



Owner of Greensgrow Farms in Kensington Shows the City How to Be Successful in Urban Agriculture

Fifteen years ago, Mary Seton Corboy got approval to transform a vacant block into a lettuce farm.

**By Michael Alan Goldberg
May 23, 2012**

How ludicrous was the notion of urban agriculture to most Philadelphia residents just 15 years ago? Mary Seton Corboy still laughs as she recalls going to the Department of Licenses & Inspections in 1997 to get approval to transform a vacant block (and former EPA Superfund site) on Cumberland Street in North Philly into a hydroponic lettuce farm.

“The girl at the counter, she said to the others, ‘Come on out here—you know how I said the other day we’ve seen it all? This lady wants to grow lettuce in Kensington!’”

The whole office roared as though Corboy had just dropped a Chris Rock routine on them. “They said, ‘We have no idea what the hell you’re talking about, but who cares, it’s Kensington.’ They stamped the thing and said, ‘You know what? Don’t come back.’”

Today, urban farming is all the rage, and Corboy’s acre-sized, widely lauded Greensgrow Farms has become the model for how to succeed in agriculture within big-city limits. Farmer-in-chief Corboy, 54,



presides over a virtually year-round, multifaceted operation that employs a staff of more than 20. There's a thriving nursery of vegetables and flowers. A Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program that provides regular shares of produce and other foods from Greensgrow and dozens of farms within 100 miles of Philadelphia to its 500 subscribers. And workshops open to all Philadelphians about how to grow in tiny urban spaces.

During a tour of the grounds under the early morning sun, the petite Corboy—who's all at once gruff, kind, self-deprecating, potty-mouthed and a joy to be around—explains she was as unlikely a person to become a farmer as Kensington was a place to establish a farm.

"I didn't know a damn thing about growing anything," Corboy laughs. Raised in D.C., she came here 30 years ago to attend Villanova, eventually earning a master's degree in political science. Her father worked for the Department of State, and for a time she thought she'd follow in his footsteps.

But ever the free spirit, Corboy instead became a chef, then a ranch-hand out in Wyoming, and then, for much of the '90s, she worked on the grounds of painter Andrew Wyeth's Chadds Ford estate. There, she learned about agriculture but also became something of a beloved bungler—driving a riding mower into a river her first day, and another time accidentally chopping down the Wyeth family's favorite apple tree. "They found it humorous to keep me around to see what I could fuck up next," she says.

In '97, she and friend Tom Sereduk, a chef and grower, teamed up to start Greensgrow with the idea of cultivating and delivering high-quality lettuce for local chefs like Marcie Turney (now of Barbuzzo), Fork's Anne-Marie Lasher and others. With a \$40,000 loan from Ben Franklin Technology Partners, the pair put down roots on a cheap parcel of land in a scarred section of Kensington once occupied by a galvanized steel plant. The neighbors were cautiously welcoming yet skeptical. Corboy, a steadfast proponent of sustainability and healthy eating, avoided foisting her values on the locals.

"You can't tell a Philadelphian what to do," she says. "They're not gonna think you're the greatest fucking thing since sliced bread because you're growing weird-looking lettuce in a place they wanted to be a bowling alley or a Wawa."

The first three years were tough. Lettuce season was only a few months long and profits were slim. The pair had a nasty falling-out over finances and Sereduk left (they've since repaired their friendship). Corboy considered closing Greensgrow, but "at that point we were known for being urban farmers, and I just couldn't fail publicly."

Corboy saved the business by growing and selling flowers to extend the farm's season. Greensgrow steadily expanded, but then a bigger crisis came in 2004 when Corboy was diagnosed with endometrial cancer and given only months to live. Chemotherapy and radiation saved her life; she's been cancer-free for five years, but treatment took its toll, and these days she can't work the soil in the hot sun quite like she used to.

Usually, she's found in the Greensgrow offices handling the business end of things, but Corboy's still a farmer at heart—making the rounds every day, getting dirt under her nails, feeding the worms for compost. "It doesn't get any more basic than that," she says. "Sometimes when you've been in meetings all day, it's like, lemme go outside and put my hands in the shit, literally. That still gives me a thrill."

The neighborhood's better than it was, but Corboy still has to deal with thieves scaling the fences in the night and stealing refrigerators, snowblowers and metal pipes—not to mention

drunks who've tried to swipe the chickens or Greensgrow's mascot and superstar, Milkshake the pig.

Corboy takes it all in stride, and notes that with Greensgrow's sterling reputation, the city finally seems to get it. She hopes they keep that in mind when they consider what to do with the vacant factories and abandoned lots dotting the landscape just blocks from her farm.

"Greensgrow is a place that was considered totally unusable, totally abandoned, and without a big capital infusion we managed to turn it into something that's a positive for the community," says Corboy. "There's no reason people can't do the same elsewhere and make this place much more livable."