urban transitions through an emphasis on education, environmental stewardship, and food sovereignty

- Founded in 2009
- Growing on 2.0 acres (1.0 acre on Radix property)
- Non-profit, soil-based and aquaponics, bees and small livestock, educational center
- Priorities, themes, and differentiators:
 - Center ecology, environmental stewardship, and justice around agriculture
 - A training center envisioning how cities can grow equitably
 - Investing in innovative growing projects and season-extension with the dual goals of local food justice and education

About Radix Ecological Sustainability Center

The mission of the Radix Ecological Sustainability Center (Radix) is to promote ecological literacy and just sustainability through educational programs based around demonstrations of sustainable agricultural technologies. Radix seeks to create a model for environmental- and urban transition- justice education from the perspective of urban agriculture, a model that Radix leadership believes could be applied in cities around the world. Radix also runs an afterschool youth employment and agricultural training program.



On the Farm

Radix is an education center first and foremost and has invested in a variety of growing technologies designed to educate groups about these systems. While Albany's growing season is relatively predictable, it is short; season extension technologies, like a solar greenhouse and a hoop house, are meaningful investments that allow production to continue, sustainably, for more of the year. Radix has also built a sustainable rainwater harvesting system, organizes a community compost initiative, and is pioneering a food forest project that will plant fruit trees across Albany to increase food access while mitigating pollution and urban heat island effect. Produce, mushrooms, fruit, and eggs harvested from the center are sold throughout the neighborhood, including through a sliding-scale CSA farm-share model.

Education, Innovation, and Community

Justice for both people and planet is at the heart of everything Radix does. As an incorporated non-profit, Radix is empowered by a board and funding to support a small staff. These resources have given Radix the capacity to identify barriers to urban agriculture in Albany and to advocate for change. In part because of this work, urban agriculture now has permitted zoning and use categories in Albany's zoning code. Scott Kellogg, Radix's Educational Director, chairs Albany's urban agriculture subcommittee (a part of the city's Sustainability Advisory Committee), and will continue to lobby for improved and affordable access to water, land, and funding for urban growers in the region.



Photos courtesy of [Radix Ecological Sustainability Center](#), used with permission.

Case Study B: Massachusetts Avenue Project Buffalo, NY

Farming, processing infrastructure, and food access

- Began in 1992
- Growing on 1.5 acres
- Non-profit, soil-based community farm
- Priorities, themes, and differentiators:
 - Access to affordable produce
 - Training young farmers
 - Investments in processing, refrigeration, and preservation infrastructure and facilities for farmers and community members

About the Massachusetts Avenue Project

Beginning as a community project in the 90's, Massachusetts Avenue Project (MAP) was a small farm focused on growing food and a handful of youth programs. When the neighborhood's final grocery store closed in 2002, MAP partnered with the University of Buffalo's Food Lab to conduct a community food assessment. In order to respond to community needs, MAP expanded their youth employment programming and started a mobile food market. Eventually, they started a micro-enterprise program, teaching their apprentices how to craft different value-added products from teas to honey and naturally-dyed products. In 2018, MAP finished its current farmhouse and community training center, which has growing plots, a commercial kitchen, and a massive amount of refrigeration/food storage. This center acts as a community center, training space, local advocacy hub, and a farm.



On the Farm

MAP grows a variety of fruits, herbs (culinary and medicinal), flowers, and vegetables, with a focus on culturally appropriate crops like peppers and a variety of eggplants. They also raise their own bees and chickens. Food sold at their Mobile Food Market is sourced both from MAP and other local farms across Erie, Niagara, and Cattaraugus Counties. This breadth of local food coming into their market allows MAP farmers to focus some of their growing efforts on culturally relevant foods that community members have trouble sourcing elsewhere.

Community Involvement & Support

This organization grows food, but also sees itself as a part of a larger food system and that focus is evident with their investment in processing, preservation, and storage facilities. Training programs teach young people to farm and are focused on creating a new generation of food systems leaders. MAP offers growing apprenticeships as well as a college prep program and community classes to learn how to raise chickens, start seedlings, preserve food, and more.



Photos courtesy of [Massachusetts Avenue Project](#), used with permission.

Case Study C: Oko Urban Farms

New York, NY

Urban farming, aquaponics, education, and environmental stewardship

- First farm built in 2013, second farm built in 2021
- Growing on 0.25 acre
- For-profit, soil-based and aquaponics
- Priorities, themes, and differentiators:
 - Innovative growing, from crop production to pest management
 - Economic and environmental sustainability
 - Community access

About Oko Urban Farms

Oko Urban Farms started in 2013 when the company converted an abandoned lot in East Williamsburg into the Oko Farms Aquaponics Education center. At the time, this was New York City's first outdoor, and only publicly accessible, aquaponics farm. The methods chosen by Oko Farms aim to provide affordable, culturally appropriate foods for the city. Having seen success towards achieving this goal, the growers at Oko Farms offer aquaponics training and consultations for other farmers interested in integrating this system into their own.

