



URBAN TREE CONNECTION 2020 Organizational Highlights

2020, What a time, what a year! COVID-19 is highlighting racialized economic and health disparities in West Philadelphia that have existed for decades. As a predominantly Black community living with low income and disproportionate health disparities – including food insecurity, a significant portion of our neighbors in Haddington are more vulnerable to the coronavirus. The rise of unemployment, caregiving and homeschooling responsibilities, housing instability and racialized violence have only further exasperated these conditions. Throughout the season, we have held the balance between providing neighbors with fresh produce while promoting [food sovereignty](#): land, resources and knowledge to grow food; uplifting community leadership and practitioners; and incorporating a vision for a just food system and regenerative economy through a [Just Transition](#) framework in our educational programs.

Entering the 2020 growing season with clear priorities and strong relationships with community members, UTC's staff was able to pivot quickly to develop a COVID-19 contingency plan in response to growing community needs. At the farm and community gardens, we revamped our food safety and handling protocols, stocked our sites with PPE, and implemented social distancing practices. We suspended our farmers markets to focus on free food share deliveries; shifted our educational programming and events to be virtual and at-home learning; and held limited in-person events. So much of our work is relationship building and hands-on learning; therefore, we had to be creative and flexible to do things differently.

In the face of these extraordinary times, our staff and board have remained resilient and responsive to our mission. As essential workers growing and distributing food – our team of farmers, gardeners, and food distribution leaders were on the frontlines. An important and insightful report created by [Building Movement Project](#) shares the impact of and on organizations led by and serving people of color responding to both COVID-19 and structural racism– and the long road ahead. As we look ahead to 2021, UTC is working with [DragonFly Consultants](#) and [U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives](#) to facilitate our 5-year visioning and strategic planning process. **Now more than ever, we must work diligently with clear-sightedness to build the world we *all* desperately need.**

Neighborhood Foods Farm: At our farm, we strive to grow *with* the community rather than *for* the community. However, this season we were faced with taking a physical step (well, 6 feet to be exact!) away from one another. As a farm whose goal is to engage, react, and thrive with our community, our team had some adjusting to do. With a new plan and safety practices, we quickly adapted to continue important work. We coordinated 4th Saturdays for small groups of partners, neighbors, and supporters to visit the farm and volunteer. Although anxiety and precautions were heightened throughout the city, we still had an amazing and consistent rotation of volunteers. Without their help, we undoubtedly would not have been able to grow the **5,760 pounds of food we distributed this season.**



Figure 1: Dan, farm apprentice and Nat, lead farmer at NF Farm

Farm Apprenticeship: This season we welcomed our first adult/community Farm Apprentice. Daniel Clymer, a beginning farmer and West Philly native, started early in the season and worked with us until late October. In addition to learning about urban agriculture, sustainable growing practices, harvesting, volunteer management, leading farm tours and community food distribution, Dan's contributions were significant to our success at Neighborhood Foods Farm. As the first Farm Apprentice, Dan paved the way for us to create a role that harnesses and develops community participation and leadership.

Sustainability Projects: With an increase in food insecurity due to the pandemic and social unrest, we wanted to ensure a successful and productive year at the farm. As such, we spent the beginning of the season building up our soil health -- no till, organic soil remediations, companion planting, and rotation of crops. We continued our sustainability practices from previous seasons (*apothecary, pollination*), and we: upgraded our composting system into a vermicomposting bin; allotted a season of rest to our largest hoop house and recycled its plastic for a second hoop house; saved seed from our Paul Robeson tomatoes, and utilized companion planting and wood-chipping to support our organic pest management.

Partnerships: We partnered with [Carversville Farm Foundation](#) to receive an abundance of organic vegetable transplants. With this donation, **we were able to grow 5,760 pounds of food at Neighborhood Foods farm for neighbors**; and provide our community gardens with a variety of culturally significant starts. We also worked with [Local Food Safety Collaborative Project](#) and the [PA Farmers Union](#) to produce a risk assessment training video for farmers across PA.



