Celebrating Ten Years of the Produce Project

The tenth season of the Produce Project will be marked by an open house at its 8th Street Urban Farm on Tuesday, July 23 from 4 to 6 p.m. Farm tours, good food (of course!) and photos will pay tribute to past staff, hundreds of alumni and thousands of volunteers who have made the farm and the program what it is today.

Much has changed in 10 years, but the Produce Project’s goal to Grow Food, Empower Youth and Build Community, remains the touchstone by which all its actions are measured.

The program’s first crops were actually planted in plots at the Livingston and Corliss Park community gardens, as the fields and the first hi-tunnel on the 8th Street site were being created. This defined much of the program’s early years as the first Farmer/Educators and classes of students worked to build their outdoor classrooms, even as they were learning in them.

When the Farmer and Educator position was split into two overlapping roles, the next phase of program development began in earnest and the Produce Project began taking the form we celebrate today.

Funding from the Department of Environmental Conservation was used to clear the wooded part of 8th Street, doubling the farm’s arable acreage and removing the need to farm elsewhere. The Merck Family Foundation supplied Capital Roots’ first grant from a national philanthropic organization, and was used to solidify the framework of the Project’s curriculum.

The Farm’s influence in the community became more obvious. Student applications regularly outpaced available positions, and youth began recommending the Produce Project to friends and family. The farm’s second hi-tunnel was created in days by dozens of volunteers, including the Mayor, who squeezed in time between meetings and brought his own hammer.
We grow, educate and provide.

From the opening of its first gardens in 1975, to the dynamic and multifaceted organization of today, Capital Roots has worked to reduce the impact of poor nutrition on public health in the Capital Region. We organize community gardens, improve access to healthy food, offer nutrition and horticulture education for all ages and coordinate urban greening programs in Albany, Rensselaer, Schenectady and southern Saratoga counties.

I’ve been a gardener for as long as I can remember, having learned from my grandmother. Gardening brings me great joy – growing food and flowers, hands in the dirt, breathing fresh air. It’s all good. And I love that so many people have been, and continue to be, touched and supported by Capital Roots’ Community Gardening Program. Anyone who wants to grow, can. Despite their location, abilities or resources.

Our founder, Dean Leith, understood the power of gardening better than anyone. That’s why he created this organization and nurtured it for decades. He also really loved fresh veggies and wanted everyone to have the opportunity to enjoy them.

While I wish everyone could experience the joy of plucking that first tomato off the vine and popping it into their mouth, gardening isn’t for everyone. But I am thankful that everyone CAN experience the delicious taste of farm fresh fruits and veggies.

That’s exactly why Capital Roots expanded our programs 15 years ago to include fresh food access. These programs – the Veggie Mobile®, Veggie Mobile® Sprout, Healthy Stores and Virtual Veggie Mobile® ensure that families in our region can eat good quality food at affordable prices right in their own neighborhoods. Coupled with our Squash Hunger program (that’s been recovering and redistributing produce to 100+ pantries, shelters and soup kitchens in the region), these programs reach more than 275,000 people each year!

We are lucky to be in a region with such a quantity and variety of local foods. Each month our Food Hub Buyer is connecting with more hard-working farmers and producers to make sure everyone can share in that bounty of delicious, locally grown food.

That seems just common sense that area school children should have access to that local food, too. But before Capital Roots launched its Farm-to-School program in 2017/18, it just wasn’t happening. Confusing regulations and a generation of systemic changes to schools and farming had created barriers that seemed impossible to break down. But WOW! What a difference a year makes. This school year our team was able to increase its distribution of local food to area schools by 1600%! Working with nine farms and 13 school buildings in 9 districts, we know they are getting the BEST top quality, affordable food. After all, isn’t that what we all want and deserve?
The next years saw continued improvement of farm infrastructure as the difficult transition from forest to truly functional farmland was made. A fruit orchard was planted, drip irrigation installed, and more retaining walls built. Flower borders with trees and shrubs encircled the farm, providing year-round beauty and a constant source of friendly conversation with neighbors and passersby.

Reflection and assessment drive regular modifications to our systems. Though changes of recent years may seem less obvious, they have dramatically improved program quality and outcome. A leadership track now gives students real ownership over daily program activities, and increases behavioral and learning expectations, which are reflected in student’s increasing success at getting jobs fresh from the program.

Indeed this employment success puts pressure on our pool of potential student leaders, who find it tough to pass up twice as much pay from a regular summer job. Fortunately, some recognize that no other job available to them will give them this level of responsibility, an opportunity to work on the same footing as college interns, and an opportunity to inspire the next group of potential leaders.

