

A CLOSER LOOK AT:

APRIL 2015



Ohana Gardens



Keith and Diane Hoyer have grand visions for their home in Highland Park. As committed local food advocates, they have gardened together for about the last fifteen years. Each year, their growing area seemed to get bigger, and what started in the backyard quickly grew to become a small working farm. They are now passionate about helping others to set up gardens, but never had imagined that they would end up where they are now. The Hoyes, who managed and maintained their own rental properties for most of the last 20 years in Detroit, divide labor on their farm very efficiently. Keith, who also has decades of experience as a Detroit firefighter, handles the farm's building, maintenance, and mechanical needs. Building on her years of experience managing the business aspects of their rental properties, Diane handles most of the planning for the farm.



The Hoyes felt drawn to urban farming due to necessity from the local economic conditions. Through their own studies and research, they felt that they had a need to control their own food resources and to empower others to do the same. Diane felt strongly that she needed to go into some of the poorest cities in Michigan, where inequality was so prevalent, to teach people to grow their own food. She explained that, "With this ability, regardless of other sources of support, people could take care of themselves." Diane and Keith see hoophouses as another way to support this vision of self-sufficiency. Keith elaborated, saying, "Our dream could get even bigger with the added sustainability from the hoophouse, allowing us to extend the growing season, even in this climate. By going bigger, we can help others and teach others. The time is good and the location is good. There are so many organizations in Detroit supporting this work – Keep Growing Detroit, the Greening of Detroit, Earthworks Urban Farm, Detroit Black Community Food Security Network – with their input and support this makes a great choice for our future and a happy choice for retirement."



The Hoyes first started growing in a hoophouse in June of 2014. They were also recently approved through the USDA-NRCS EQIP for a second hoophouse that will be installed next to the first structure later in 2015. Diane remarked that a hoophouse is "heaven" in the whole farming experience, and that it is something that she views as necessary for their urban farm. She explained, "The hoophouse really becomes an excellent mechanism for survival. I honestly think that every street should have a hoophouse, just as neighborhoods have playgrounds. We should teach our children how to survive on the land."

Much of what Keith and Diane hope to do in 2015 involves outreach. They hope to be an educational outlet for local students and have already hosted fifteen visiting student workers at Ohana Gardens. They also plan to offer beginning growing classes for the community and are especially trying to reach children and seniors. Their unique property, which includes roughly 25 housing units, is especially well-suited for their ambitious educational and community goals. In addition to all that they have done to develop the farm itself, Diane and Keith have worked tirelessly to transform their property so that it can act as a bed and breakfast agricultural destination.

The Hoyes' welcoming nature is extraordinary: Their 1.5 acres are already an appealing destination, featuring not only the farm itself, but also a multimedia meeting space, an outdoor gathering area, original outdoor art installations, a treehouse lookout, a gallery of African art, and a full-featured exercise facility.

While the Hoyes began their farming operation by giving food away to local residents, they are now starting to look at markets in hopes of creating a sustainable business model. Keith and Diane just joined Will Allen's Growing Power Initiative, a Milwaukee-based urban agriculture operation that works to support the growth of community food systems. The Hoyes are very invested in the national conversation on urban agriculture and are eager to learn from the experiences of others. They aim to function better as a business, with more effective marketing, sales, and distribution, but they also want to create a teaching community. They see sales moving beyond just produce, and are also interested in aquaponics, teas, and composting.

Keith and Diane reflected on their first year with a hoophouse, agreeing that prospective growers should simply get started. Keith expanded on that, saying, "It's a lot of constant work, but if you love it, it doesn't feel like work. Know what and how much of it you want to plant. Just because you have a hoophouse, the food won't grow itself." They agreed that winter growing has been their biggest challenge so far. They installed their first hoophouse somewhat later in the year in 2014 and struggled with taking full advantage of the remainder of the growing season. Altogether, this left them feeling unprepared for their first winter season. The Hoyes learned a great deal from that first year and already have planned out strategies to be better prepared for year-round growing in the future.

Diane explained that, in their time so far with Ohana Gardens, she is most proud of bringing people in from other countries to join the agricultural movement with them. She has really enjoyed networking, teaching, and working with children. She is grateful for being able to share both food and her passion for it, and feels that they are helping to change the dynamics and image of Detroit. Keith agreed, saying that during a recent local conference, they had nineteen people stay on their property, representing at least five different countries. He said, "Having those people see what we have here, I was proud of what we've done and of our ability to connect with them and inspire them."



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