



A sign welcomes visitors to the land that once hosted a psychiatric facility, but is now a sprawling urban garden.

By Shawndra Miller  
Photography by Josh Marshall

# URBAN GROWTH

Seven Steeples Farm brings new life to once-forgotten ground



A chicken coop donated by Indiana University Health.

SEVEN STEEPLES FARM on Indy's near westside covers the buried remains of a seven-steepled hospital building that was demolished several decades ago. Not just any hospital building: This was a mental institution for women, part of the campus of Central State, once one of the largest psychiatric facilities in the country.

Since the 1850s-era institution closed a few decades ago, the 150-acre grounds lay in disuse, with most of the buildings demolished. But in the past few years the site has begun to come to life with the opening of Central Greens, a new residential development. Seven Steeples Farm is an integral part of the land's reinvigoration, say project coordinator Mike Higbee and farm manager Justin Berg.

Even on a gray January day, the duo can evoke the farm in all its summer lushness. "One of the highlights," says Higbee, "is this gorgeous trellis garden that's covered with vining plants by midsummer." Visitors to the farm are greeted by the sight, along with wood-framed raised beds. Farther down the lane, chickens cluck under century-old

oaks that once shaded patients' outdoor walks. Here, two shipping containers are being repurposed into refrigeration and storage space to anchor an outdoor classroom.

Berg points out a triangular demonstration garden situated in partial shade. It holds lettuces and other greens during the growing season. Beyond the shade trees' reach stretch wide beds, soon to be planted for the second year in melons, tomatoes, pumpkins and other crops.

The surrounding neighborhoods have few options for fresh, affordable, healthy food, says Higbee, who works for Development Concepts, part of the team behind Central Greens. This four-acre farm is meant to remedy that problem.

The farm's primary objective: to get nutritious food onto the tables of nearby neighbors. Higbee says the dearth of stores offering produce at affordable prices drives most residents to convenience store fare. "Bottles of pop and bags of chips," he says. "That's what's serving as dinner for a lot of near westside neighborhoods."

"Their de facto go-to is the Dollar Store, (where they) get SpaghettiOs,"

he says. "We want to give people an option other than that. Within a mile radius of the farm, there are 1,500 households that are considered at the poverty line. They can't afford a \$2.36-a-pound tomato." That's the gap he and Berg hope to address.

Higbee also intends the farm as an amenity to people moving in to Central Greens. "It's kind of like having Waterman's (Farm Market) in your backyard," he says.

Berg started working the ground in 2014 with help from Higbee and volunteers. The cucumbers, greens, melons and other fruits and vegetables of the 2014 growing cycle hit the market through three outlets: a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, restaurant accounts and on-site market days.

Each week Berg and volunteers prepped CSA bags for some 40 subscribers, with the majority of uptake



Mike Higbee (left) and Justin Berg



from young couples and businesses beyond the near westside. This year they intend to increase subscriptions to 75 and target the local base. A new Farm-to-Family CSA program will bring 35 subsidized subscriptions to families in need living nearby. Higbee is seeking business sponsors for the program and working with community leaders in hopes of boosting the number of local subscribers.

"We need a little street cred on the near westside," he says. "That

neighborhood has had a lot of ups and downs, with people promising things and then disappearing in a year. So we have a lot of timid consumers. Even though the product is good and the price is good, they're skeptical on whether or not it will stick. We're going to try our hardest that at least 50 percent of CSAs get into the neighborhood."

An on-farm market every Thursday and Friday afternoon had a better response: "We got around \$1,000

last year in market stand sales from neighborhood people," he says.

In keeping with the educational goal, market customers are invited to pick their own if they wish, and many families did just that last year. Others chose to have the farmer (or farmhands) go into the fields and bring back a bag of greens or a few tomatoes. Either way, the produce that graced the dinner table on those nights was as fresh as could be: purchased within minutes of harvest.

Restaurants and food trucks like Paleo on the Go also sourced ingredients from Seven Steeples.

In planning the 2015 season, Higbee and Berg decided to create different plots to supply each outlet. They are lining up accounts in advance and planting for those needs, instead of the somewhat seat-of-the-pants method of their first year. "Last year we planted a bunch of stuff and then tried to figure out outlets for the produce," Higbee says. "This year is more calculated."

