News From The Winter Newsletter
Bringing Healthy Food Access To Our Communities
In the hard times and the good, 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.

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From Our Food Hub

By Amy Klein, Chief Executive Officer

This has been a year of challenges. Many have struggled with isolation and life’s upheaval that this pandemic has brought on. Others in our community have lost their jobs or their business. And too many have suffered the devastating loss of a loved one.

Amidst all this distress there have been rays of hope. We’ve seen an outpouring of community-wide kindness and support for others. We’ve seen government stepping forward to help in new ways. These are signs of possibility not just to get us through these dark days but to set a new path forward for tomorrow.

Decades ago, when Capital Roots began advocating for fresh healthy foods for all, the concept was radical. Filling hungry bellies was the focus; what people were served was not a primary concern. But this notion is no longer revolutionary. The concept that quality food is often the most important medicine needed for a healthy life is now a mainstream idea.

How we achieve that reality though is still elusive for many who are regularly reliant on government programs (such as SNAP) to purchase food. During COVID, we saw solutions manifest that can become long-term options to greater food security. Families receiving SNAP were able to access the maximum amount of benefits during the pandemic. This resulted in more food dollars in the pockets of families chronically in need who were then able to purchase the food of their own choosing instead of relying on charity.

Governor Cuomo developed a program called Nourish-NY to support NYS farmers and producers and infuse those quality foods into food assistance programs. Nourish-NY ensured that families going to a pantry for an allotment of food could receive top-quality produce and other NYS products instead of seconds. Farmers and NYS producers were able to sell their food to the emergency food system instead of being expected to give it away. This program set a new paradigm in both the emergency food system and the producer sector of our food system.

More changes in our region’s food system are needed to address the financial and physical barriers that make accessing quality food unequitable and an often-insurmountable challenge for so many. I urge everyone who is concerned about food security to advocate for increases in SNAP benefits so families can have the dignity of buying their own food. Support for continued funding for Nourish-NY is another great way to improve the food options at food pantries and other emergency food assistance programs and at the same time support our small farmers. These are just two concepts that deserve our attention in 2021 so we can make real and lasting change in our quest for food equity in the Capital Region.

Thank you for being a partner in Capital Roots’ work.
A Safe Market For All
Since the grand opening of our Urban Grow Center (UGC) in 2014, the produce market has featured a cornucopia of local produce, giving the lobby of the Capital Roots’ office an ambiance that welcomed visitors and also served our regular customers.

This year, the UGC market transformed into a vital, safe, and secure access point for healthy food for our neighbors and greater community. On Monday March 16, when New York went on “Pause” and residents were strongly encouraged to shelter in place, Capital Roots’ staff skillfully worked to stay ahead ahead of the curve to figure out how to continue essential food access services under a set of unprecedented circumstances and uncertainties. We knew that our organization would be able to navigate somehow, thanks to our staff’s undeniable grit and the ability to approach challenges with innovation. What we didn’t know at the time is just how well our Urban Grow Center Produce Market was set up to fortify and respond to this unexpected weak link in our regional food system.

Inspiring Food Access to meet increasing demands
The pandemic shone a light on how vulnerable our regional food system is due to retail outlets depending on distant, massive, multi-region distributors to procure produce and other goods. In contrast, Capital Roots’ Food Hub, with its extensive network of local farm producers and smaller regional distributors, was primed and ready! We were able to provide a consistent and continuous flow of local products for all of our food access programs.

News got out that the UCG market not only had a consistent array of locally sourced produce, but also had meat, eggs, cheese, bread, vegan sausage and a variety of value added goods. When meat was scarce in our local supermarkets, our existing network of local meat producers, processors and distributors came through and kept the Market fully stocked with ground beef, bacon, chicken and sausage. Locally produced meat is often not affordable enough for many people to purchase on a regular basis. However, Capital Roots’ Market sells goods at wholesale cost while also accepting SNAP/EBT payments. By doing so, these local meats are accessible and affordable. For many customers this year, cooking and enjoying local, grass fed meat was a new experience. At its peak, the UGC Market experienced a 600% increase in sales when compared to the same time frame the year prior and SNAP/EBT sales increased by 95%. At a time when most people were avoiding large grocery stores due to safety concerns, our little market experienced a 320% increase in the number of transactions compared to the year prior. Doing this safely was a top priority.

