Organizational Overview: Urban Tree Connection (UTC) is a grassroots non-profit organization, founded in 1989, whose mission is to work with residents in Philadelphia’s historically marginalized urban communities to transform abandoned open spaces into safe and functional places that inspire and promote positive human interaction. UTC has partnered with residents in the Haddington neighborhood of West Philadelphia over the last two decades to redevelop 29 vacant lots into community-driven greening and gardening spaces, including our ¾ acre urban farm. Together, we have repurposed these spaces for communal gathering, sustainable food production, and multi-generational community health and wellness education.

Program Overview: UTC’s Youth Apprenticeship Program hires and mentors around 10 high school aged youth annually during the growing season. This unique five-month (June to October) paid Apprenticeship introduces young people of color that primarily live in Haddington, to urban agriculture. Each Apprentice receives one-to-one mentorship from UTC Staff. Youth also participate in a series of weekly leadership sessions that dig deeper into issues of food, land and environmental justice – in relationship to our local work, and the world at large.

This season, 15 youth applied directly to an apprenticeship track. After one-on-one interviews with their prospective mentors, 10 youth were hired at the beginning of the program; 6 returnees and 4 new apprentices. Seven of the youth resided in Haddington. The program opened on June 15th. Youth worked 8 hours a week during the spring session, an average of 20 hours for 6 weeks during the summer, and 6 hours a week once school started again in the fall.

<table>
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<th>Summer Youth Apprenticeship Schedule</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesdays: Group workshops</td>
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<td>Wednesdays: Youth-led Market or Neighborhood Canvassing Project</td>
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<td>Thursdays: Working with mentors at farm/gardens, markets, or programs</td>
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<td>Fridays: Team building exercise/field trip</td>
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<td>Saturdays: Working with mentors</td>
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Youth Mentorship: The cornerstone of our work with youth is the apprenticeship model, in which youth work with a mentor in one of three categories:

Farm Apprenticeship: Three farm apprentices worked primarily with our Lead Farmer at Neighborhood Foods Farm. Apprentices
participated in several responsibilities of working on an urban farm including soil remediation, seeding, planting, weeding, tending to crops, checking for pests, and harvesting and packaging produce.

*Market Apprenticeship:* Three youth worked with our Community Markets Coordinator. Apprentices prepared harvest for markets and the low-income Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, set up and broke down markets, engaged customers and managed the cashbox. Apprentices worked at two weekly Saturday markets, one at Neighborhood Foods Farm and the other in Rittenhouse Square, and additionally at a bi-weekly market at the West Philadelphia YMCA, and a monthly Tuesday market at the Shepard Recreational Center. When not working a market, market apprentices helped with daily activities at Neighborhood Foods farm.

*Community Engagement Apprenticeship:* Four youth in the Community Engagement Apprenticeship track worked with the Community Land Coordinator, on two key projects: 1) rehabilitating and managing UTC’s network of community gardens and parks in the Haddington neighborhood, and 2) door-to-door canvassing for a neighborhood-wide listening project. UTC maintains 6 core sites in the Haddington neighborhood, which range from community gardens, to pocket parks and open space. Over the course of the program the apprentices helped to remove trash, clear brush, mow, weed-whack, spread mulch, repair fences, and lead volunteer groups.

*Leadership Development:* The goal of UTC’s Youth Apprenticeship Program is to cultivate future community leaders, farmers, and food justice advocates of color. To that end, this year, we piloted a new curriculum focused on developing leadership capacities around food and land justice and community alternatives to capitalism. The material covered in the workshops was enriched by their participation in one of two engagement projects, the *Youth Cooperative Market* and the *Community Canvassing Project.* Through these projects, youth gained competency in 21st century workforce skills such as collaboration and teamwork, creativity and imagination, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Over the course of 8 weekly sessions from June through August, youth participated in discussion-based workshops aimed at developing a critical analysis of historical and current social conditions and their sense of agency in addressing pressing issues impacting their lives and neighborhood.

After introducing them to the meaning and importance of food sovereignty and agroecology as opposed to conventional exploitative food systems, we delved into rich conversations on the four types of oppression (*internal, interpersonal, institutional, and systematic*) and how they manifest in communities of color both historically and in present day. Youth learned about the history of Black land-based resistance and spoke with a member of their community who had participated in numerous civil rights and Black-led land-based
movements. We then turned our attention to naming and dismantling the societal narratives that uphold capitalism and suppress collective imagining of alternatives. Throughout the program, we built on the ideas of alternative economics, emphasizing the role, function and forms of cooperatives as tools for building community wealth.

Youth-Led Market: This year, Apprentices launched and operated a second market at Neighborhood Foods farm, where they explored cooperative economic principles and practices of democratic, member-controlled worker cooperatives.

Each day began with an assessment by the youth on what needed to be done in preparation for the market, including what was ready to be harvested, what prices produce could be sold at, what potential revenue they could generate that day and who would be responsible for which tasks. Afterwards, they set about smoothly preparing for the market. During the market itself, which ran from 2-6pm, youth split into two crews, one to sell at the stand, and the other to actively recruit customers from the neighborhood.