It’s hard not to be emotional when realizing that the Produce Project is 10. It’s an emotional program, more personally involved with the lives of our constituents than any other. By daily throwing together two of the more unpredictable features of our world: farming and teenagers, we should not be surprised that things often sparkle and crack. The Produce Project has created many moments of beauty, transcendence and heartbreak over the years.

The truth is that the great constancy of the program has been its youth, many of whom come from impossible situations, yet reliably show incredible resiliency and bravery. Who, despite many disappointments, remain open to the possibility of change, and a desire to remake themselves and their world. They inspire Produce Project staff and the entire organization. After committing so many resources and energy to the program over 10 years, Capital Roots in the end is indebted to the youth of the Produce Project.
Growing together through nutrition education

Capital Roots’ educational programs are soaring this year as we nurture a growing number of relationships with community partners, both old and new.

Back in February, Capital Roots partnered with the Albany Center Gallery to present an “Ecological Arts” workshop, the first in a series of “Zero Waste” programs that help bridge the gap between growing, cooking and composting. Participants experimented with plant-based dyes and re-purposed food waste to create eco-friendly watercolor paintings and fabrics. Capital Roots’ Educator, Francesca DiGiorgio worked together with Community Gardens’ VISTA, Catherine Morba, to spearhead this series. Together they led a number of classes related to composting, garden maintenance and a special “Root to Stem” cooking class, which was a lot of fun and very well attended.

With generous support from the Junior League of Albany, Capital Roots has been working with Sheridan Preparatory Academy, a community school in Albany, to implement our five-week “Taste Good Series” for 100 pre-K and Kindergarten students. Each week, students taste different fruits and vegetables, learn about how they grow and discover the importance of nutritious eating for their health and well-being. In addition to working with the students, our Educator has been implementing afterschool family nutrition workshops in which students and their parents help prepare and eat delicious and nutritious dishes to reinforce the good eating habits they are learning in the classroom.

Working in partnership with St. Peter’s Health Partners, Capital Roots has been cooking up a storm with Girls Inc., an afterschool program in Albany that strives to inspire all girls to be strong, smart and bold. A series of three nutrition workshops were presented by our Educator including “Hydration Celebration” where the girls discussed the pitfalls of drinking sugary beverages and prepared their own low-sugar and nutrient-rich drinks. St. Peter’s Health Partners provided the participants with reusable water bottles to support their hydration efforts. In their “Food as Fuel” workshop, they explored the benefits of mindful snacking for long-term energy and health and sampled a number of tasty snacks. The third workshop, “Growing for Flavor” utilized gardening and food as a bridge between Girls Inc. and the residents of the Life Path senior center.

Capital Roots also implemented some food-based programming, both in the classroom and after school, at Philip Schuyler Achievement Academy in Albany. About 60 elementary students are participating in a “Fun with Fruits and Vegetables” program designed to introduce young children to fresh produce items through fun, engaging activities and tastings. A Family Cooking Series was also offered for students and their family members at the school.

Finally, many organizations throughout the Capital Region are partnering with Capital Roots to brush up on their gardening know-how. We have done workshops with longtime partners like Albany Guardian Society, CDPHP and Alliance for Positive Health. Many new partners including Beverwyck Senior Living Community, Eastwyck Village, the Federal Highway Workers Association and the Schenectady, Albany and Guilderland libraries have also hosted classes. On top of all this, throw in about a dozen classes at our community garden work parties and that created an incredibly exciting Spring education schedule!

If your group or school would like to host a garden or food-based program, contact Program Manager, Sharon DiLorenzo at trees@capitalroots.org or 518-274-8685.
Volunteer News

HONORING MANY HANDS

Each January, Capital Roots celebrates the volunteers who greatly lighten our heavy workload. This year’s Volunteer Appreciation event honored two individuals who have been committed volunteers at Capital Roots—Cheryl Reeves and Rich Ambuske.

Cheryl has spent the past several years working with our Development team on administrative tasks that are essential to our fundraising efforts. Her dedication and diligence each week has saved our staff hundreds of hours of work.

Going back almost a decade to our days at 40 River Street, Rich spent countless hours helping out on the Veggie Mobile®. After a few years helping others out of the country, he picked right up where he left off and is once again doing a weekly Veggie Mobile® shift.

Rich and Cheryl were each presented with a “Many Hands” art piece created by our longtime friend, Peter Bowden, and many volunteers from this past year joined us for an evening of refreshments and conversation. Each year, this celebration reminds all of us at Capital Roots of how incredibly fortunate we are to have so many dedicated volunteers and supporters who work alongside us to create healthy communities throughout the Capital Region. We are so thankful!

