Rhode Island is an urban state, being the second most densely populated state in the country. Urban agriculture has been increasing in RI since Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT) started farming on a vacant lot in 1981. Since then, SCLT has transformed 55 acres of land which has enabled farmers to grow produce and sell their crops at Farmers Markets. Currently 21 urban farmers in Providence produce vegetables and sell at city farmers markets, restaurants, wholesale markets and CSAs.

Over the last few years many organizations have formed in Providence, committed to increasing the amount of local food produced and sold at markets. Through the ongoing efforts of the City of Providence’s ‘Lots of Hope’ program, the African Alliance Rhode Island, Lots of Hope Program, Sankofa Rhode Island’s three large urban farmers have expressed interest in growing crops. As a result of learning, ASP will be able to direct farmers to reliable sources of production information.

Some Urban farm have had very little Ag training. We plan to take a problem-based learning approach, where ASP gain practice using new knowledge and skills to help solve problems likely to be encountered by the urban farmer.

In 2012, the City of Providence started a Healthy Communities Office (HCO) and as part of its work, the HCO is coordinating the City’s ‘Lots of Hope’ urban agriculture initiative. This project converts city-owned vacant lots into urban farms, enabling farmers to grow and market local produce. Lots of Hope’s first major project involved creating a farm that provides residents and newly-arrived Rwandan and Burundian refugees the opportunity to grow ethnic food to sell in Providence markets.

The African Alliance of Rhode Island (AARI) is a local 501c3 non-profit supporting recent African immigrants and refugees in RI. In 2013, 7 farmers grew produce from their native countries and successfully established a retail sales stand at the Armory Farmers Market in South Providence. In 2014, AARI will erect at high tunnels to extend the season for its farmers. Right now, AARI has a waiting list of 6 African immigrants waiting for land to start a farming business. Through ‘Lots of Hope’, land should be found in 2014.

These initiatives are wonderful, but there is a lack of knowledge with regards to soil health and crop production. In the past Extension has not had access to these farmers, but AARI and Lots of Hope have requested crop production training from URI Cooperative Extension. The Ag Service Providers (ASP) at three of the organizations eagerly request help from Extension in training these new farmers. Their surveys have shown that in addition to land these new farmers want training in all aspects of farming.

In addition to these organizations, URI Cooperative Extension personnel (Andy Radin and Heather Faubert) have recently communicated with 15 new urban farmers and they have expressed interest in receiving training from us. All of these farmers are beginning farmers and NRCS and FSA have initiatives to support beginning farmers.

Rhode Island’s three-year SARE PDP project will assist this under-served farming community by providing training on crop production techniques to ASP from various organizations serving urban farmers in addition to the typical ASP from NRCS, FSA and other agricultural agencies. We have a verbal commitment from 3 ASP stating they will participate in our trainings and we are recruiting 3 additional ASP to serve as our core ASP to urban farmers.

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