

# Back to basics: Farms sprouting in Phila.

An organic farm in Northeast Philadelphia could be part of a push toward "agritourism" in the region.

**Somerton Tanks Farm**, a pilot project operated on the site of **Philadelphia Water Department** holding tanks, is already a source of fresh vegetables sold in places like **Reading Terminal Market** and restaurants like **Coleman at Normandy Farms** in Blue Bell. Now, the organizers hope it can serve as an economic development catalyst, including drawing visitors.

"We want to get policy makers to see this," said **Roxanne Christensen**, a board member on the **Institute for Innovations in Local Farming** and project manager at Somerton Tanks Farm. "There's a desire for this. People want to get back in touch with the basic things in life."

The institute's mission is to create more community farms like this in Philadelphia, train urban farmers, partner with neighbors and start cooperatives to share costly equipment such as rototillers.

In coming weeks, the institute and the **Farmers Market Alliance** plan to go to Harrisburg to ask the Department of Community and Economic Development for support in bringing farms to a wider audience.

As recently as the 1940s, the city had 239 working farms, according to the state Department of Agriculture. Somerton Tanks may be too recent to be included in the latest data, but that number is now zero.

With Somerton Tanks as a pilot, Christensen envisions a network of small farms

like this one throughout the city.

"It has to be proven as a business. We're starting to have success here, showing that this could be a green community and that this could revitalize a community," said Christensen.

Somerton Tanks' farmers are **Steve and Nicole Shelly**, a husband-and-wife team that take home 80 percent of the profits. Nicole is an ex-architect, while her husband worked with at-risk kids.

The farm was started with a \$50,000 investment, which included the cost of a walk-in refrigerator, rototiller, shed, irrigation system, post-harvest washing station, soil preparation and miscellaneous items like tools and seeds.

It costs about \$12,000 a year to run the farm.

In its first season, last year, sales of Somerton Tanks veggies generated \$26,000 in revenue. This year, the estimate is \$34,000. The goal for next year is \$50,000.

"[The water department] was looking for a better use of the land. It was also looking for a commercial use," said **Nancy Weissman**, spokeswoman for the public utility. "This shows that you can earn a living farming in the city. It provides economic development and that's good for all of us."

On a recent gray Sunday morning, the farm was the site of a summertime **KitchenAid Book and the Cook** event, featuring Melrose Park-based author **Aliza Green**, a former chef and author of "Field Guide to Produce" (**Quirk Books**).

On the tour of Somerton Farms, Green said one of the most frequently asked questions at the farm is, "Do you grow Jersey tomatoes here?"

No, the farmers patiently answer. You have to go to New Jersey for those. •



## Tourism

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