Some 400 volunteers worked on the farm in 2014, and a few steady volunteers who live nearby have created continuity — even stopping by throughout the winter to help care for the chickens.

Berg knows this kind of loyalty is priceless. He wants to encourage as much community involvement as possible. "We're surrounded by houses," he says. "I really want (residents) to treat the farm as if it's their own, to watch over it and help out, because if you help us, we'll gladly give you produce."

The guiding principles behind the farm are twofold. The first is to grow all produce organically and free of genetically modified organisms. To that end, Berg eschews pesticides and other chemicals, and the chickens eat non-GMO feed.

The second principle is education. "We don't want to just put a piece of kale in (a customer's) hand and say, 'Here you go; it's affordable and healthy — go eat it,'" Higbee explains. Instead, they will engage a chef to teach farm-to-table cookery: taking participants into the field to harvest vegetables at peak perfection, then

**"I really want (residents) to treat the farm as if it's their own, to watch over it and help out, because if you help us, we'll gladly give you produce."**  
— JUSTIN BERG

demonstrating efficient and tasty preparation methods. Purdue Extension is Seven Steeples' biggest partner in this endeavor, with plans to offer cooking classes in the outdoor classroom this year.

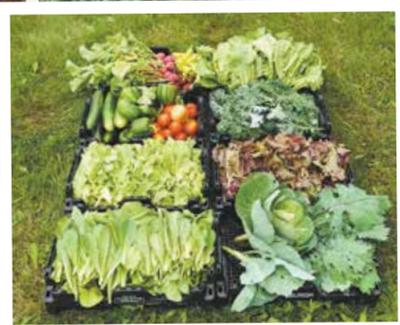
As for those demonstration gardens, Berg hopes to show would-be gardeners how to turn their own

yards into food-producing oases. "That's how he got hooked on farming, and he sees no reason why others wouldn't take to it as he did. "It is a lot of work," he admits, "but at the same time it's pretty simple: You put a seed in the ground and let it grow with a little bit of water."



The Seven Steeples garden beehive.

[SUBMITTED PHOTOS]



"I want to show people that through a little bit of work, they can make a real difference to their pocketbook, their table and their health."

With trellis gardens, the shade garden, a few small raised beds and the wide beds that grow the bulk of the crops, the farm offers multiple models for the backyard gardener. The layout is walkable, with welcoming swaths of mulch between beds. People often meander through, and many a child expresses astonishment to find carrots growing underground or to see a watermelon patch full of ripening sweet fruit on their sprawling vines. Learning what food looks like long before it gets to a supermarket is part of the draw.

But the biggest attraction turns out to be the chickens. "The people in the community like to come sit by the chicken coop and watch the chickens act crazy," Berg says. Fresh eggs have been a hit, too. He has no trouble

finding buyers for the 14 dozen or so currently laid each week.

Berg also values the chickens for their contribution to his composting program, just as he appreciates Indianapolis Municipal Police Department's Mounted Patrol horses stabled nearby. He incorporates their manure — hundreds of cubic feet of it each week — into the soil in hopes of returning to the earth more than he takes out. Similarly he sources wood chips from a local tree trimmer, coffee grounds from three coffee shops and spent brewery grains from a microbrewery.

He doesn't stop there in his quest for organic matter to bolster the beds. Throughout the fall and even into winter, he keeps an eye out for bagged leaves people have set out for collection. Since October, he estimates he's brought in about 500

bags of leaves from neighborhoods all over the city. The beds have been blanketed with these leaves all winter long. "Wherever I'm driving," he says, "I just pull over and get it."

Biannual soil tests will monitor the impact of such randomized inputs, but "as of now I've had no issues," he notes. "I just really hate seeing stuff go to waste ... and I feel that once it's turned into compost it's going to save me a ton of money."

Turning waste into food seems a fitting use for a site that lay fallow for so long. An eerie former wasteland now plays host to plants, bees, hens and visitors from children to retirees. And the serene setting takes those visitors away from the stress of city life. "If you're tired of all the concrete and cars," says Berg, "you can come sit with the chickens under 150-year-old trees."

For more information, visit [centralgreens.net](http://centralgreens.net) or [facebook.com/CentralGreens](https://www.facebook.com/CentralGreens).



Higbee and Berg work together at Seven Steeples Farm.

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