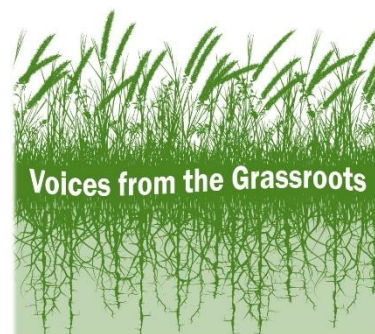


VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS COMMENTARY

Reversing food-land relationships in the city: Insights from the Seeding East Buffalo Fellowship Program



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Abstract

The Seeding East Buffalo Fellowship (SEBF) program, co-founded by community and academic organizations from Buffalo, NY in 2022, supported residents in Buffalo's Black neighborhoods to grow their own food, emerge as urban agriculture (UA)

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Note

People interested in reaching out to Urban Fruits & Veggies (UFV) can email Marilyn Rodgers at mrodders@buffalogogreen.org

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leaders, and engage in and advocate for UA policy. This article reflects on the lessons learned from this pilot program. The authors, all of whom are either co-founders or team members of the SEBF program, drew from field notes and qualitative interviews with SEBF growers in this article. Key lessons for policy change are that programs must be rooted in the community's history, pedagogical strategies must be tailored to the local context, and long-term relationships must be fostered.

Keywords

urban agriculture, Black growers, adult education, Buffalo, experiential education and training

Introduction

Black and brown residents in the U.S. are growing food in cities to directly demand a dignified life and denounce the precarious conditions in their neighborhoods. They collectively learn and share knowledge about urban agriculture (UA) and food policy literacy (Ramos-Gerena, 2023) to resist and reverse historical disinvestment in their regions.

The Seeding East Buffalo Fellowship (SEBF) program, piloted in 2022, is one of the many initiatives led by local food actors intending to *reverse* historical disinvestment in eastern parts of Buffalo, NY, by helping residents grow healthy food, control their food system, and advocate for their communities. For years, numerous organizations in Buffalo have pointed out the limited access to healthy food in predominantly Black neighborhoods in eastern Buffalo (Frimpong-Boamah et al., 2022) and the untapped potential of UA on the 8,000 publicly owned vacant lots managed by the city government (Magavern, 2023).

The SEBF was launched by Growing Food Policy from the Ground Up (GFPGU¹), an action-research coalition composed of an urban farmer (Urban Fruits & Veggies,² or UFV), community

elders (Buffalo Freedom Gardens³), and researchers (UB Food Lab⁴ and other partners). The program was advertised in *The Challenger*,⁵ the city's oldest Black-owned newspaper. Eligible applicants had to be 18 years or older and residents from the neighborhoods east of Main Street in Buffalo. An important factor in their selection was the applicants' commitment to improving their neighborhoods. Fellows were selected by UFV. The 12 selected fellows ranged from 35 to 70 years of age, all were Black Americans, and eight were female.

The SEBF program provided didactic information (on sustainable agriculture and food policy), experiential learning opportunities (on a farm and in their homes), social networking opportunities (with peers and community elders), and material resources to fellows to begin or expand their own gardens.

Didactic. Fellows received information about sustainable UA practices, the national food system, and the 2023 farm bill. They also participated in UA policy workshops at the beginning (focusing on federal policy) and end of the program (focusing on municipal policy) delivered by the UB Food Lab and Food for the Spirit.⁶

Experiential. From May to June 2022, fellows met weekly at the UFV urban farm and were exposed to on-hand gardening from seed to cultivation. Fellows received hands-on training on seed saving, organic pesticide management, and harvesting. From July to August, fellows put their knowledge to use by launching or expanding their own gardens.

Social networking opportunities included membership in and engagement with the Buffalo Food Equity Network (BFEN)⁷ and the Agricultural Pavilion⁸ at the city's Juneteenth celebration to raise awareness about UA citywide. Some fellows also joined Buffalo Freedom Gardens to distribute raised garden beds through-

¹ <https://foodsystemsplanning.ap.buffalo.edu/project/growing-food-policy-from-the-ground-up-gfpgu/>

² <https://buffalogogreen.org/urban-fruits-veggies/>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/BuffaloFreedomGarden/>

⁴ <https://foodsystemsplanning.ap.buffalo.edu/>

⁵ <https://issuu.com/challengercommunitynews>

⁶ <https://foodforthespirit.org/>

⁷ <https://foodforthespirit.org/buffalo-food-equity-network/>

⁸ <https://www.buffalorising.com/2022/06/recognizing-the-buffalo-juneteenth-agricultural-pavilion/>

out Buffalo. In September 2022, fellows were honored at a SEBF graduation ceremony at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York (UB) attended by family and friends.

To support the initiation or expansion of existing food production activities, fellows received modest *material resources*, including a US\$250 gift card (for supplies) and soil and supplies delivered to their homes to build their own raised beds.

Lessons Learned

Our experience suggests that three areas were important for a meaningful implementation of the SEBF program: (a) the history and context of the community, (b) the pedagogical strategy of the course facilitators, and (c) the relational infrastructure of program leaders and participants.

Rooted in community history: The SEBF program was scheduled to begin on May 15, 2022. Tragically, the day before the launch, a white supremacist shot and killed 10 people at a supermarket located in the city's predominantly Black neighborhood, a few minutes' walk from the UFV farm site. However, community elders urged SEBF coordinators to move forward with the launch of

the program. One elder in the community shared with the SEBF program coordinators that "they [supremacists] are not going to take this away from us." Elders reaffirmed that reversing historical inequalities is not a one-time event, but a long-term struggle that has been spearheaded by generations before them.

Tailoring pedagogy to local context: The SEBF program made a conscious effort to welcome residents with little to no experience growing food. In fact, various fellows admitted they were growing food for the first time with the SEBF program. One participant shared that they applied to SEBF to "have a better relationship with the soil." Sharing knowledge across diverse levels of experience in gardening motivated the SEBF team to use a dialogic inquiry-based learning approach, particularly for the classes held at the farm. The UFV farmer-educator provided hands-on and varied farming practices at different stations on the farm; each class resembled a field trip rather than a lecture (see Figure 1). The UFV farmer-educator answered questions individually, and, when the occasion necessitated, responded to the whole group, illustrating a deft pedagogical style. Fellows


learned from and supported each other's learning journey, while being in a constant state of curiosity and reflection around the farm.

Fostering relationships: SEBF leaders shared that their main goal was to provide a "beautiful space to create networks." Indeed, the most frequently cited benefit by fellows was being able to connect with peers in the program and growers in the city. One fellow commented, "I didn't realize how many people are gardening in my community." Fellows not only met representatives of food-related organizations in Buffalo, but also visited each other's gardens. Simi-

Figure 1. Urban Fruits & Veggies (UFV) Farmer-Educator (Squatting) Answering Questions from Seeding East Buffalo Fellowship Participants Inside the UFV Greenhouse



larly, other fellows shared that they applied to SEBF to connect with like-minded people “to know how to reverse [particular] trends,” referring to the depletion of healthy soils and the persistence of racism in the city.

Rooted in the community’s history, using pedagogical strategies tailored to the local context, and fostering new relationships with the soil, food, and peers, the SEBF program supports the potential for community-led policy change. Stronger relationships among Black growers, combined with their heightened awareness of the linkages between municipal policy and UA practice, are important precursors for community advocacy and systemic change. In other words, and using a SEBF fellow’s phrase, only with these relationships will we see “community gardens [and sustainable urban agriculture as] normal,” especially in Black and brown neighborhoods. 

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