Shopping Safer
The UGC, a beacon of sustainable architectural design, has a window looking into the building’s vestibule which offers an ideal set up for safe grocery shopping. The market is within view of the window, allowing customers to view our stock and shop without setting foot in the building. Our staff is ready and willing to take orders on the spot. For our immuno-compromised UGC Market customers, or anyone who desires curbside pick-up, orders are encouraged to be called in ahead of time. This ensures a 100% contact-free shopping experience and easy pick up through the “take out window” or our staff is happy to bring orders out to the parking lot.

“When I was getting out of the car yesterday with a paper bag full of produce, the driver who had stopped for me to cross the street asked me where I got all the fresh food. I told him I called in my order to Capital Roots and that they were open till 5:30. It’s super simple to get great food. Wish I had a picture of his smile, but trust me it was big. He missed the farmers market, and now he’s got an alternative” – A.H.

The UGC Market has supported our community through continuous healthy food access in a neighborhood with otherwise low access to fresh, healthy food. As we move forward into the ongoing pandemic, we plan on continuing to stay ahead of the curve so more people can utilize the UGC market, taking advantage of this dependable and secure point of healthy food access, while staying safe, healthy and nourished.
A New Frontier in Food Access
As with everything in 2020, Capital Roots’ Squash Hunger Program had to adapt to life with COVID-19. In early Spring, the number of people in our region in need of food assistance dramatically increased, and Squash Hunger (which collects and distributes top quality fresh produce to food assistance programs) thus expanded its capacity and reach to meet this increased demand.

How we Nourished New York
As part of a state-wide COVID Relief effort, New York State granted $35 million to food assistance programs across the state. The Nourish-NY program was created to support NYS farms and agricultural food businesses while also meeting the growing demand at food assistance programs. As one of the Nourish NY recipients, Capital Roots’ Squash Hunger Program purchased more than 90,000 pounds of food from local farms and food businesses and distributed that fresh produce, dairy, meat and grains to more than 85 food assistance programs with help from our dedicated volunteers and our partners at Food Pantries of the Capital District. Capital Roots’ Squash Hunger Coordinator, Lena Faustel, commented on the impact Nourish-NY has had on the program, “The food we’ve been able to purchase through this program has helped keep thousands of people fed. It is truly wonderful to provide pantries and other community feeding programs that are doing such amazing work during these hard times with such beautiful fresh products and to see their smiles when they share stories of the people that they are able to help as a result.”

While the Nourish-NY program has provided the resources to help support area farms, agricultural food businesses and food assistance programs during the pandemic, Squash Hunger has also continued to receive food donations from our many partners who have supported the program for decades. These generous community partners include local farms and CSA’s, home and community gardeners, retail markets and wholesale distributors across the Capital Region and have donated more than 65,000 pounds of produce. Combined with Nourish-NY, 155,000 pounds have already been distributed to communities as far north as Corinth, south to Ravena, east to Hoosick Falls and west to Amsterdam.

Amen Place Pantry
The Amen Place Pantry in Amsterdam, NY saw their numbers rise from a pre-COVID average of 200 individuals each week to more than 750 lining up for weekly food assistance. Amen Pantry Coordinator, Kathy Bulger commented on how the pandemic affected their distribution process and the impact of Squash Hunger’s deliveries: “When the Pandemic hit, our program changed. Instead of allowing individuals to come into the building to get their food, we began safely handing out boxes of food to clients. Our biggest concern was could we find enough food to handle this growing number of people and still maintain a safe distribution practice. Capital Roots has continued to come each Tuesday during our distribution helping us meet the growing demand that our community is facing.”

The Dedication of Our Volunteers
Volunteer support has always been the backbone of Squash Hunger’s produce distribution efforts, but that paused in March when NYS shut down non-essential businesses. Capital Roots’ food access programs were deemed essential and those programs continued to provide services. But for the safety of our volunteers, we kept them home. When it was safe, Squash Hunger volunteers returned and new folks joined the ranks to help get food to those who needed it. Volunteer groups from the Center for Disability Services and Rensselaer County ARC have also returned to making their weekly food deliveries to local food pantries.

Board member and new Squash Hunger volunteer, Tom McGuire commented on his experience making weekly deliveries to three area food assistance programs. “It is very gratifying to serve as a volunteer, delivering fresh fruits, vegetables and meats purchased from neighbouring New York farmers, sourced through Nourish-NY funds or donated by gardeners, farms and businesses. The direct recipients are hungry families and people affected by homelessness and currently displaced from economic well-being. It is like making the right medicine available to help people re-build adult’s and children’s physical and psychological strength and stamina, sense of well-being and hopefulness needed to enter or return to productive and happy lives.”