Figure 2. High tunnel at the NF farm (above)

"With pandemic restrictions, increases in gun violence all over the city and protests happening on a weekly basis, the farm became an oasis for me. I'd come to pick up my CSA, weed a row of veggies, or paint the landscape. Spending time outdoors in nature was a balm for my mental and emotional health."

-Ellissa Collier: Volunteer, CSA member, neighbor

Haddington's Favorite Crops This Season



Paul Robeson Tomatoes
We grew these large heirloom tomatoes and kept seeds for next season.



Beets
Community members enjoyed both the roots and leaves of these beets!



Swiss Chard
These rainbow-colored greens were a crowd pleaser because of their taste and appearance.

Community Food Distribution: Typically, food distribution at UTC is centered around affordable, community-led farmers markets operated by community members and youth and our \$5 CSA share program. However, COVID-19 contingency planning pushed us to re-evaluate our food distribution methods. After talking to our neighbors and community leaders, we confirmed our suspicions that food insecurity was on the rise in the community due to economic instability caused by the pandemic. Because of this and the higher risk of transmission, we pivoted away from running farmers markets this season.



Figure 3: Contents of a CSA/food share box

Free Food Share Project: Instead of markets, we collaborated with 5 block captains to pilot our Free Food Share Project and deliver CSA-style boxes of produce weekly to 3 neighboring blocks in June. With block captains, we developed a system that uplifted their pre-existing leadership on their blocks. Block captains signed up their neighbors for the food shares and served as the drop-off/pick-up point for the families on their block. Our survey at the end of June confirmed people’s continuing need for free food shares, so we extended the project through the end of October. In July we expanded the project, to include 9 block captains across 6 blocks.

We were able to make **100% of these shares free** and offer Block captains a weekly stipend due to generosity of individual donors and funders; and committed volunteers that supported harvest days. **In total, we distributed 1,450 food shares to 122 families.**



Figure 4: Junior Block Captain, Nora

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Program: In August, we re-opened our CSA program, where members receive 5-7 produce items weekly for \$5 (valued at \$25 retail cost). To further ensure that membership is accessible and affordable, neighbors can sign up on a weekly basis, and we encourage the use of Senior and Women Infant and Children Farmer’s Market Nutrition Program vouchers, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/EBT), and incentives like Philly Food Bucks which increase the purchasing power of members who use SNAP by 40%. We distributed **44 shares to 4 CSA members** - some who also volunteered at the farm on harvest days.

Food Donations: UTC achieved **zero food waste** through donating over **1,300lbs. of produce** to:

- [West Philly Bunnyhop](#) and [Front Line Meals](#), mutual aid groups formed in response to COVID-19, that delivered fresh produce and cooked meals to families in West Philadelphia
- [Food Not Bombs](#)
- Smart Beginnings Early Childhood Education Center
- UTC Youth Apprentices, community volunteers, neighbors and Staff



