

Food Innovator Profile: Barbara Buffaloe (Columbia MO)

Barbara Buffaloe (Columbia MO) reflects on her experience in urban agricultural policy and partnerships.

What does a journey towards sound urban agricultural practices look like? We chat with Barbara Buffaloe to find out.



Figure 1: Image from columbiaurbanag.org

Q. In 2014, you participated in a Peer Learning exchange with Fayetteville AR and Lawrence KS. Where you sticking a toe in the water at that point, or in the process of refining your urban agriculture policies?

A. We were at the point of refining our policies when we did the Peer Learning Exchange. Earlier, we had been approached by the Community Garden Association, a local non-profit, and by the Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture (CCUA). They were requesting use of vacant city lots for community gardens. It was my job to determine the broader community benefit of undertaking the policy work to enable this.

Our focus had been on energy – urban agriculture was not a priority at the time. But our local partners were persistent in their requests. In part because of this persistence, and in part because of my growing awareness of urban food trends, we became more interested in prioritizing it. Because we were interested in expanding urban land use, we wanted to see how others were doing this first. That was why we went to Lawrence and took with us our partners that had been so vocal: CCUA and the Community Garden Coalition. Lawrence’s Health Dept. made the case as a champion for urban agriculture. It was included in their strategic plan. We followed their lead, adding access to healthy foods to Columbia’s strategic plan. Also, our STAR Communities assessment showed a gap in this area, making it clear that the time was right.

It was interesting to watch the momentum snowball with each reaffirming action. CCUA has a dynamic innovator, and watching him grow as a community leader has been satisfying and inspiring. One thing he says often is that “everybody eats”, so that’s what we start with. It dissolves barriers and is truly a common ground. Proven success is the other selling point. We make our urban ag work measureable, so we can say how much is being donated, etc.

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Q. You just won a Partners for Places award to build Columbia's Agriculture Park: A Public-Private Partnership Providing Fresh Produce and Better Nutrition to Columbia's Food Pantries and Demonstrating Sound Environmental Practices. Excited?

A. Yes! Our partners are amazing and skilled, so they are well equipped to manage the deliverables of this grant. We made sure we could track what we said we would do. The Partners for Places grant is just the beginning – we are also doing a capital campaign. We have community members holding us accountable to succeed. If we don't think big, then big things will never happen.

This award has also given me the ability to enter my office into a large, really cool project. This is a chance for me to influence the overarching focus of the work, to insure our sustainability goals can be met. It is strengthening relationships across city departments and with the broader community. We needed some bigger walk-the-talk projects to showcase, and this is one of them.

Q. How do you structure your urban ag work? Where does it live in your department, and who do you lean on the most to help you manage the city's involvement?

A. We try to have our community own the urban agricultural work, as opposed to the city. Because we're in a conservative environment, we are conscious of government's role in everything we undertake. We tuck it into our stormwater program. CoMo Common Ground has a commitment to food security. The Farmers Market is on city property. We are seen as a supporting partner. Boone County Health Department took on staffing roles. When they were accredited, they designated one team to healthy living and access to food.



Q. What advice do you have for those who are developing their own urban agricultural programs?

A. Invite yourself to the table and don't be shy about making urban food contacts. I find opportunities when I give something. I was seen as a resource with programs like USDN's Peer Learning Exchange and Partners for Places. I could also find ready examples from other communities. All of this showed interest in what our food partners are working on. Having those connections has strengthened these efforts.