As we head into winter, Squash Hunger will continue to provide fresh healthy food to our neighbors in need as we’ve done since 2004 and with your support, for decades to come.
For Our Farms

The Farms That Feed Us
This was the most important growing season to support small farms. As the pandemic paused New York in early spring, our region's farmers were left with market uncertainty and questions: Were the farmers markets going to open? What about restaurant sales? Would their loyal customers support a farm's new online market? As consumer demand shifted from restaurants and institutions to small markets and online platforms, the local food system pivoted to help feed people and to stay in business.

Capital Roots' Food Hub Director Erin Wright reflected, "A lot of farms had a good year, in terms of sales, at the beginning of the pandemic because CSAs were filled. Smaller farms were in a more vulnerable E-position because there was a scramble with the farmers markets." Capital Roots' retail markets saw an incredible increase in demand at the beginning of the pandemic as we focused on serving the region's most vulnerable residents with safe, affordable, healthy food. This increase in demand translated into an increase in purchasing, and our food hub worked to deepen relationships with existing small farm partners and build relationships with new farms in the region.

In addition to deliveries to our hub, which is right off the highway in Troy, and pickup at farms, our hub team developed a new aggregation point at Hawthorne Valley in Columbia County. With this new relationship and infrastructure, we were able to source weekly from four new farms in the southern counties of our region throughout the growing season.

Filling Our Food Hub
Capital Roots' regional food hub, which opened in 2014 with our move into the Urban Grow Center, plays a unique role in the local food system. We are committed to sourcing from small farms and food businesses in quantities that they can produce, providing them with a perfectly-sized wholesale outlet for their small business. We then market this product at affordable prices to residents living in low healthy food access neighborhoods through our retail programs, like the Veggie Mobile® and our Healthy Stores. Our food hub enables Capital Roots to provide equitable healthy food access and support the growth of the local food economy. During the pandemic, this work and our infrastructure became even more critical to the region.

"We [Capital Roots] were a good option while the farmers markets were being settled out in the spring. We have been buying consistently from small farms throughout the pandemic," explained Wright. "For some farms, our purchasing was a strong reason they stayed afloat. For others, we were an important complement to their direct sales at farmers markets."

As the growing season comes to a close, we continue to support small farms and food producers. Our food hub continues to buy lots of local food to sell through our retail and institutional markets. Foods we are sourcing include: winter squash (honey nut and delicata), root crops (beets and watermelon radishes), winter greens (spinach and kale), value-added products (applesauce, bread and pasta), and proteins (eggs, cheese, frozen meat, and plant-based sausages).

As the days shorten, nights grow colder, and the country sees a spike in cases, we are preparing for an important winter for small farms and food businesses. This has been a difficult year for all of us, but Capital Roots continues to rise to the challenge.
More than Mobile Markets

In the “new norm” of social distancing, growing online and call in orders for goods and services – the Veggie Mobile® and its smaller counterpart, Sprout were ready made for life in the pandemic. For some, “routine” grocery store trips are generally not on the agenda, even before COVID; and while online delivery services may provide a socially distant solution, it is not an affordable choice for those on a tight budget.

For some communities, access to affordable fruits and vegetables can be a challenge. Stores that sell healthy foods are not often found in locations where there is a need – and reliable transportation to take one to a grocery store can be just as challenging.

“Having this right where I live is truly fantastic,” said Susan, who has been coming to the Veggie Mobile® stop at Kennedy Tower Apartments for over four years. “I have no car and I am on a limited, fixed budget. With this mobile market, I can use my EBT card, which makes tight weeks easier.”

Providing safe food access right outside one’s front door has been one of the key driving forces behind the mobile market program since its inception in 2007. The other is affordability. The Veggie Mobile® is loaded with top quality fresh fruits and vegetables made available at wholesale cost with WIC-FMNP, Senior-FMNP and SNAP all accepted.

During the early spring of 2020, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) users received additional benefits to be spent at participating markets and grocery stores, this included the Veggie Mobile®. We saw a one hundred percent increase in use of SNAP benefits during that time at the Veggie Mobile®, helping shoppers bring home healthy food.