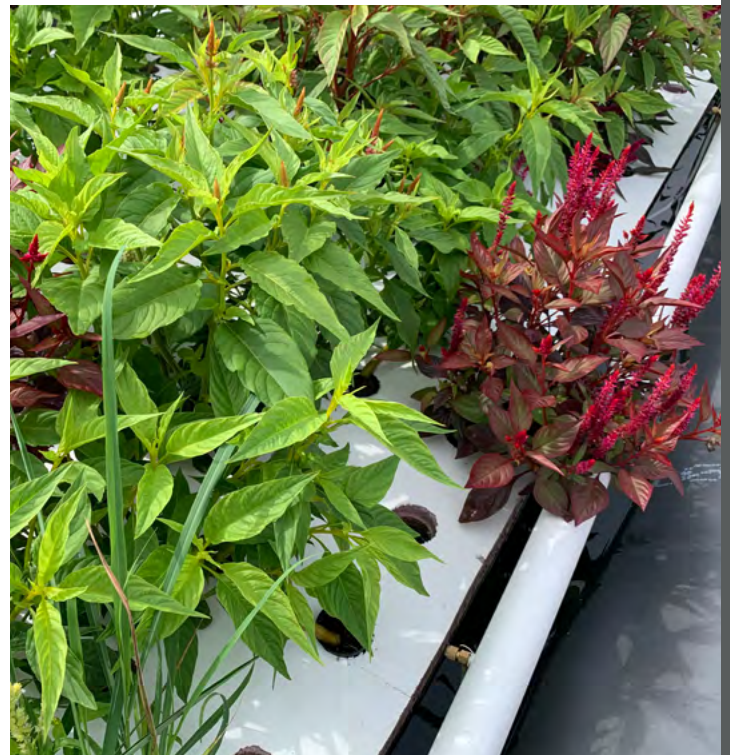


On the Farm

Oko Farms combine indoor and outdoor aquaponics and soil-based growing. Aquaponics is a recirculating, closed loop system that allows the farm to both cultivate and sell vegetables and freshwater fish while minimizing off-farm fertilizer inputs and saving water. A wide variety of produce is grown on the farm, demonstrating the possibilities of aquaponic systems. Some of the crops grown on the farm include cabbage, onion, sweet potatoes, lemongrass, okra, millet sorghum, and flowers like marigolds. Fish species include mirror carp, koi, and crawfish. Experimentation is central to the ethos at Oko Farms; for example, the team has been growing indigo for use as a dye.

Tradition, Innovation, and Sustainability

The growers at Oko Farms take seriously the method of growing, not just the output. The farming practice at Oko Farms is rooted in Traditional Ecological Knowledge, emphasizing low-tech and accessible growing techniques that employ symbiosis. Growing fish and leveraging an aquaponics system allows the farm to rely primarily on fish waste to fertilize the crops. Pests and disease are an inevitable part of any farm, and closed loop systems face unique challenges when either are introduced to the system. However, Oko Farms has succeeded in managing their pest issues using Integrated Pest Management (IPM), an “environmentally sensitive” approach to pest management (Environmental Protection Agency, 2022). While Oko Farms offers courses to other growers, the team is also constantly innovating and testing the limits of urban growing.



Photos courtesy of [Oko Urban Farms](#) and Island Bee Project, used with permission.

Case Study D: Aerial Springs Community Garden Rochester, NY

Art, community space, and accessible produce/cut-flowers

- Began growing at this garden in early 2022
- Growing on 1,500 square feet
- Soil-based
- Priorities, themes, and differentiators:
 - Providing an accessible community space
 - Integrating art throughout the garden
 - Creating a source of food and joy through open access to produce and flowers

About Aerial Springs Community Garden

Aerial Springs is a recent project by arts and special education teacher Janelle, fueled by her desire to build an inclusive green space in her neighborhood. She began with a community garden permit from the City of Rochester and has built a thriving garden that functions as a community space and food source for her neighbors. She credits other Rochester urban farms, community gardens, and CCE staff for their support and advice as her garden continues to grow.



On the Farm

Aerial Springs grows produce and flowers in raised beds using organic methods. Some of the crops she grows include cucumbers, chives, beans, lettuce, watermelon, tomatoes, herbs, onions, and garlic. In building the community garden, Janelle has been able to recycle and reuse pallets, tires, and a variety of other materials. This, combined with her work saving seeds, demonstrates her commitment to circular methods in the garden. She has taken advantage of CCE master gardener classes and many of the subsidized resources offered by the city, including trees, plants, seeds, mulch, and tools.

Art and Community

Aerial Springs works to invite community members in by providing seating and including kids in the art projects found throughout the garden. At the school where she teaches, Janelle incorporates her garden into the arts curriculum, and her students are able to contribute to the garden too. Produce and flowers from the garden are distributed to the community through baskets at the perimeter, and many neighboring families volunteer in the garden planting, weeding, and harvesting.



Photos courtesy of [Aerial Springs Community Garden](#), used with permission.