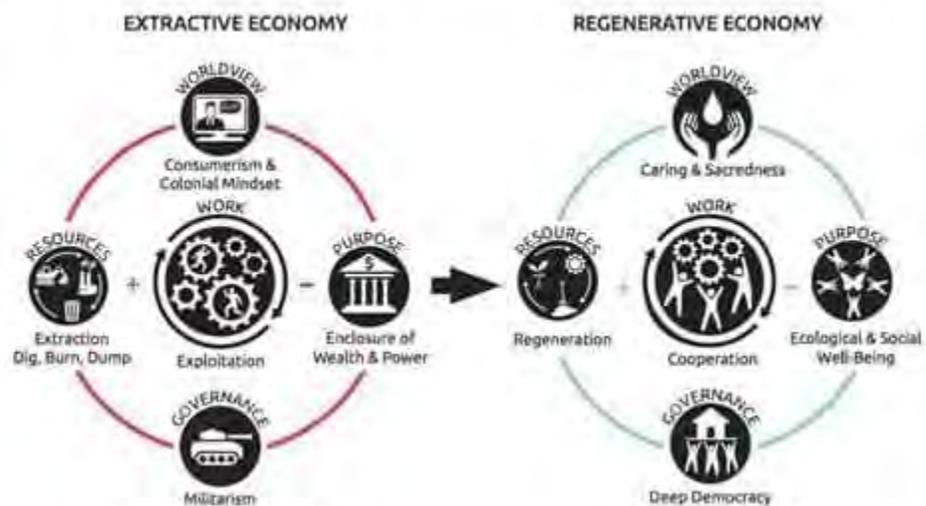
Youth Apprenticeship Program (YAP): Staff mentored 7 high school students this season, through our five-month paid program that introduces young people of color, primarily from Haddington, to agroecology and the Just Transition framework. Each apprentice receives 1:1 mentorship from staff as well as collective sessions that grow their knowledge and capacities to build a community rooted food system. These sessions dig deeper into issues of food, land, and environmental justice -- in relationship to our local work and the world at large. Due to COVID-19, YAP 2020 was a hybrid program that existed mostly online, but with some in-person opportunities. To go virtual, we utilized Zoom, Venngage, Microsoft Teams, and youth kits that included all the supplies needed for at-home cooking and gardening.

Mentorship: We believe that true growth does not happen individually, but in collective work together. The apprenticeship model focuses on delivering scaffolded and adaptive education to address the needs and interests of youth apprentices (YAs) in our program. YAs were mentored by 3 unique community builders. Each mentor created videos that taught different aspects of Just Transition through tangible skills such as growing and sharing food. During the summer, YAs met with mentors virtually to discuss and apply their learnings to at-home gardening, as they could not be on-site due to COVID. YAs met with mentors for weekly Straight Talk sessions to develop their emotional intelligence and communication skills. During the fall session, YAs visited UTC's garden and farm sites in-person with their mentors. For in-person series, mentors focused their lessons on apothecary. YAs learned how to collect and dry herbs for medicinal purposes, along with their healing modalities. The in-person sessions allowed the YAs to be on the land and gain a better understanding of UTC's place-based work.

Videos by YA mentors can be found at [Urban Tree Connection's YouTube page](#)

Just Transition: During the summer sessions, youth engaged in 6 workshops on Just Transition. The sessions included:

- Economy & Ecology
- Cooperation vs. Exploitation
- Deep Democracy vs. Militarism
- Regeneration vs. Dig, Dump, and Burn
- Social Well-Being vs. Enclosure of Wealth and Power
- Caring & Sacredness vs. Consumerism & Colonialism



After each session, youth created infographics to share what they learned with neighbors. Their infographics were included in weekly Food Share Boxes. Through this process, YAs developed their capacities to work in groups and independently, while also gaining graphic design skills and learning how to effectively communicate UTC's values and framework with community members.

Culinary Classes: We partnered with Chef Sherimane Johnson of [Night Owl Vegan](#) to host an 8-week culinary series focused on plant-based meals with youth apprentices. We supplied each youth a culinary kit for their home, along with a food share box every week from Neighborhood Foods Farm. Each week the youth learned new skills for cooking with vegetables, including knife skills, sautéing, pickling, and salad preparation. At the end of the season, the youth planned a community cooking tutorial to lead with Chef Sherimane at our annual Harvest Party.

Straight Talk: Critical to the success of our work with youth is an accountability framework based on the [Food Project's](#) "Straight Talk" model- which provides guiding principles for giving and receiving feedback. It offers youth an opportunity to reflect on the strengths and areas for growth they observe in their peers, themselves, and their mentors. In each of the 13 Straight Talk sessions, YAs set goals for incorporating the feedback into their work and lives. By routinely checking in on how they were implementing their goal, we built a culture of trust and support that increased social and emotional intelligence within the YAs. UTC sees the development of socio-emotional capacities as a necessary component of creating a healthy community-rooted food system.