As a pilot project, building a customer base was a crucial part of a successful market. Youth walked through their neighborhood in pairs, handing out flyers and talking to the neighbors about the program. The crew that stayed behind engaged the customers as they arrived, educating them about the vegetables and handling transactions. At the end of each day, after breaking down the market and cleaning up, we debriefed the day, discussing our successes and growth points as individuals and as a team.

Learning to work cooperatively challenged both youth and adults, who had to practice the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity in order to navigate this new way of working together. Karyn and Marquis (pictured above), both apprentices on the Market track, quickly emerged as leaders among their peers and were challenged to step into greater responsibilities of coaching their peers, taking initiative on unforeseen tasks, modeling consistency and mood management, and managing cash flow. Both students met the challenges of leadership with some resistance at first, feeling uncomfortable with both the added responsibility and with power dynamics involved. Overall, both students rose to the challenge and helped smoothly coordinate successful markets even on the most difficult days.

Community Canvassing Project: The canvassing project was the first step of UTC’s Neighborhood Engagement Project, a multi-year plan intended to build stronger connections between the organization and Haddington residents. Under the instruction of the Community Land Stewardship Coordinator, the apprentices were trained in “deep canvassing”, a method of
Canvassing designed to stimulate in-depth conversations between canvassers and residents. This training included role play and discussions about how to handle uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situations.

Canvassers worked in pairs, with one guiding the conversation and the other recording answers, asking residents questions such as: “What do you enjoy about your neighborhood?”, “What challenges do you face living in your neighborhood?”, and “If you had to see your neighborhood organized to fight for one thing, what would that be?”

The apprentices began the project with a lot of shyness and anxiety about speaking to strangers. After knocking on over 400 doors, and having 122 canvassing conversations, they had all become more confident public speakers and conversationalists. While all of the apprentices displayed considerable personal and professional growth over the course of the program, Q’mara and Azjan, Community Engagement apprentices, became key group leaders.

After each session of canvassing, the team held debriefs to discuss experiences and observations. Some days this would be exploring challenging conditions of canvassing: hot weather, neighbors that didn’t want to talk or who were abrupt with their responses; other days would bring deep discussion about residents’ responses and how they compared and contrasted with the experiences of our youth, many of whom live in Haddon. Recognizing that they shared many experiences, concerns, and aspirations with their neighbors, was an important realization for our apprentices, and sustained their motivation to complete the project. Finally, once the canvassing work was done and the data analyzed, two of the youth participated in a community dinner at which the canvassing findings were presented to neighbors.

**Team-building & Accountability**

Critical to the success of our work with the youth was piloting a new accountability framework based on The Food Project’s “Straight Talk” model. This model, which uses guiding principles for giving and receiving feedback, offers youth an opportunity to reflect the strengths and areas for improvement they observed for both their team members and themselves.

Two different iterations of “straight talk” were used. During the summer, the Education Coordinator held weekly meetings in which all the youth would go around and share feedback to each individual member of the group, including adult mentors. While youth were hesitant at first, as the program progressed the apprentices were more willing and able to share constructive criticism and praise with one another. Though the sessions could be intense and difficult, the space created during this time allowed for conflicts to be resolved, positive behaviors to be reinforced, and over time, supported the development of individual and collective emotional intelligence among the group.

Mentors were trained in the “straight talk” model at the beginning of the season, and met with each of their youth one-on-one for bi-weekly feedback in the summer and fall. Mentor-to-mentee straight talk created space for mentors to coach mentees and give suggestions for improvement in a balanced way, while recognizing and appreciating youths’ abilities and growth. Throughout the season, we witnessed a great transformation in the youths’ ability to self-reflect on their own actions and in their empathy and support of their peers.
Field Trips / Youth Exchanges: Another important aspect of our Apprentices’ learning (peer to peer) occurs when we connect them to other youth of color working with urban farms and gardens across Philadelphia. Our Apprentices are also given the opportunity to learn from farmers and food justice advocates locally and nationally through their attendance at events.

This year we participated in several youth exchanges. We first went to Hoodstock, a fun annual summer festival hosted by the youth of Urban Creators at the Life Do Grow Farm. Our second outing was to Norris Square Neighborhood Project, a Latinx-centered community organization at which youth toured their community gardens and helped their youth with a neighborhood clean-up. In August, we celebrated the Haitian Independence and Black resistance across the diaspora with youth from the African Family Health Organization (AFAHO). Youth cooked Haitian soup joumou with vegetables from the gardens and learned African rhythms on the drums. We visited Brightspot Farm, a youth farm in Delaware where both youth groups worked side-by-side each other, swapping stories. Lastly, our youth attended the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group Conference (NESAWG) in October, which not only reinforced what our youth had been learning, but allowed them to connect to other youth and food systems leaders both in their community and regionally in the broader movement.

Harvest Party: The season ended with our annual Harvest Party, in which the youth, their families and neighbors shared a potluck meal, laughed, played, and enjoyed each other’s company. The Apprentices enjoyed making the decorations, handing out Halloween candy to the younger children, and manning the mask-making and face-painting tables. At another table, Owen from TrueLove Seeds showed us seed-cleaning techniques and spoke with the youth about the practice of seed-keeping.