

# UDC out front with urban agriculture

By **Kirk Kramer** - March 21, 2018



*The University of the District of Columbia sponsors an urban farm at Southern Avenue and East Capitol Street. (Photo courtesy of UDC CAUSES)*

When older folks who live near the East Capitol Urban Farm in Ward 7 get a garden plot of their own there, it is often a happy trip down memory lane.

“Senior citizens are excited to get a plot,” said Sabine O’Hara, who runs the urban agriculture program at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). “It takes them back to their childhood days when they helped their grandparents on the farm.”

O’Hara wants children here in the District – today in 2018 – to share those same elemental experiences of the soil and the weather and the sun, of sowing and reaping. That is one reason UDC is setting up urban farms like the one at Southern Avenue and East Capitol Street.

“We provide those childhood summers to our children now,” O’Hara said. “We want to end the disconnect between us and our food – for the children to experience what a tomato tastes like when it’s pulled fresh from the vine, warmed by the sun.”

O'Hara, dean of UDC's College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability and Environmental Sciences, gave a presentation about her division's work in the community at the Jan. 17 meeting of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A (Foggy Bottom, West End). She was invited to speak at the ANC by Will Smith, the commission's chairman, whose wife is one of O'Hara's graduate students.

In addition to the East Capitol site, which has 60 raised garden beds that are available for free to people in the neighborhood, the urban farms program also sponsors community food production at a location in Ward 8. A native plant nursery has been established on South Dakota Avenue in Ward 5.

And the building that houses the UDC college O'Hara leads has been retrofitted so that its 20,000-square-foot roof is itself an "urban food hub."

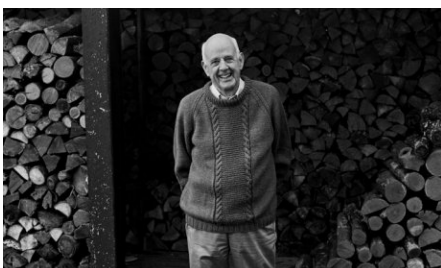
At the January ANC meeting, O'Hara distributed literature that described the rooftop farm.

"Eighteen-inch deep planters placed around the perimeter of the roof support the production of a variety of food plants, from tomatoes to peppers, beans, okra, eggplant and even berry bushes," the brochure said. "The interior of the roof is limited to no more than four inches of soil, which can support the production of leaf lettuce, microgreens and herbs.

"The roof also features a greenhouse and a hydroponic system."

Programs like the one O'Hara has established at UDC – she is its founding dean – have a strong backer in one of the country's most respected public figures, the Kentucky farmer, writer and environmentalist Wendell Berry. In 2012, Berry was invited by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to give the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at the Kennedy Center.

According to the NEH website, "The Jefferson Lecture is the highest honor the federal government confers for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities."



*The Current* wrote to Berry and asked him to comment on UDC's urban farming program. He responded in a letter.

"From the point of view of a rural American, urban agriculture is important, not just because it helps to solve certain urban

Wendell Berry (Photo courtesy of Guy Mendes/NEH.gov)

problems, which it does, but also because it helps urban people to learn something of the knowledge and work required to produce food," he said. "In other words, urban agriculture helps to correct the urban ignorance of agriculture, which is a serious rural problem."

For more than 60 years, Berry has been writing essays, fiction and poetry about farming, good work, the appropriate use of technology, the degradation of the environment, and most of all, the ties that bind human communities. Berry's letter bears witness to the importance of the work O'Hara and her colleagues are doing.

She spoke of two strands of the urban food hubs.

"One is the community garden work," O'Hara said. "It reintroduces people to our food [and where it comes from]. And it re-connects people to nature.

"The second strand is commercial. Some techniques of urban agriculture are commercially viable, like turning hot peppers into hot sauce, making pesto from basil and other herbs."

O'Hara noted the disparity in food availability across the District. She said in Wards 7 and 8, there are two or three grocery stores to serve a population of 140,000. People have to travel considerable distances to get food.

These "food deserts" benefit from the urban farms O'Hara oversees. In 2014, they grew over eight tons of produce for food banks like Bread for the City and D.C. Central Kitchen.

"We are keenly aware of our mission to provide services to District residents, particularly those who may have less access to services than others," O'Hara said.

Such community service is built into the DNA of the university. Like Cornell, Ohio State, UC Davis and about a hundred other colleges around the country, UDC is a land-grant university. It is the only urban land-grant institution in the country.

"We offer not only academic programs," O'Hara said. "As a land-grant university, we also offer applied research and community outreach programs."

The college has research programs that study the nutritional health of the elderly and the young.

"We study what encourages young people to eat more fresh food, and the effect this has on their performance in school," she said.

O'Hara admits getting youngsters to eat garden produce can be a challenge, since their diet includes so much processed food.

"Their tastes aren't used to fresh food. But when children are engaged in growing their own food they are much more ready to try it," she said.

Besides her work as scholar and dean, O'Hara practices what she preaches at her own home in Forest Hills.

"I have some old trees I wanted to preserve. I add perennials each year that thrive in a shady spot. Some are edible – asparagus, rhubarb, strawberries," she said. "I also have some annuals like beans and tomatoes, and some flowering plants. The daffodils and crocuses are coming up right now. It's always a surprise each spring to see which perennials come back and which ones didn't make it."

Introducing O'Hara's presentation to the Foggy Bottom ANC on Jan. 17, the commission's Will Smith mentioned that

an open area near the intersection of Virginia Avenue and 27th Street NW could serve as a space for an urban farm.

After O'Hara spoke, Smith introduced a resolution, unanimously passed, to form a group who would dialog with O'Hara to find an urban farm site in Ward 2.

In an email on Tuesday, Smith described the progress made so far.

"We are trying to license space . . . for this garden. We have done a site visit with UDC staff to collect a soil sample and they are working on a site design," he said. "The lot is in the inventory of the Department of General Services. The department's personnel have been speaking with WMATA, which has a surface easement on a section of the lot, and are trying to get clearance for the license. Nina Albert, who handles real estate for WMATA, has asked for some patience as they work through the question.

“All in all, it looks promising. We are hoping we can get something in place for this growing season. Things will hopefully firm up in the next week or two.”

The website for the college O’Hara leads at UDC can be found at [udc.edu/causes](http://udc.edu/causes).

A link to Wendell Berry’s 2012 Jefferson Lecture, “It all turns on affection,” can be found on the NEH website at [neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture](http://neh.gov/about/awards/jefferson-lecture).

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