



"We Are Farmers" Learning Table

Co-hosted by Food Well Alliance & University of Georgia Cooperative Extension
October 13, 2016

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension and Food Well Alliance, in partnership with the City of Atlanta, Georgia Organics and the Georgia Farmers Market Association, hosted over 75 urban and peri-urban farmers, community gardeners, and representatives from nonprofit, educational, and government organizations in a conversation about resources and scaling up the Atlanta food system. The learning table, "We Are Farmers," is part of a series of events coordinated by Food Well Alliance that engage actors in the food system to facilitate shared knowledge and resources across Metro-Atlanta. The events also introduce and expand on the Local Food Baseline Report and Local Food Roadmap, two inter-organizational initiatives that will map where Atlanta's local food system is today, where it needs to go, and how it will get there through coordinated actions and investments across the five-county region.

"We Are Farmers" was the first time University of Georgia Extension (UGA) talked one-on-one with Atlanta's urban farms about resource needs to grow their local food system impact. After presentations by UGA representatives, attendees grouped together by their primary roles: as farmers; as organizational supporters of farmers through resource-provision; or as community gardeners. The groups asked three sets of questions, which differed slightly but were parallel in their investigation of current challenges, challenges to scaling impact on the local food system, and resources that could aid in scaling up.

For purposes of clarity, each group's answers are kept separate, except for question #1 for farmers and their supporters. This analysis keeps community gardeners separate as they face challenges unique to their models.

I. Challenges in marketing and selling Atlanta-grown food

Farmers and their supporters agreed on several obstacles facing urban farmers who sell their food commercially. The most frequently mentioned challenge is farmers' own need to **develop marketing skills and capacity**. Farmers said "farming is a full-time job and marketing is a full-time job, and there isn't enough time to do both." Farmers say, and their supporters agree, they lack "marketing knowledge," staff time for marketing and "customer outreach," an "understanding of the demographics of current and potential consumers of local food."

Paired with a limited ability to do marketing, farmers in particular call for "**establishing local**

markets.” Farmers say it is “hard to break into new market areas.” Meanwhile their **traditional market channels are less effective:** farmers markets and CSAs have proliferated, but the oversaturation of markets has diminished their farm-impact.

Part of new market development is **customer education**, for which farmers and supporters advocated, particularly “helping people see the **value of local** even if the price is higher.” This is particularly important because urban farmers feel like they are in **competition with large retailers** who are “green-washing and local-washing” their produce.

Getting to market would be helped by **physical and labor resources**, including **aggregation and distribution**, improved **land access**, and partnership to identify common standards of **quality and food safety**. These would be further improved upon by a focus on **wholesale-readiness training for farmers** including crop planning for meeting market demand, maintaining consistent quality, and connecting farmers to resources to improve their land and facilities.

II. Farm barriers to scaling up business

Barriers to scaling up their sales are similar to current challenges. Atlanta farmers said the **availability of skilled labor** to help with production was a serious farm-side setback, as **land and infrastructure limits**, like cold storage and season extension.

The greatest number of responses centered around business and market development. **Professional services** like accountants, lawyers, insurers, and grant-writers are hard to find or expensive--particularly professionals with a background in agriculture. **Year-round markets** and **aggregation/distribution services** were also cited as a potential growth area, particularly if cooperative or collaborative marketing were available to maximize impact.

Education is needed both to expand **consumers’ local buy-in** and farmers’ understanding of **local policies, certifications, and regulations**, including operating legally, understanding when and what types of insurance are needed, and how food safety is incorporated into the function of an urban farm.

Finally, farmers note that they want to be **servicing low income communities**, but the high costs of production necessitate that they keep prices high or sell high-value produce. Some said that **grants or other capital** may be used to offset those costs and scale up their businesses.

III. Organizational barriers to scaling local food impact

Atlanta’s farm supporters noted that their lack of time prevented them from **identifying long- and short-term goals** or perhaps prevented them from organizing **cooperative or collaborative marketing** strategies.

Supporting organizations themselves face barriers to helping farmers achieve their goals. They have **little business-development expertise** or **organizational capacity** to help farmers. They feel that the “**lack effective outreach**” strategies to both farmers and other organizations to help farmers get the resources they need. They also say they lack the **data and funding** to inform and staff programs that can help farmers.

IV. The Role of UGA in scaling Atlanta’s agriculture

Farmers had many ideas for how UGA can assist them in scaling their production, sales, and impact. They asked for **monetary assistance mechanisms** including providing insurance and subsidy programs, grant opportunities and assistance with grant applications, and actively supporting small urban and rural farm subsidies.

Farmers suggested UGA author **consumer-oriented resources** to educate consumers and promote local food. UGA could also build a suite of **urban farmer-oriented resources** including

information on organic and sustainable growing resources, marketing information, guides to certifications and insurance, and conducting “pre-visit farm checks to help farms prepare for certifications.” On the market side, UGA could help farmers gain access to more farmers markets, larger markets, and consumers who use nutrition assistance program benefits.

Finally, farmers suggested UGA **engage with Metro Atlanta growers more frequently and scale its offerings to meet the needs of small urban farms.**

V. Community gardens: scaling community food impact

Community garden leaders share many of the same issues as urban farmers, including access to land, water, and financial support. But as community-oriented production sites they must also **gain consensus** on everything from land and equipment management to leadership direction.

Leadership is hard to maintain, say community gardeners, because their lack of revenue make it difficult to **hire and maintain a garden manager at a living wage** and maintain organizational stability. **Internal leadership and external partnerships** are crucial to community garden success and longevity.

VI. Organizations, programs, and policies to scale up urban farms’ impact

Supporters and Community Gardeners named several organizations that might assist farmers as they scale up their businesses, including:

Small Business Development Council (county)	UGA
USDA (county and federal)	Fort Valley State U.
Southern SARE	City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management
Continued education - community colleges (county)	USDA-NRCS
Continued education - universities (local/regional)	USDA-Rural Development
Cooperatives (local)	Georgia Organics
Food Hubs (local, regional)	Habesha Works
Policy advocates (all levels)	City and county governments
Farmers Market managers	Atlanta Community Food Bank
Master Gardeners	Real estate professionals
Atlanta Works	DeKalb Works

These organizations may assist farmers by providing **farmer wholesale readiness training, business training,** and assistance in **production and food safety certifications.** Supporters called for greater access for farmers, like changes to **zoning laws,** and to low-resource consumers through the provision of **low-cost EBT machines** to accept nutrition assistance program benefits.

ANALYSIS

Farmers want to expand their growing and marketing skills, and are looking for help. Supporters of urban farmers seemed more focused on farmers’ need for funding than the farmers themselves. Instead farmers focus on making their farms and produce more market-ready, connecting to

markets, and marketing cooperatively to scale their impact.

Physical resources are still needed for farmers and community gardeners, including land, water, and permissive local policies. But the physical resources that will help farmers scale are more network-based, and include post-harvest handling equipment, aggregation, distribution, and transportation.

Meanwhile, support organizations say they do not have adequate staff or knowledge to help farmers. Farmers pointed to UGA to provide some of those skill-trainings and connections to market.

Two “wicked problems” facing farmers and community gardeners is their ability to provide food for low-resource communities, and doing so without burning out because of a lack of leadership or stable, livable income. This question—“How can urban farms be sustainable in their farming practices **and their people practices?**”—may guide some fact-finding as FWA prepares the Local Food Roadmap.

Overall, consensus was strong among farmers about their needs. This points to a unified producer movement that may galvanize around common goals set out by the Local Food Roadmap.