

Emerging Trends in Providing Electronic Access to Urban Agriculturists in North America

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Abstract:

The practice of growing, processing and distributing food in or around a village, town, or city is also known as urban agriculture (UA). UA is gaining importance as a step towards achieving food security. The RUAF Foundation, an international rural and urban development organization has expounded what, why, and how of urban agriculture. Urban agriculture is a continuous process that increases as the city grows. Urban agriculture is a freelance activity or hobby where the residents perform as growers, care takers, marketers, and as consumers. They may be called neo-agriculturists. Urban agriculture in North America is on the rise. By and large these neo-agriculturists lack viable sources of information to practice their newfound calling. The print media, television and service agencies are unidirectional have their own limitations in catering effectively to the information needs of urban farmers. The emergence of Internet and associated social media with various or channels has greatly facilitated farmers in advancing urban agriculture. This paper highlights each of the selected social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter and You Tube and their relevance, usage and popularity in keeping the neo agriculturists abreast of knowhow of show how of do how (demonstration).

Key words: Urban agriculture; You Tube; Facebook; Twitter; RAUF Foundation.

Introduction:

Cultivating plants and raising animals has progressed concurrently with human settlements in urban areas. The practice of growing, processing and distributing food in or around a village, town, or city is also known as urban agriculture, urban farming, or urban gardening. Urban agriculture (UA) and associated activities are increasingly drawing the attention of planners and

policy as an attempt to achieve food security. UA is mostly practiced at home or around the home. UA can also involve animal husbandry, beekeeping, floriculture, and horticulture. Often, urban agriculture is confused with community gardening, or subsistence farming. Sheila Golden (Golden, 2013) in an extensive literature review has summarized the economic, social, and health impacts of urban agriculture. The RUAF Foundation (RUAF Foundation, 2018) an international rural and urban development organization operating in several countries, has dealt with the what, why, and how of urban agriculture lucidly. The RUAF Foundation focuses its activities on five areas of work: planning resilient urban food systems, short food chains and local economy, food security and social inclusion of the urban poor, productive reuse of wastes and wastewater, and urban agriculture and city adaptation to climate change. It has distinguished UA from rural agriculture and says that UA treats residents as laborers, uses urban resources such as organic waste as compost, urban wastewater for irrigation, and links with urban consumers. Urban agriculture is a continuous process that increases as the city grows. It is an integral part of the urban system.

Urban agriculture is a freelance activity or hobby and the neo agriculturists must operate as the growers, care takers, marketers, and of course as consumers. Urban agriculture in North America is on the rise and is going green while growing greens. It is advantageous in the sense that to produce food closer to where people live and work reduces transportation costs and the environmental impact of that drive from farm to table. However most of the urban farmers do not possess the knowhow of do-how of a variety of operations and the tricks of the trade of marketing their produce. These perceived needs calls for easily and economically viable sources of information. Though the print media in a variety of ways has been catering to information needs of urban farmers, it has its limitations and intrinsic barriers. Luckily the emergence of the Internet and the social media with multidimensional channels has greatly facilitated farmers in advancing urban agriculture.

Electronic Access via Traditional Tools:

Several service agencies and organizations assist the urban farmers in providing information via the Internet. They include Master Gardeners programs; junior gardener programs; producers' cooperatives; commercial and marketing firms such as Lowes, Walmart, and Home Depot; private functionaries such as Martha Stewart; local newspapers; TV programs; the Internet of Things; and urban agriculture kits of USDA. They all communicate and make use of the Internet.

Electronic Access through Social Media:

Digital media is a comprehensive term which includes anything that is online or digital including mobile, or web. Social media is a subset of digital media and includes channels through which people socialize.

Social Media and Urban Agriculture:

With the advent of a variety of social media sites, the resultant electronic access to information has greatly facilitated advancing urban agriculture. The biggest advantage of social media is that one can directly respond to what is shared with them. Most of the social media sites such as YouTube and Twitter act as show-how or demo tools. Each of the selected social media channels and its relevance, usage and popularity are delineated below.



Facebook:

Facebook is a website designed by three Harvard University students in 2004 to share their photos and meet new people. In the course of time it was opened to others and it is extremely popular now. The number of monthly active users worldwide as of the 2nd quarter of 2018 had exceeded one billion. Facebook is a pathway to share information in an easy and entertaining way and it too is a social networking site. Urban agriculturists can post their activity on their farm, share pictures, and see what friends, celebrities, organizations, and groups are up to. The Facebook community often consists of people they know in real life. Here is an example of a Facebook posting on Urban Farming with all the features of Facebook such as Like, Follow, Share, and Post: <https://www.facebook.com/ProfitableUrbanFarming/>

According to a survey of 1,550 farmers by the periodical *Farm Futures* in 2016, Facebook is the most popular social media used by U.S. farmers, followed by Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr and Periscope.

Twitter:

Twitter is a social networking site that is used for communication. Users can communicate with their followers and get information spread around. Twitter lets users make short posts about anything, but limited to only 140 characters in length. The posts are known as “tweets” and appear chronologically on the Twitter profile page. Statistics shows Twitter users in the United States as of the second quarter of 2018 amounted to 68 million. Twitter is an open forum of sending a text message to the entire world and to be welcoming of any feedback based on that message



Figure 1 Tomato seedlings in the backyard. Courtesy Deva Shivakumar

Pinterest:

Pinterest enables anyone to organize and share visual information. It is a unique way to share agriculture's story through pictures. By creating a board dedicated to agriculture, other users can see what a real-life farm, ranch, barn, or crops actually look like. As of October 2016, there were 150 million monthly active Pinterest users worldwide. Pinterest also has a strong mobile presence, reaching 23 percent of U.S. mobile audiences in 2017.



Figure 2 Bottle gourd on the Sundeck. Courtesy Deva Shivakumar



Figure 3 Produce from home garden. Courtesy Deva Shivakumar

You Tube:

YouTube enables users to upload, view, rate, and share, add to favorites, report, comment on videos, and subscribe to other users. It offers a wide variety of user-generated and corporate media videos. Available content includes video_clips, TV show clips, music videos, short and documentary films, audio recordings, movie trailers, live streams, and other content such as video blogging, short original videos, and educational videos. Most of the content on YouTube is uploaded by individuals, but media corporations including CBS, the BBC and Hulu offer some of their material via YouTube as part of the YouTube partnership program. Unregistered users can only watch videos on the site, while registered users are permitted to upload an unlimited number of videos and add comments to videos. Videos deemed potentially inappropriate are available only to registered users affirming themselves to be at least 18 years old.

Conclusion:

With the increasing interest in access to healthy foods, agriculture in urban and suburban areas has risen in popularity. However, urban agriculture is hindered by several barriers and threats. Barriers include limited access to land, insufficient infrastructure and supportive services, intense competition from other land uses, lack of research on human health risks in growing food, and lack of skills and experience in urban agriculture. Threats range from pests, diseases and animals. In recent years several states have enacted legislation related to various aspects of urban agriculture – gardening in urban areas, food hubs, and statewide coordination.

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