

URBAN AGRICULTURE

Urban Oasis Psychiatric Center Farm Market

A “real-job” work experience uses horticultural therapy to bring local grown and upstate farm produce to a Brooklyn community

By Linda Ameroso

There is a gazebo right inside the gate at Kingsboro Psychiatric Center. It is the home of this Brooklyn community’s first Farmers’ Market, and welcomes residents to step inside and experience a market sponsored by the NYS Office of Mental Health at Kingsboro Psychiatric Center. Urban Oasis, an affirmative horticultural business and agricultural initiative of Kingsboro Psychiatric Center has provided vocational training and improved employment opportunities through “real job” work experience for trainees since 1997.

Urban Oasis is under the auspices of the Rehabilitation Services Department, and in 2004 it expanded beyond a mini-farm and greenhouse operation by opening a NYS Farmers’ Market where produce grown onsite is featured along side apples, pears, pumpkins and other produce supplied by David and Veronica Haughton, participating farmers from Trinity Farms in upstate NY.

State Farmers’ Market Nutrition Checks are gladly accepted here, a plus for this community where two senior centers and major hospitals come together to provide needed medical services and community support facilities. Trainees sell their produce and tell customers how collards are grown, and tomatoes are picked and cleaned with genuine care. There is a sense of warmth and pride that goes along with selling, and you can buy not only produce, but houseplants and festive holiday gifts, specialties grown and arranged by these trained Urban Oasis employed participants.

Halloween was not only market time last season, but a time of entertainment, as this gazebo is in an open area large enough to host activities as well. Open only one day a week for 5 weeks last fall (2004), Urban Oasis grossed over \$1600. In 2005, their market has been open one day a week starting the end of June through October.

As a business run by a state facility, Urban Oasis works with partners at Cornell Cooperative Extension in NYC, which helps them to



David and Veronica Haughton from Trinity Farm in Clintondale, NY sell fruits and vegetables directly to the Brooklyn community at two NYC farmers’ markets and also supply “Urban Oasis” with fresh NYS produce. Photographer: Alan Braverman



network more effectively and utilize their resources to support other food growing initiatives city-wide. For example Urban Oasis contracts with GreenThumb, a program of the City of New York/Parks and Recreation, to grow 150 - 250 flats of vegetable transplants a year. This arrangement supplies quality transplants to community gardeners all over the City.

From 2002 to 2004, 400 flats of vegetables were grown by program participants - that's \$4000 generated to offset salaries and supplies to run their business. In 2005 they have increased the yearly amount to 250 flats of varieties grown from organic seed and suited for NYC community gardens.

With help from Cornell Extension Educators, Urban Oasis has moved their minifarm operation toward sustainability, utilizing cover crops and row covers, practicing IPM, and composting onsite to build soil. They use mulch and wide rows for weed control, and drip irrigation to insure quality yields while conserving water. Manure is generously supplied by The Black Cowboys Association, who drop off truck loads when needed because they believe in this farming effort.

Urban Oasis trainees help conduct onsite training workshops in production for other growers. This year Urban Oasis will benefit by receiving services from the Horticultural Society of NY through a \$35,000 grant of support from Vonamergin. Working together with Extension and other partners, vocational training program efforts will continue to extend horticultural opportunities at Kingsboro Psychiatric Center and in the community.

What do participants think of working in Urban Oasis? Adan, a past trainee says, "It is work I can really depend on at Urban Oasis. With the progress I've made and the skills I've learned, I hope to further my career in horticulture." Urban Oasis trains in horticulture and agri-cultural production, but more realistically it gives training in job readiness, and uses "real job" work experience to help move trainees toward working in NYC. In 2004, 2 out of the 10 employees that worked during the season did get jobs in the community, and that is one of the major goals of this Kingsboro Psychiatric Center experience.



Trainees of Urban Oasis work all facets of this business, from growing transplants for mini-farm production to marketing.
Photographer: Linda Ameroso



Farm fresh apples supplied by Trinity Farm in Clintondale, NY lure customers inside the gazebo at Kingsboro's Farmers' Market. Community residents can buy produce grown on-site and picked the same morning along with fruits and vegetables grown by a participating NYS farmer.
Photographer: Linda Ameroso



Urban Oasis Farmer's Market

Brooklyn, New York

<http://nyc.cce.cornell.edu/emerginginitiatives/marketinitiatives.php>

For more information about Urban Oasis, contact Susan Braverman, Coordinator at 718-221-7132 or Linda Ameroso, 212-340-2967 (lma6@cornell.edu) Cornell University Cooperative Extension in NYC.

For information about selling at community based farmers' markets in NYC contact John Ameroso at 212-340-2946 (jma20@cornell.edu) Cornell University Cooperative Extension in NYC.

For information about Trinity Farm or about these farmers' personal experiences marketing in NYC, contact David or Veronica Haughton at 845-883-5478.

Linda Ameroso is an Educator with Cornell University Cooperative Extension in New York City.