“There is a misnomer that I hear often,” said Audrey Bridge, Capital Roots’ Food Access Director. “And that is people in low-income communities do not want healthy food. Simply put, is not true – and the Veggie Mobile® proves that every day. It’s about access. ‘If you build it, they will come’ can be rewritten to if you provide it, they will come. Low-income communities will eat more healthy food, local farmers earn more money, and more food dollars stay right here, in the local economy.”

Delivering Hope

Serving four counties, Albany, Rensselaer, Saratoga and Schenectady – the mobiles cover a lot of ground and serve thousands of consumers at a total of 36 weekly stops year-round at housing projects, senior centers, health clinics and community organizations. Many who shop at the mobile markets have not only taken advantage of the accessible, affordable food options; but, they have also looked forward to the social interactions.

“I feel safe shopping at the mobile market,” said Rory, who has been shopping at the Veggie Mobile® almost every week for the past ten years. “So many seniors like me are worried about COVID, but being able to get outside and talk with people has been something that I look forward to.”

Jane Husson, a long-time volunteer who has been assisting staff on the mobile markets for almost eight years, shares Rory’s viewpoint. “I get as much out of being here as the guests. Developing relationships is what keeps me coming back. Before COVID-19 was a concern, social outlets were not too common for our guests. Now, the pandemic has made interactions even harder; so, I’m happy to provide safe socialization while providing healthy offerings. As a bonus perk, I buy my veggies here!”

The community building benefits of the Veggie Mobile® could not be more apparent than at Father Leo O’Brien’s senior housing in Schenectady. “We would arrive at Father Leo O’Brien’s and be met with applause as we unloaded the truck,” said Michael DellaRocco, Capital Roots’ Marketing Coordinator who assisted on the mobiles during the height of the spring shutdown. “Residents placed orders for their week ahead, knowing that our Veggie Mobile® offerings were the safest option for them. We were simply doing what we’ve always done – delivering fresh produce to those in need, but during the pandemic it meant so much more. It was exciting to share food that would benefit their health, but it was also a chance for the residents to socialize a bit and share their favorite recipes and stories or the fact that they detested the taste of Brussels sprouts. We were packed and on our way to the next stop in 45 minutes, but you could really feel the effect of the time we shared.”

Keeping the Most Vulnerable Safe

More than half of our weekly stops service senior communities, (including Father Leo O’Brien’s) with a total of 45,000 low income seniors served annually. During this time of uncertainty, keeping the highest risk populations safe is especially appreciated by these customers. “The mobile market is very important to me – coming here saves me a trip to the store which presents a higher risk because more people are gathered. Plus, the produce is better than what I find in the supermarket – especially the beans, spinach and broccoli too” noted Rory.

Before, During and After the Pandemic

Access to fresh food has been difficult and many people, especially seniors, have been depending on the Veggie Mobile® during this time. The Veggie Mobile® has served low-income communities for 13 years thanks to support from CDPHP. It has become a dependable source for healthy food as well as a community relationship outlet for many – and COVID has not altered those benefits. Capital Roots’ ongoing commitment to providing critical food security support to some of the most vulnerable people in the region is unwavering.
Replanting The Produce Project

The March COVID-19 lockdown forced an immediate end to student attendance at the Produce Project, but not Capital Roots’ connection with its youth. Through calls and texts, staff kept in touch. As the lockdown stretched into April, staff began produce drop-offs to student’s homes. Between April and June, hundreds of pounds of food were delivered. Keeping the Produce Project “classroom” ready for the eventual return of the program meant tending the farm as if it were a normal year, even without volunteer groups or students to help.

Other Capital Roots’ staff as well as undaunted volunteers like Nancy Scott, helped ease this labor crunch. But, with markets scheduled to begin in May, we decided to withdraw from our Saturday market and focus on our Tuesday farm stand. Excess produce was sent to Capital Roots’ Veggie Mobile® and other programs, where demand was skyrocketing.

Uncharted Territory

As staff revamped market procedures to provide safe customer service during COVID, it became obvious that the Produce Project would also need an overhaul. Many aspects of the program involved opportunities for disease transmission, and being so shorthanded and in the busiest month of the year, it became obvious that the Produce Project team needed to completely redesign the summer session. Recruitment was changed, and an online application was created. Students were interviewed on Zoom. New infrastructure was built at the farm to limit crowding, allow tools and surfaces to be sterilized, and make social distancing and mask-wearing a natural part of daily activities. Everything, from temperature checks and screening questions asked as students entered the farm, to how they ate their snacks and worked in the fields, was analyzed and readjusted to build and ensure safety.

