

A CLOSER LOOK AT:

MAY 2015



# Ortega Urban Farm



Rufino Vargas is a true American success story. Born in Guerrero, Mexico to a farming family, he studied as an agricultural technician before moving to the United States in 1988. He spent roughly ten years in Florida before moving to Michigan, the place he now considers his home.

Rufino is very proud to be a U.S. citizen and feels that this country gives people an opportunity to work hard and to see the results of their labor turn into a better quality of life. He's active in the local immigrant community, and has become a valued resource for other people who are working their way toward citizenship. He is also very pleased with the success that his own children have found through their hard work and determination in school. His eldest, a daughter, will begin her studies at the University of Michigan in the fall on scholarship, with an intent to pursue a career in medicine.

It took some time for Rufino to circle back to agriculture after moving to the United States. He first spent a great deal of his career cooking in the restaurant industry, giving him knowledge and skills that will be very valuable as he now seeks to expand his business, Ortega Urban Farm. Ortega Urban Farm evolved from community gardens that Rufino and several neighbors developed on unused lots in the City of Detroit. In his earliest days of farming in Detroit, city staff steered him toward the Greening of Detroit for assistance in navigating the necessary permitting and governmental hurdles, and his group found success in securing land, growing crops, and providing fresh food to their families and neighbors. In time, thanks to their invaluable help, he found his relationship with the Greening of Detroit deepening, eventually committing his own time as an AmeriCorps volunteer to build his own skills as a grower, while also giving back to the local community.

Ortega Urban Farm has now expanded over several empty lots in the City of Detroit and is setting up to be a key supplier for local restaurants. Rufino clearly loves this work; his face particularly lights up as he offers details about his latest find in hot peppers, his favorite crop. He explains that growing your own vegetables provides many benefits. Through a farm like his, he feels that he can save money, eat fresher food, and be secure in knowing exactly how the crops were grown. He feels great satisfaction in knowing that his own crops are truly organic.

Rufino is endlessly resourceful, repurposing shipping crates as raised beds and creating innovative rainwater catchment systems to supply his irrigation needs. Participating in the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wayne County Local Food Initiative is helping him to take his passion for farming to a new level. With their support, he installed his first hoophouse in May 2015 and will now be able to explore new, year-round market opportunities with the restaurant industry that he knows so well. Ortega Urban Farm is well on its way to the next level, with crops planted and thriving before the hoophouse was even completed. Good things are growing for Rufino Vargas.



## LEARN MORE:

The construction of the hoophouse at Ortega Urban Farm took place in May 2015 through the Detroit-Wayne County Seasonal High Tunnels Educational Initiative. Nineteen volunteers contributed over 100 hours of hands-on time to learn more about proper hoophouse construction, gain valuable building experience, and help make year-round growing a possibility at Ortega Urban Farm. See a step-by-step slideshow of the structure's installation at: <http://goo.gl/59CiQI>.

Rufino's journey to American citizenship, his passion for urban agriculture, and his family's Mexican heritage are also featured in an inspiring video interview from the exhibition *Pathways to Freedom in the Americas: Shared Experiences between Michigan and Mexico* from the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. Watch online at: <http://goo.gl/y34KLl>.



This profile series is hosted by the Southeast Michigan RC&D Council, as part of their Detroit-Wayne County Seasonal High Tunnel Educational Initiative. Learn more at: <http://semircd.org/projects/hightunnels>. Funding for this initiative has been provided by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Since late 2009, NRCS has been leading a Seasonal High Tunnel (SHT) Initiative as a part of its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The SHT Initiative brings financial and technical assistance to support installation and management of seasonal high tunnels or "hoophouses" in agricultural production. Both the NRCS and the SEMIRCD are equal opportunity providers and employers.