INTRODUCING NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Please join us in welcoming Nicholas Crounse and Jennifer Weil Malatras to Capital Roots’ Board of Directors! Nick is the Director of Strategic Communications of Bestpass and has served on Capital Roots’ Marketing Committee since 2007. Nick said, “I have seen firsthand not only how much the organization has grown over time, but also the amazing impact it has every day on so many communities throughout the Capital Region.” He is looking forward to using his background in strategic communications, PR and community engagement to help further our mission.

Jenny, a Clinical Assistant Professor at the University at Albany, is passionate about ensuring that all Capital Region residents have access to fresh affordable food. “As a clinical psychologist with specialty training in pediatric psychology, I know the important role nutrition plays in child development and human health and adjustment.” We are looking forward to the ideas and support they will add to our team.

WELCOMING A NEW TAP ROOT

For the past 20 years, Sharon Bedford has been deeply involved with Capital Roots; as a Board member, donor, and volunteer. And, while she continues to serve as a weekly volunteer on the Veggie Mobile® as well as a member of several committees, Sharon announced her retirement from Capital Roots’ Board of Directors at the December 2018 meeting.

Sharon’s history of service to Capital Roots has had a lasting impact on the organization. She has worked tirelessly planning and working at our annual Spring Brunch as well as our Spring Plant Sale, chaired the Volunteer Committee (and is still a working member), and continues to be the set of helping hands we know we can always rely on. Sharon’s service has been so deeply rooted in the organization’s history, she has been selected as the newest member of Capital Roots’ Honorary Board, the Tap Roots. Her service to our mission continues through her volunteer work, and her legacy will be forever celebrated.
One of Capital Roots’ newest programs – Farm to School – has been making big strides towards helping local school communities access fresh, locally-grown food directly from Capital Region producers. Farm to School aims to break down barriers that exist in both the food system and food service. Since the start of this school year, we have helped local schools access 45,000 pounds of fresh produce.

Capital Roots is currently serving 9 school districts and 13 school buildings, helping food service staff provide their students with high-quality, fresh foods from farms across our region. Some schools, such as Troy High School and Bethlehem Middle and High schools, are most interested in the wide variety of local apples available – having purchased more than 8,800 pounds this school year alone! Meanwhile, other communities like Hoosic Valley Central Schools and Shaker High School are interested in utilizing the full breadth of items that are available, including onions, carrots, brussels sprouts, and tomatoes.

Some of the most popular items that Capital Roots has been providing this school year are hydroponically-grown butterhead lettuce from Sustainable Aqua Farms in Berlin, NY and Goose Island Potatoes from Argyle, NY. In fact, we have provided nearly 1,900 pounds of lettuce and 1,000 pounds of potatoes. In total, 9 local farms have sold 45 different produce items directly to schools.

Our new Farm to School program coordinator, Scott Fuller, is eager to continue the momentum that has been building since the program’s inception in 2017. “Working directly with the farmers is what most excites me about the opportunities with this program. I’m looking forward to supporting our local farms by finding them new customers and supporting their food safety efforts.” Since January, the Farm to School program has grown by 65 percent, and as we look ahead to the next school year we are planning on continuing that momentum.

To learn more about Farm to School, contact Farm to School Coordinator, Scott Fuller at farm2school@capitalroots.org or 518-274-8685.

Capital Roots welcomes six new hardworking, enthusiastic individuals to our growing staff. They each have a passion for making our communities greener, healthier places to live and work. We hope you’ll get to know them as you volunteer, attend our next event or engage with our programs. Welcome to the family!

There are plenty of opportunities to join the Capital Roots family, from employment to internships to volunteering. We’d love to get you involved. Visit www.capitalroots.org/donate/employment.

meet the team

Scott Fuller
Farm to School Coordinator

Shauntay Brandon
Mobile Market Assistant

Joshua Anthony
Volunteer Coordinator

Sarah Heikkinen
Development Writer

Lena Faustel
Outreach and Squash Hunger Coordinator

Ian Mielke
Food Access Assistant VISTA
SUPPORTING OUR LOCAL PRODUCERS

Supporting our Local Producers

Capital Roots is committed to ensuring that local food rests at the heart of our food access work. Over the last few decades, our network of local farmers and producers has grown exponentially. And these relationships have been so critical to the growth of our programs and services.

The map above illustrates many of the 80+ partners supporting our efforts to provide fresh fruits, vegetables and products to the Capital Region community. They devote their time, energy and talent into feeding our region.

