

# A farm grows in Somerton

## Nonprofit brings agriculture back to the Northeast

BY NICOLE CLARK /  
Staff Writer

Mathematician Kathy O'Hara had a mid-life crisis. Differential equations and statistics and combinatorics—something to do with the computational complexity of algorithms—just weren't that exciting.

So in 1994 she left her job at the University of Iowa and moved to Virginia to start a farm. Instead of crunching numbers, she muddies her hands planting broccoli raab and Japanese turnips.

Now she's doing it in Somerton. Nestled among the houses and two-car garages along the 200 block of Tomlinson Road, Somerton Tanks Farm celebrated its grand opening and first harvest last week with O'Hara, farming instructor, giving tours of the pea shoots and potato heads to men in suits.

"This is very nice soil," she said to one tour group. "Things have been coming up beautifully."

Nonprofit corporation the Oley Institute is leasing the half-acre site from the Philadelphia Water Department as an experiment in urban farming. Under O'Hara, three farming trainees will work the land.

"Is a farm economy possible in Philadelphia?" said Nancy Weissman, director of economic development for the Water Department. "We believe it really is."

Two years ago, Weissman met with Oley president Joseph Griffin to discuss the project and select a site. The Somerton parcel was nothing but sod until it was tilled last July, O'Hara said. Water Department Deputy Commissioner Richard Roy said the project fits with the department's environmental protection role, citing expansion of waste treatment plants and methods to control pollution of streams from stormwater runoff.

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**Lori Albright**, a farming intern, works a vegetable bed at Somerton Tanks Farm.



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## Urban farming a grand experiment in Somerton

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Griffin called Somerton Tanks Farm, named for the two red and white checkered water tanks on the property, his "field of dreams."

"I can hardly believe what's happening today," he said. "It's probably the biggest and craziest dream (of the Oley Institute)."

The Oley Institute, headquartered in Oley, Pa., was founded in 1997. The organization works with schools, towns, neighborhoods and workplaces on environmental projects. Current projects include an educational garden for grade-school students, developing a plan for a rural township, a study on homegrown hybrid corn and now Somerton Tanks.

A dozen partners, including the city Commerce Department, the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Services, are funding the project.

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Griffin said 2 percent of Americans are farmers. Of the remaining 98 percent, many feel "the call of the land" but are shackled by blacktop and concrete. Hong Kong has about 10,000 registered farmers. In a "small-scale agricultural revolution," he said, doctors in Cuba are quitting their jobs to farm. "The urge is almost irresistible," he said. "They're called to farming. People who aren't called have some urge to do it. There are lots of people who would farm if they could but happen to live in the city."

Farming intern Nicole Shelly felt the call. With a bachelor's degree in architecture from Philadelphia University, she was working for a firm specializing in historic preservation and bike trails.

She first heard about the Somerton Tanks project two years ago in a Philadelphia Inquirer story. Then she and her husband did a farming internship in upstate New York last year. The farmer there told

her about the job opening in Somerton.

"I just wasn't satisfied with the architecture field," said Shelly, 27. "I like being outside and I had a growing interest in plants. I like working with my hands."

Thirty-year-old Andrea Fleegle was an assistant manager at Pigalle, a Northern Liberties restaurant. In the restaurant business for 15 years, she'd been thinking about farming when she saw an ad for the intern positions.

"It seemed like a natural progression for me," said Fleegle, of Center City. "I've always wanted to start my own business and everything Joseph (Griffin) said I believe in. Farming is very mentally and physically stimulating and it's socially good for everyone. I've been here 11 years and I don't want to leave. I just want to make it better."

"There's nothing better than growing living things. Hopefully we can change a few landscapes in Philadelphia."

Lori Albright is confident they can. She left her job as environmental programs manager at the Village of Arts and Humanities in North Philadelphia, a non-profit that promotes urban greening. Like Fleegle, she'd always been interested in farming and wanted to start her own business.

"I didn't think it was possible living in the city," said Albright, 32.

And now? "I would say I'm 95 percent sure it'll work," she said, "because it's a passion, number one. And the way we've formed relationships here, we're all on the same page. Our hearts are in it."

The interns, who are paid, work 45 hours a week and take a weekly class on the business end of farming, will run a community supported agriculture program. Subscribers pay \$300 for a season's worth of fresh veggies from May through October.

"Everything is totally fresh," Albright said. "We harvest it the same day. We probably won't

even refrigerate it."

O'Hara expects restaurants to buy from Somerton Tanks, too. The farm, divided into four zones, will harvest only vegetables with quick turnarounds to maintain a high profit margin. And the farm won't produce goods you can find in any supermarket.

"We really can't compete with traditional farming, so we need to offer a unique product to make a living," O'Hara said. "Broccoli's not a good idea. It's very cheap, it's very plentiful. But we will grow broccoli raab. It's a similar product, but different enough to give us that edge."

A marketing trick for the Fourth of July: red, white and blue potatoes. Crops like bull's blood beets with red on red concentric circles, fancy stir fry greens, scallions, spinach, filet beans and arugula are also being grown. O'Hara uses nothing more than soapy water to repel pests.

Griffin said research shows a

minimum of \$25,000 in vegetable revenue can be produced on a half acre of land.

"We hope that this pilot farm will encourage other entrepreneurs with a strong interest in farming to develop their own farms," he said. If a network of small, commercial farms develop, he said, the city will profit from added business revenue and spinoff jobs.

City Councilman Briar O'Neil (R-10) praised Weissman for "thinking outside the box."

"I think it'll make a big difference," he said.

O'Hara, who lives in Bustleton, moved to Philadelphia this year to be closer to her parents in Drexel Hill. She recruited someone to take care of her commercial vegetable farm in Virginia.

"The beauty of these small gourmet farms is you get to talk directly to the farmer," she said. "We really want that to happen and then people go out and try the same thing."