"Since my introduction to Urban Tree Connection and the YAP program, I'm glad to say that my time was well spent. The people that I met and the knowledge I obtained have helped me grow and develop as a person. After all, if I hadn't taken the opportunity to be a part of this organization, I would have never met my best friend who was an apprentice like myself.

Their strong belief in building a safer and more sustainable community as well as the Just Transition teachings has opened my eyes to what our communities could and should be. I hope the future young people who decide to be a part of YAP do not take their experience for granted, because what I experienced will never be forgotten."

Zafir, 2nd year Youth Apprentice

Multigenerational Community Education Classes: UTC hosted four virtual classes led by local community educators and practitioners:

- *Healing the Body with Herbs and Awareness*, taught by Ayesha from [Wildflower Wellness](#)
- *Developing Healthy Habits*, Dr. Sunlight Little
- *Fuel for Fall: Kitchen Remedies to Build the Body During Cold and Flu Season*, Ayesha
- *Pickling Class*, Chef Sherimane

Over 40 community members attended the series, and we received feedback via online surveys showing that participants learned healthy habits, benefits from plant-based foods, and wellness remedies for cold and flu season.



Partnerships: Some key partnerships that supported our education programs this season include:

- SWWAG (Southwest and West Agricultural Group) to develop COVID-19 contingency plans for youth programming; and generate resources together
- [Civic House at UPenn](#) and [Bridging the Gaps](#) provided us with interns that supported UTC's social media and Youth Apprenticeship Program
- [Philadelphia Youth Network's](#) and [Urban Affairs Coalition](#) summer Workready program

Community Gardens and Outreach: Our community gardens and green spaces are the foundation of UTC's connection to the Haddington neighborhood. As the summer progressed and regulations were adjusted, we were able to slowly coordinate small groups of gardeners and volunteers return to the gardens. Our community members were excited to get out of the house to garden; we shared gardening tips and safety precautions to take together. Through reaching out, providing protective gear, and being a general source of support, our staff deepened UTC's relationship with neighbors. With the odds against us, we still had a great season with meaningful experiences.



Figure 6: intergenerational gardening at Pearl St. garden



Figure 5: a young gardener shows off her harvest at Pearl St. Garden

Partnerships and Projects: Located just off the corner of 54th and Westminister in West Philly, our Queen's Garden needed a serious redesign to make the space more accessible for elders and families. With the leadership of Nefertari Muhammed, a dedicated community leader that has managed this garden for years, we are in the process of upgrading this garden to give the community a safe space to grow food, learn, meditate, and create new bonds that in turn help us restore our community. [Tiny WPA](#), a West Philly-based non-profit, has also been integral to the Queen's Garden rebuild by providing community-centered design.

We partnered with the [Philadelphia Orchard Project](#) (POP) to revitalize our fruit orchard at the Pearl St. Conestoga Garden. In recent years, our fruit trees have fallen into poor health. Thankfully, POP chose our organization as part of their restoration initiative and taught us how to best care for our trees and plant new ones. With new skills, we are excited to plant-up our fruit orchard and redesign the landscape with new fruit trees, flowers, and pollinator walls. This was a great learning experience and opportunity for us to connect with new allies working for the same goals: **connecting community to land to produce more food and promote holistic wellbeing.**

Harvest Party: We closed out our season with our annual Harvest Party. Normally, community members would gather at the Pearl Street Garden for food and festivities, but this has not been a normal year. Nevertheless, our goal was the same: **to celebrate a great season with the community members that made it possible!** This year, the Harvest Party was a virtual celebration and UTC staff worked together to create a welcoming, interactive, and fun event. We distributed our final harvest for the season and raffled off gardening and cooking equipment and supplies. We honored a host of volunteers, youth, and community members for all the hard work and support they gifted one another this season.