Get to know their names. Remember where they’re located. And head to the Virtual Veggie Mobile® at market.capitalroots.org to find out how you can purchase delicious produce directly from the farm. There’s no easier way to support our regional food economy.

Explore Capital Roots’ Local Farm Producers online at www.capitalroots.org/programs/virtual-veggie-mobile/local-producer-map/

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Earlier this year, families and friends gathered from around the Capital Region to participate in Capital Roots’ 22nd Annual Garden Bowl with hopes of taking home the title of ‘Top Fundraiser’ or ‘Top Bowler’. This year, thanks to everyone including bowlers, sponsors and donors, we raised an outstanding $20,000 to help fund our programs to make fresh food accessible to all.

Some of our returning corporate sponsors took to the lanes, including Hodgson Russ’s “Russet Potatoes”, “Cabbage Rollers” “Russel Sprouts”, and “Squashers” competing alongside Bouche and Clarke’s “Strike Force” and Community Resource Federal Credit Union’s “Rowdy Rollers”. Friends and families gathered to form teams with creative names such as “Spinach to Spare” and “First United Follies” to join in on the fun.

The event would not be possible without the generosity of more than 30 local businesses such as Capital City Brewcycle, Honest Weight Co-op and Bountiful Bread, just to name a few. We thank all of the prize donors for their generosity.

We also are very grateful to our in-kind sponsors: Uncle Sam Lanes, Proforma Lee’s Trophies, One Day Signs and Troy Cloth and Paper.

If a day of family fun with fellow bowlers is right up your alley, make sure to keep an eye out for the announcement of the next Garden Bowl. Don’t strike out on the opportunity to join in on the fun- it’s an event that shouldn’t be missed!
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CHRISTINA AND DANIEL RYAN
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KONNOLE AND LARRY SMITH
PERRY SWIG AND ROSEANN FOGARTY
RAYMOND AND JOANN SMITH
JOHN SMOLINSKY AND ELLA PRACKEN
CARL SOMERS
I’d like to support Capital Roots’ Produce Project with a donation of $ __________

- $35 Friend
- $60 Sponsor
- $120 Supporter
- $300 Benefactor
- $600 Cultivator
- $1200 Gardening Angel
- Make me a Harvest Helper for $ __________ a month.

TRIBUTES IN MEMORY OF:
- Bidzina “Babu” Khatiashvili by Judith Gabler
- Dean Leith by Catherine Elliott
- Layla by Susan Stah-Cooper and Chris Cooper
- Margaret A. Aldrich by Karen Farfield
- Michael Agneta by Barbara Agneta
- Pam Stewart by Alan and Rose Levensohn
- Sybil Ross by Van Rensselaer Garden Club
- Terry Hayden by Meisha Rosenberg and Roddy Collins
- Susan Drislane by James Drislane
- Virginia Opera by A.J and Ann Amato

TRIBUTES IN HONOR OF:
- Kimberly and E. Stewart Jones by Laura Graham
- Cheryl Reeves by David and Maud Easter

To make a donation, call: 518-274-8685

SUPPORT CAPITAL ROOTS WITH A DONATION TODAY!

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☐ $35 Friend ☐ $600 Cultivator

☐ $60 Sponsor ☐ $1200 Gardening Angel

☐ $120 Supporter ☐ Make me a Harvest Helper for $ __________ a month.

☐ In honor of ☐ In memory of

WISH LIST

- Cutlery Set
- Baskets
- Broadforks
- Non-digital kitchen (or hanging) scales
- Pickup truck
- Working vehicles
- Hoes (stirrup preferably or regular)
- Garden carts and water barrels
- Good working all-terrain mower
- Set of metal ramps for loading equipment
- Laptop computers
- Long handled and round point shovels
- Cake platters and pie servers
- Clean 5 gallon buckets
- 3-4ft tall pointed wooden stakes
- Large plastic storage totes with lids
- Push mower
- Gardening gloves for cold weather
- Battery powered weedwacker
- Spray nozzles and watering wands
- Soaker hoses in good condition
- Pick axes and pitch forks

To make a donation, call: 518-274-8685

I’D LIKE TO GET INVOLVED

☐ Volunteer in the Food Hub Wednesday evenings

☐ Spend a Thursday or Saturday morning at the Produce Project 8th Street Urban Farm

☐ Deliver produce to area food pantries for Squash Hunger
Join Capital Roots for an elegant evening of seasonally fresh foods and mingling amongst chefs, farmers and friends

SEPTEMBER 12, 2019
HILTON GARDEN INN, TROY | 6:00-9:00PM

Purchase tickets online at: WWW.CAPITALROOTS.ORG