

Hosting a Farmers Market

Stevens Square Farmers Market

*Plymouth Congregational Church and Stevens Square Community Organization
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

Empty land and parking lots are precious commodities in some urban areas. This “wasted space” can be gold for innovative thinkers who find ways to improve their neighborhood and community at-large.

Plymouth Congregational Church (PCC) and the Stevens Square Community Organization (SSCO) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have accomplished this and more.

History

Plymouth Congregational Church is located south of downtown Minneapolis in the Stevens Square neighborhood. Great things are happening both inside and outside the church. The Groveland Food Shelf is operated in the church, the Stevens Square Farmers Market takes place in the church parking lot and a community gardening program is located a short distance away. All have links to one another.

Motivation

The idea for a community garden was put forth 11 years ago by a group of neighborhood association members. Two nearby lots had become hosts to trouble. One lot housed a run-down building that had turned into a place to buy drugs, while the other lot had become overgrown with weeds. The city demolished the house and the weeds were cleared away, allowing neighborhood residents to take advantage of these spaces for community gardening.

The project

Robert Skaft of the SSCO has been involved with the gardens since the beginning, and currently serves as both the community garden and farmers market manager. Since the gardens’ inception, Robert has hosted various groups who have added to the viability and appearance of the gardens. Members of the Women’s Correctional Facility in Shakopee, Minnesota, built a tool shed for use in the gardens. In 1999, graduating architecture students from the University of Minnesota built an aqueduct to serve as a watering system connected to the hydrant, allowing gardeners to retrieve water from a central station on site. The two garden locations currently support 35 gardeners who tend to



their plots throughout the growing season, raising fruits, vegetables and flowers for their own use. Costs are \$25 for a 4-foot-by-8-foot plot and \$50 for a 10-foot-by-20-foot plot annually. Robert organizes workdays that include watering and weeding.

At the end of each season, Robert sends a letter to the participating gardeners to determine if they will return next year. A turnover rate of about 15 plots is generally expected and there is a waiting list for the following season. The Drop-in Center, a program

at PCC for people with both physical and mental disabilities, helps maintain two plots as well. For two seasons, the Groveland Food for Youth program, also associated with PCC, helped maintain the gardens through weeding and watering. Homeless youth were paid \$10 an hour to do this work. Robert hopes to renew this connection in the future.

“I have a good group of people who keep the gardens clean,” says Robert. “People tell me that they really enjoy that the gardens are here and that they cleaned up the neighborhood.” One of Robert’s biggest complaints from gardeners is the occasional theft of produce, but they understand that it is hard to avoid.

One of Robert’s goals included tying the gardens to the food shelf at PCC. Produce from two plots at the gardens was donated to the food shelf weekly. The produce added fresh and healthy options to the Groveland Food Shelf. Now, this donated produce also comes from the farmers market.

The Groveland Food Shelf is located in the basement of Plymouth Congregational Church and distributes food for those in need. Around 25,000 pounds of food are shared with nearly 1,000 people on a

monthly basis. Five churches are involved with this monumental effort. The food shelf advertises that it is “continuously addressing the need for an ongoing supply of fresh vegetables and fruits.”

The idea for a neighborhood farmers market came about in 2007 from both Robert and the former Executive Director of SSCO, Julie Filapek. “There is no grocery store in our neighborhood where you can buy fresh fruits and vegetables,” says Robert. “We felt this would be a great niche for the community.” Robert and Julie attended a small farmers market in a nearby neighborhood and then launched their own market the following year.

Robert came up with an idea to connect the church with the market. Katie Dailey, who serves on both the SSCO board and the PCC Outreach and Events Committee, encouraged him to pursue the idea. That spring, Robert approached the Plymouth Congregational Church and asked about hosting a small farmers market in their parking lot, which was in a prime location due to a busy four-way intersection and nearby bus stops. The market was the first to be awarded a Local Produce Market permit, the result of a new City of Minneapolis policy championed by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy to reduce barriers to starting small farmers markets. According to Katie, “The congregation at Plymouth was very excited about the prospect of having a farmers market in the parking lot.”



The spring of 2008 marked the beginning of the Stevens Square Farmers Market. Two or three farmers sell their own locally grown fruits and vegetables every week. One farmer accepts Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers, allowing customers who participate in the federal Women, Infants and Children nutrition program to purchase healthy food. Sales are robust and the number of shoppers has been steady. The market takes place on Wednesdays from 3-7 p.m., when many parishioners also visit the church.

What makes this market unique is the connection with the church. At the end of the market, the vendors fill a few boxes with their unsold produce. Robert takes this produce to the church to be distributed through the food shelf. The fee that is normally charged to vendors who sell at farmers markets is waived if they give fresh produce to the food shelf. “The vendors are cool with the idea,” says Robert.

As market manager, Robert is present for the entirety of each and every market. He provides information on local foods and healthy eating to interested shoppers, along with recipes featuring produce sold at the market. Robert is truly devoted to all three projects and feels good about the connections made between the three. “The whole idea is to bring fresh produce to the people, whether it’s through the community gardens, the food shelf or the farmers market,” says Robert.

Lessons learned

“Being exposed to locally grown food is good and helps people learn new things about food—and probably about the neighborhood,” says Robert. “Even if they’re just passing by on foot, bike, car or bus, they see the market and notice that it really brings life to this little corner of the world.” Katie agrees that taking advantage of an under-utilized space for a small farmers market benefits the church and the community. “Now that we are well into the season and the farmers market is in full swing, people are really enjoying the chance to purchase fresh produce. We hope that the market will continue next year.”

Web resources

Plymouth Congregational Church: www.plymouth.org

Stevens Square Community Organization: www.sscoweb.org

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy Mini Market Project: www.iatp.org/localFoods/project_miniMarkets.cfm