External Presence: UTC Staff and board were featured in some key articles and panel discussions this year that highlighted our food sovereignty projects:

- [The Philadelphia Citizen, How to Grow Food in Philadelphia](#)
- [American Heart Association, Farms Flourish in Philadelphia Neighborhood](#)
- [WHYY: Victory Gardens](#)
- [Philadelphia Citizen: How to Grow Food](#)
- [The Food Trust: Farm to School Champions](#)
- [Inside Viasat, Nonprofit feeds its community physically, financially and spiritually](#)
- [Generosity, How to Disrupt a Non-Profit Board](#)

Featured Panels/Speakers:

- March: Pennsylvania Women’s Agriculture Network’s, [‘Resilient food system during crisis’](#)
- June: Get Healthy Philly’s, *city-wide Farmer’s Market Operators Panel*
- September: Penn State Extension’s, *Equity in Farmer’s Markets/Food Distribution models*
- September: Philabundance, *Food Insecurity + Inequity in Philadelphia*

Generating Resources: UTC is people-powered, including the people that share our vision of a more just society and demonstrate their commitment through investment in our work. Our supporters coordinated their efforts to generate resources during one of our most challenging years for our community, city, and world. Some key highlights include:

- UTC’s board launched a GoFundMe Campaign raising \$8,503 = 425 free food shares for families
- Selected by the members of The Transitional Network’s Giving Circle to receive a \$25,000 award
- Recipient of PHL-COVID 19 Relief Fund; Bread & Roses COVID-19 Relief Fund
- Awarded a 3-year PHENND VISTA position to support our organizational capacity building efforts

We also graciously received support from the following foundations and funds:

Whole Cities Foundation	The Philadelphia Foundation
Viasat Business Support	Sprouts Healthy Communities Foundation
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church	Bread and Roses Community Fund
Rosenlund Family Foundation	Claneil Foundation
The Allen Hilles Foundation	Leo & Peggy Pierce Family Foundation
Patricia Kind Family Foundation	First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia
Verizon Foundation	Catholic Campaign for Human Development
Henry E. Niles Foundation	Dolfinger McMahon
Merck Family Fund	Lindback Foundation
Wawa Foundation	Philadelphia Committee of The Garden Club of America
Union Benevolent Association	Clif Bar Foundation
The Barra Foundation	The Food Trust - Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI)
Alfred & Mary Douty Foundation	Garfield Charitable Fund
Providence Garden Club	Independence Foundation
Farm Aid Inc.	Berkowitz Foundation
1830 Foundation	Whole Foods Market



UTC was featured in the In Deep Initiative's [Resource Guide for Funders, Sustainable Food Systems organizations led by People of Color and Indigenous Communities](#) and spoke on the Philadelphia Philanthropy Networks' panel ["Role of White Supremacy in Philanthropy"](#). UTC also participated in the North East Farmers' Relief Fund, developing the process to administer funds to over 200 Black, Indigenous, and People of Color rural, urban and coastal farmers.

Race, Class, Gender: UTC recognizes the historical legacy of our food and land systems that were developed through violence, dispossession of Indigenous land, and exploitation of Black and immigrant labor, leading to the accumulation of capital and power among elites at the expense of the health, wellbeing and livelihood of the masses and the environment. These systems have become highly privatized, contributing to a growing wealth inequality gap, significant public health issues, and environmental crises. Present day issues of intergenerational and feminization of poverty, housing insecurity and poor health in Black working-class and poor communities are directly tied to disenfranchisement from agriculture, land, and the food system. UTC's intervention is to build a neighborhood-rooted equitable food system that uplifts Black leadership and self-agency through reconnection to and reclamation of land.

To develop this shared analysis, our Staff and Board are engaging in collective study that is coordinated by the ED and Board Chair. Further, as an organization with a long history of white leadership, we have engaged in a transformative process over the last four years to uproot white supremacy and heteropatriarchy within our organization. This includes shifts in who is leading our organization, our staff, mission, values, and vision, organizational policies, practices, and frameworks. We have adopted food sovereignty principles and the Just Transition strategy to guide our work towards fulfilling our mission.



Figure 7: Various UTC Staff, youth, volunteers at NF Farm's 4th Saturday