

State College—The Garden City? Christopher Uhl

When I was a little kid, my family had a vegetable garden. One day, I took it upon myself to add a big helping of fertilizer around the base of all the tomato plants.

When I returned to the garden the next day, I was shocked to see that those tomato plants had died. I had over-fertilized them. Later, when my father asked me if I knew what had happened to those dead plants, I shook my head, but I think my dad knew.

Now, almost 50 years later, I am having a second try at vegetable gardening, and I am going at it with gusto. For example, just this past weekend, my partner, Dana, and I ordered 50 different types of seeds from a vegetable catalogue. We will be planting some of the seeds—the cold-hardy ones—next month, as soon as the soil thaws. I can hardly wait!

It may sound crazy, but I can't get vegetables off my mind. In part, this is because I love food, and I have come to see that the very best foods for me to eat are locally grown, fresh vegetables. But there is more: I am discovering the joy and deep satisfaction that comes from growing my own food, and I want to share this joy with others by helping to create a vision of Central Pennsylvania as a vegetable gardening hotspot, with State College as the "Garden City."

So fast forward with me five years into the future and imagine State College with vegetable gardens everywhere—on school and church grounds, in municipal parks, on office park land, in back yards and front yards. Imagine, too, vegetables growing in the winter in scores of hoop houses located all throughout the city. Imagine people coming together to eat wholesome, homegrown, fresh food all year long.

Farfetched? I don't think so. For starters, note that there is no shortage of potential arable land for the enactment of this vision. Indeed, many schools have tracts of land that are not in use. Easterly Parkway Elementary, located right across from where Dana and I live in State College, has a playground that covers about one acre and another two or three acres of land that are simply mowed.

The mowed land could be converted into a school mini-farm or "food laboratory" that could provide food for both the school cafeteria and the families of the school children. Teachers could use the food laboratory to teach students about health, soil science, insect biology, horticulture, sales, geometry, cooking, physical fitness and much more.

Aside from schools, substantial tracts of idle land are under the control of businesses. In State College, there are many acres of mowed lawn associated with the enterprises off of Science Park Road. With a bit of entrepreneurial chutzpah, those lawns could be stitched together into one or more urban mini-farms.

The land itself could be leased at a nominal fee to young aspiring farmers who lack the capital to purchase farmland of their own. The vegetables produced in such mini-farms could be made available, in the form of a weekly food basket, to the employees of the companies leasing the land. It would be a win-win-win-win situation.

Companies would no longer need to spend money maintaining and mowing large expanses of lawn, and they would maybe even save on health care costs because their employees would be eating fresh, healthy food. Meanwhile, job opportunities would open up for aspiring farmers. Lastly, the local economy would benefit because food dollars

would be channeled directly to local producers, rather than going to food producers in far off places.

There is one final option for urban agriculture that is easy to overlook. I was alerted to it when a friend who lives on a one-third-acre lot in State College said that she would be delighted if someone wanted to grow vegetables on her property.

This leads me to wonder if there might be many folks who don't want to garden themselves but who would be willing to lease a portion of their yards in exchange for a basket of vegetables each week. And maybe, just maybe, there are some young folks among us who would like to get their hands dirty doing real and ennobling work. Just think of it: dozens of young, itinerant farmers, moving from plot to plot throughout State College, turning lawns into verdant vegetable gardens and making food available throughout our neighborhoods.

These are my thoughts and dreams amidst February snow. Maybe there are other folks with similar visions. If so, let's talk! You can find Dana and me in our front-yard vegetable garden.