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Bringing It All Home – The Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers Cooperative of Pittsburgh



Photo: BUGS farmers show off their lush produce.
Photo by BUGS

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By Ron Gaydos

I have sat with Raqueeba Bey and Ayanna Jones, the founders of the Black Urban Gardeners (BUGS) and Farmers Cooperative of Pittsburgh, at one of East End Brewing's game nights to play the game "Co-opoly" (they had ginger ale) and learn about cooperative business. I've met with them and a lawyer helping them to organize their new venture into the right legal entity. They have a good lawyer, and she's determined to mentor new cooperatives, especially in the black community. Pittsburgh needs a lawyer well-versed in cooperatives.

I've waited, like they all did, for the weather to break so they could finally see lush produce growing in their community gardens. And I've been greeted warmly, along with all of the

other customers, to the first of many Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers Cooperative farmers markets.

Where did all of this determination come from? A lot of it was always there, and a lot of it is responding to urgent community needs. As Raqueeb put it, BUGS, which members affectionately call the cooperative, “revives and continues the tradition of black farmers begun after Emancipation in the 1860’s. It imparts the gardening and agricultural skills many people in the community have to others to keep that tradition alive.”

It addresses the dire food desert problem in many majority-black communities by making fresh food available to people who have limited transportation options. It does this with the biweekly BUGS farmers market and monthly free food distribution in partnership with 412 Food Rescue. The market is in Homewood for now, but BUGS is planning a second market in Uptown/Soho next year. The farmers markets include cooking demonstrations so people can learn new ways to prepare the food they buy, whether they are beginners or experienced cooks.

The markets also hold talks on various social justice themes, such as the impacts of gentrification and increasing economic opportunity in the black community. In this way, the cooperative can keep tabs on developments and issues in the community. I should mention that they have a good time doing all of this, too. Music, dance, and art are a part of every farmers market.

The BUGS founders are Raqueeba Bey and Ayanna Jones. There are 25 members now and the organization is growing. BUGS has partnerships with the Black Permaculture Network, Grow Pittsburgh, the Penn State Cooperative Extension’s Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, Landslide Community Farm, the Homewood YMCA, and many other groups in several majority-black neighborhoods. Several members of the community, like Celeste Taylor, Rhonda Sears, and Ayanna Jones, have become certified master gardeners. Others, such as Ashley Cox and Isaiah Bey, are graduates of Bidwell Training Center’s well-respected horticulture program. BUGS is a proud member of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives, benefits from its services, and is helping to advance the cooperative business scene in the Pittsburgh region.

BUGS, designed as a cooperative, has in its requirements most of the cooperative principles, including member participation both financially and with efforts of continuing education, cooperation with other cooperatives, and mutual assistance and respect.

Where is this happening? At the Sankofa Village garden on N. Braddock Avenue and Monticello Street in Homewood, at the Harry and Theresa Orlando Garden in Uptown, at the Paulson Street Mosque and Maroon Children's Garden in Lincoln-Lemington, at Mary Savage's flower garden in Larimer, and Muffy Menendez's Mom's Garden on the North Side. BUGS brings fresh food, fresh knowledge, and fresh leadership around food and spreads it around these neighborhoods..

The BUGS Farmers Markets are at the House of Manna Worship Center at 7240 Frankstown Avenue in Homewood 15208 on these dates:

- September 10th and 24th
- November 13th , and yes, on
- October 8th and 22nd
- December 10th

At the September 10th BUGS Farmers Market the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives will hold an informational workshop on starting and running a cooperative business at no charge to attendees.

For more information and to join the Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh, email blackfarmerscoop@gmail.com or call (412) 206-1597.

See more New People News at:

<https://newpeoplenewspaper.com/2016/09/01/bringing-it-all-home-the-black-urban-gardeners-and-farmers-cooperative-of-pittsburgh/#more-2825>

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THINK OUTSIDE THE BOSS.