A dozen new protocols were created, trialed for potential pitfalls, and then prepared for teaching to the summer’s student leaders and interns who would manage crews. Their usual training session in June was extended by two days to help teach new protocols.

Meanwhile the spectre of COVID hovered. One student had to delay starting until they finished quarantine. Others shared with us the burdens of lockdown, how they hated distance learning and had been in “slumps.” They were worried about grades and their families and “what’s gonna happen next.” Beyond health, the other major concern was how to build team cohesion. So many team building techniques relied on in the past were now off limits. The awkwardness of social distance made closeness of any type seem difficult. But as always, the students’ resilience inspired. After months of isolation they embraced opportunity and shrugged off difficulties. As Margaret said, the program, “made me want to talk to people and make new friends, get back to being my normal self.”

Shared Responsibility

The students appreciated the safety efforts and staff’s “honesty” about COVID and health concerns. Although it was hard “when masks got hot and sweaty”, youth could choose from hundreds of backups sown by volunteers. Ashanti favored the all-white masks, while William liked sport-themed ones. Sydney said she was now clear what proper social distance really was, and that the summer made her “more comfortable wearing a mask.” Margaret said that when she returned to school, “I will definitely bring extra masks to switch during the day.”

Although staff was glad that youth noticed and embraced the new safety precautions, the most gratifying student comments were the ones that could come from any summer: that they found weeding boring, or working in the high tunnels hot. That they were most proud of how they had stayed strong when work was hard, or how well their Kohlrabi grew, how they loved cooking and working the market. Or as Shaelyn shared at summer’s end: “Being here made me feel a lot surer about myself. I know who I want to be and know what I want to do.”
Therapy In Our Community Gardens

This ended up being a particularly important year for the community gardens. We all appreciated the gardens for the nutritional, mental, and physical health benefits they provided prior to COVID. But this year, they offered yet another distinctive type of nourishment. They became one of the primary spaces to visit (i.e. escape to) and enjoy during the pandemic when most other places were off limits. One 11th and Eagle gardener captured this sentiment perfectly: “tending to my garden is what got me through the peak COVID months where everything was closed and I had so much time alone at home. I have learned so much and am so excited to do it again!”

There is so much room to move in the gardens that even when a number of gardeners showed up to work, they were all physically distanced. Between the open space and the fresh air, the gardens have been widely viewed as sanctuaries where gardeners can take refuge from the distressing virus and enjoy green space and nature. There’s no fence or lock that will keep the virus out, but the gardens certainly have offered a low risk setting for virus exposure and increased exposure to known agents of well-being: green space and gardening!

“

The garden has kept me sane, having a space to focus on life, growth, and beauty.”

– Paul’s Place community gardener.

Beautifying Our Region

This fall Capital Roots partnered with the City of Rensselaer and worked with 32 volunteers from MVP, Bergmann, and CENGAGE to implement Urban Greening Projects. In two days, we were able to install a rain garden and plant 10 trees on Second Street in Central Park, 6 border gardens on Partition Street. Overall, we introduced almost 50 trees to their new home in Rensselaer! This environmental benefits project will enhance the streetscape of Rensselaer by providing a number of advantages. Over the years, plantings will reduce noise and air pollution while providing a screen against traffic, conserving water and reducing runoff as well as adding beauty through color, form, and texture. All plants were chosen not only for the climate we’re in but for the distinctive conditions that exist in this particular city setting and for longevity. We are excited to watch the many beautiful plants grow and bloom in the years that come. After all, what we plant today is really for a greener tomorrow.
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This year, in response to the cancellation of our events, Liz Vigoda hand made beautiful ceramic bowls and mugs with all proceeds going to our essential food access services. Over the past few months, her work has helped raise thousands of dollars. Thank you Liz!

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Support our Amazon Wishlist
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Deposit cans and bottles via CLYNK
Start a Facebook Fundraiser
Host a Squash Hunger produce drive
Volunteer your time
Capital Roots is supporting essential food access for our region’s most vulnerable residents. We buy from local farms and food producers to provide key markets throughout the Capital Region.

Your gift is needed to keep our work going.

This year our team at Capital Roots stepped up and solved problems that none of us thought we would have to face. We provided services that were already desperately needed before the pandemic and made sure that, when faced with this new challenge, we did not falter. We banded together and made a difference. The challenge will not wait and neither could we. But we were not alone – your support is like our sun, our soil, and the water we need to keep growing. For that we thank you and look forward to what is ahead.

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