Twin Cities Metro Growers Network’ers Explore Season Extension … in the Snow!

Meeting at Urban Ventures on a cold crappy weather day … 20 growers getting ready for spring. Really! After introductions I reiterated the goals and methods for a Grower’s Network — sharing and learning together at each other’s gardens in ways that are informal and informative. See our web site for all the handouts from this event – www.sfa-mn.org/twin-cities-growers-network — Karl Hakanson, UM Extension-Hennepin County.

A presentation of the Urban Ventures Farm included a history of Urban Ventures’ work in the neighborhood over the past 25 years and what Urban Ventures is currently doing in meeting the needs of the neighborhoods it serves. The purpose of the Urban Ventures Farm is to address food insecurity, poor nutrition and diabetes in the Central and Phillips neighborhoods of south Minneapolis by offering organically grown vegetables and fruit that low income families can access.

Due to the sudden spring storm we then took an abbreviated farm tour. We started in the hydroponics high tunnel where we primarily grow romaine lettuce via a floating raft hydroponic system. There is a new aquaponic system, and are excited for our first year of raising yellow perch. Hopefully we’ll have a fish fry at the end of the season!

We trekked in the snow through our market area, pointing out our raised beds where we grow root veggies and herbs, took a peak in our converted container cooler, and described our wood-fire pizza oven and food truck. Urban Ventures has a farm stand from July – October, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 11:30 am-6:30 pm. Think co-op quality at Cub food price! To help entice our neighborhood, we offer a free neighbor membership which gives 50% off for both produce and fresh food.

Across the street we escaped the weather in our other high tunnel, which is used for primarily tomato production and other hot crops. The high tunnel is on rails so we are able to move it each season, which helps with crop rotation and cover cropping. We looked out the back of the high tunnel to see other parts of the urban farm, such as our compost (a six-bin system for extra turning), bee hives, and Garden-in-a-Box beds. Tom McKusick from Northern Gardener Magazine explained the Garden-in-a-Box program and their other free seeds and tool lending programs. This land used to be a part of the Hennepin County dump! Now we grow about 20 different crops at our urban farm site, (30 at our Lakeville site) and over a hundred different varieties. Last year we provided seven tons of fresh produce to the neighborhood.

Being a small team, it’s a balancing act to extend production into the fall, while getting the farm prepared for winter. End of season strategies include cutting plants at the soil so roots stay and hold onto the soil, spreading a winter rye cover crop, and using a leaf mulch in areas where it got too late to seed. We use city water, so unfortunately, we don’t get to control when it’s turned off or on which creates limitation. Other limitations included temperature regulation of the high tunnel, as we don’t have electricity for heat or cooling. While we are very excited for the addition of chickens to our Lakeville farm, we were surprised to learn you are not allowed to have animals (chickens) if you are a farm site in Minneapolis. But Karl said he would work on this one for us!

Mark-Peter Lundquist and Clarisse Randolph

Larry Cipolla shared some basic information about starting seeds for soil-based and hydroponic-based gardening. One of the first points he mentioned was that seed buyers should note the packing date of the seeds they are buying. Sometimes they were packed for the previous year, which could lower the germination rate. You can still use the seeds, but be prepared for having fewer plants germinate (see testing seed germination on TCMGN website KH). He also identified the different substrate media available for starting seeds, such as sterile potting soil, rockwool cubes (not to be confused with the rockwool used as insulation), peat, perlite, vermiculite and coconut coir. You can use a wide range of containers for your media, such as single plastic pots, peat and composite...
pots, cow pots, single, four and nine-hole plastic units, two-inch net pots and up to ten-inch wide-lip baskets, typically used with non-commercial hydroponic systems. With a mix of 80-percent perlite and 20% peat, for example, you can fill a net pot, plant your seeds, and allow them to germinate and grow in those units, then transfer them to other food-safe-containers, such as standard totes, buckets and PVC tubes. Wide-lip baskets will fit over standard 3.5 to 6-gallon buckets. No tools needed.

For plants destined for your soil-based garden, such as tomatoes, Larry suggested transplanting them from a standard 1020 seed starting tray to individual units at least twice and preferably three times. When transplanting, bury the plant up to its first level of leaves, which will develop a more robust root system.

Larry focused on the passive deep-water culture hydroponic system, which is the least expensive, easiest to maintain and expand hydroponic system and allows for year-round gardening. Plants grow in air, not soil, which is one reason why hydroponic gardening is easy to do. No electricity is needed for the hydroponic system itself. No gardening experience needed. Initially, the nutrient solution (water and hydroponic fertilizer) need only to touch the bottom of a net pot or wide-lip basket. The remaining space is the moist air that sustains the root system. As the plant and root system develops, the air-space expands. Hydroponic fertilizer is a more complete fertilizer, compared to soil-based products and can be used with soil-based plants. It can be purchased as a dry-granular or wet-liquid product. Larry noted to make sure and follow directions so you don’t “burn” your plants!

The newer LED (light emitting diode) bulbs were recommended for purchase. Some bulbs have a life of at least 36,000 hours and others up to 50,000 hours. LED bulbs, which can be purchased locally at garden centers and big-box outlets are fairly inexpensive at about $15 for a pack of two bulbs. The Kelvin (K) temperature of bulbs is important for plant growth. 4100K bulbs, emit a yellow-ish light and are great for growing flowers and plants that produce fruit, such as tomatoes. For vegetative growth, consider bulbs that range from 5100K to 6500K. Larry Cipolla, Hennepin Co. Master Gardener and author of Hydroponic Gardening The Very Easy Way: A Proven Indoor and Outdoor System for Year-Round Gardening.

Thanks to all who attended, the Urban Ventures crew and to Larry Cipolla for sharing his growing experience! The next meeting will be at the MN Food Association Big River Farm, May 29th, where we will be delving into farmer training and tools for better growing. --Karl Hakanson, Network Coordinator and U of MN Extension Ag. & Natural Resource Educator, Hennepin County … and we have a web site where all the handouts and other resources are available:

www.sfa-mn.org/twin-cities-growers-network