

Grow Bristol CIC

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A GROWING PROJECT · PETE WHITING & DERMOT O'REGAN

Our work at Grow Bristol during 2015, the Green Capital year, was focused on both setting up our new urban farm and getting out there amongst the public to demonstrate and talk about our work and approach.

For those not familiar with Grow Bristol, we are a small social enterprise with big plans for farming fish and greens in the city using the methods of vertical farming and aquaponics. Our aim is to produce great food all-year round, in the heart of the community where it is eaten, whilst farming in a more sustainable way. We are part of a movement that is changing the way we feed our city, using innovative agricultural methods and helping to re-connect the people of Bristol to their food.

A NEW KIND OF MARKET GARDEN AND FISH FARM

We have made great progress in transforming a disused industrial site near Temple Meads into a productive urban farm and space for training and public engagement. The focus of the site is our 'Grow Box', a recycled shipping container repurposed as an integrated 'controlled environment' growing system producing healthy greens (like watercress, pea shoots, kale, radish leaf and micro-herbs) together with a sustainable source of protein in the form of fish (tilapia).

Developing the site and the new growing system has taken a lot of time and effort (and money!), especially in the less glamorous challenges like finalising a lease, getting planning permission and insurance, and connecting a water supply and electricity (green energy, of course). With the help of some wonderful volunteers we have got there and during early 2016 will open the site to the public for visits and training courses and, following a similar model to the market gardens of the past, we will be supplying fresh produce directly to the immediate locality.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP-BUILDING

From May to September, Grow Bristol was 'on the road' with our demonstration vertical aquaponic system dubbed the 'Grow Pod' as part of the Green Capital project the Urban Growing Trail. We took up six-week residencies at both the Engine Shed and Windmill Hill City Farm and either side popped up for



long weekends at the Food Connections Festival and for our 'Talking Tilapia' event at the Lab Space on the harbourside.

This allowed us to engage with thousands of locals and visitors to the city to not only show how our innovative and integrated growing systems actually work, but also to start conversations about how our approach challenges and provides more sustainable solutions to many of the issues associated with the dominant industrial-scale and chemical-based agricultural system where most of the UK's food still comes from. Talking about things like carbon and water footprints, pesticide use, soil degradation, climate change and depleted fish stocks can all come across as a bit heavy, but we approach our public engagement in a positive and engaging way and usually get a positive reaction, especially when we can demonstrate our innovative and inspiring efforts to provide solutions.

Another major benefit of our year of getting out there has been to work with some great new people, projects and businesses such as Nick Sturge and the team at Engine Shed (not to mention the thousands of innovators who descended on Venturefest while we were there), the team and visitors at Windmill Hill City Farm, Source (Joe the fish filleter extraordinaire!), 91 Ways, Chelsea Fringe, Bridgwater College and many others.

2016 AND BEYOND

At Grow Bristol we are looking forward to an exciting 2016 which will see us deliver our social and environmental aims and move from a pilot project into

a sustainable commercial enterprise. Meanwhile we still need to raise funds and encourage more people and partners to work with us to achieve our plans for this year and for growth in future years.

So we have been developing a Crowdfunding campaign with the wonderful team at 'Better Bristol' to launch in early Spring, talking to restaurants and retailers interested in taking our produce, and meeting with schools and support service providers about creating opportunities for educational visits and volunteering. We are also working closely with a number of local colleges and universities on some really exciting initiatives, soon to be revealed. And if anyone reading has an interest in getting involved with any aspect of our work either as an individual or organisation or business please do get in touch for a chat.

Finally, to mention that none of this would have been possible without the funding and support we received from Bristol 2015 during Green Capital year and ongoing support from UnLtd and the School for Social Entrepreneurs, and of course our partners in the Urban Growing Trail project Incredible Edible Bristol (Sara Venn) and Bee the Change (Heather Moore), our volunteers and too many others to mention here.

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