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Brooklyn Grange Farmer Matt Jefferson Works the Land, 12 Stories Up

Rooftop farmer Matt Jefferson is at the forefront of the local and organic food movement at Brooklyn Grange

June 7, 2016, [Craigh Barboza](#)
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People are always telling Matt Jefferson he has a cool job, especially once they have stepped out onto the roof of the industrial building inside the Brooklyn Navy Yard where he works at Brooklyn Grange. Throughout this 65,000 square-foot urban farm are neatly planted rows of organic salad greens and other vegetables, herbs and flowers.



Matt Jefferson (Photo: Courtesy of Brooklyn Grange)

Then there's the postcard panoramic view of Lower Manhattan. Most people, he says, are like, "What! *This* is where you go every day?" But as Jefferson will tell you himself, he rarely gets to take in the view. He's too busy looking down, tending crops.

Jefferson is one of a growing number of urban agriculturalists who are transforming city rooftops into sprawling farms that foster healthy eating and environmental sustainability. He grew up in Indianapolis and after graduate school at Hunter College, he spent two years in Botswana as a Peace Corps volunteer, focusing on HIV/AIDS awareness. He was planning for a career in education until he found Brooklyn Grange upon returning to New York in 2011. That's when he stopped by the farm to purchase worms for a vermicompost bin and says he was "blown away by what was going on." Not long after, Jefferson began working as an apprentice at Brooklyn Grange, and then earlier this year took over the position of head farmer from Ben Flanner, the farm's co-founder and president. He calls Flanner an "awesome farmer and a mentor."

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Managing a rooftop farm is hard work even for someone who isn't married with two small kids, like Jefferson. "I'm almost 40 and I can feel it," he says. Jefferson splits his time between the company's two farms (the other is in Long Island City), where he leads a team of 10. He's responsible for creating the crop map, monitoring the irrigation system and training the farm crew, as well as prepping beds the size of studio apartments, seeding the soil, transplanting and harvesting food and then getting it all packaged and out the door. As if that weren't enough, Jefferson also helped develop a yearlong microgreens program, which has brought in some much-needed revenue during the winter months, when the outdoor space is closed. "We're fortunate to have leaders like Matt, who share this mindset of continuous improvement to produce the highest quality fresh herbs and vegetables," says Flanner, who is still active in food production but has shifted his focus to "other channels" at Brooklyn Grange, including their educational program and a robust design and installations arm that built a half-acre meadow atop the Vice Media headquarters in Williamsburg last summer.



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Under Jefferson, Brooklyn Grange has steadily increased its output by finding efficiencies in its farming practices and focusing on profitable crops, such as ground cherries, that tend to do well in their soil and conditions. Annually, the two farms cultivate more than 50,000 pounds of organic produce, much of which is served at restaurants throughout the city.

Did you always see yourself doing this kind of work?

My background is actually in public health. There was a period, after I returned from the Peace Corps in 2011, when I thought I'd end up working with the Board of Ed, building farms on top of schools — which is still not out of the question, simply because Brooklyn Grange does a lot of design and installation stuff. The first thing I noticed when I got back to America is the obesity problem we have here. I thought: Why do we have to live like this? It's so hard to eat healthy. There are food deserts all over the place. I thought, hopefully we can do something to change this in the next 20 years or however long it takes. When you think about the number of people who have to eat, what we're doing at Brooklyn Grange is not even a drop in the bucket, but it's progress. And we're thriving as a business because we not only grow and sell fresh produce, but we're also involved in the community. We offer workshops on farming and sustainability so my job is this nice mix of my passion for growing food and this education and community outreach component that all of us at Brooklyn Grange tap in to.



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Brooklyn Grange Navy Yard rooftop farm (Photo: Anastasia Cole Plakias/Brooklyn Grange)

Commercial rooftop farms like Brooklyn Grange are a relatively new concept. Are there any books that you would recommend to someone who is thinking of doing this for a living?

[Our vice president] Anastasia Cole Plakias just wrote a book called *The Farm on the Roof: What Brooklyn Grange Taught Us About Entrepreneurship, Community, and Growing a Sustainable Business* (Avery). It will guide anybody in the right direction when it comes to [the business of rooftop farms] and the steps it took to get Brooklyn Grange to where it is now. The book isn't as technical on the farming side, but you can read about organic farming, which is relevant to what we do, or *The Rooftop Growing Guide*, by Annie Novak. There are still a lot of unknowns when it comes to rooftop farming. We're learning stuff every day: on the soil that we use; different crops that grow well and don't grow well; nutrients in the soil and do we lose a ton of it every time we get a heavy rain. We're trying to figure all that out. Right now, we have a doctoral student from Cornell, who got a big grant to do some research up here.

What do you grow at Brooklyn Grange?

We grow a pretty wide range of crops, but our bread and butter is greens; nearly half the farm is salad

greens: lettuce mixes, mustard mixes and arugula. Between both farms we also do about 1,500 tomato plants, a few thousand peppers (of many different varieties), hundreds of eggplants, cucumbers, squash, ground cherries, beets, many varieties of herbs. And there are hundreds of kale and chard plants. We have to keep the farms diversified, not only for CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) members [who pay for a weekly supply of freshly picked produce], but to keep a healthy cycle of plants throughout the farm.



Workers tend to the Brooklyn Grange Long Island City Farm (Photo: Brooklyn Grange)

One of the most important parts of your job is planning the crop map. Tell us what it looks like and walk us through the steps on how you create it.

The crop map is loaded with numbers, colors and notes. It's done on a computer. First, we talk about what did well last season, in terms of sales and growth, and then we determine if we should do equal amounts, more or less the following year. Once we determine the number of square feet per crop that we want to plant, we decide where it will go. We try our best to rotate most crops, especially peppers and tomatoes, but it gets a bit tricky. I definitely rack my brain for weeks trying to prepare the map and once I think I've figured it out, I sit down with both managers, Liz Dowd (the LIC farm) and Michelle Cashen (Navy Yard), and talk it through. I give them each a crack at doing it themselves, before we sit down to make a final map. It's a fun process and super important. Us farmers can pretty much tell you what is going where before anything is ever in the ground. It's ingrained in our heads in February.

Is irrigation an issue on a rooftop farm?

We use drip line irrigation on a majority of the farm – the same drip that a lot of ground-level farms use. The one challenge of being high up on a roof is water pressure. The Navy Yard is 12 stories up so we put water pumps to get enough pressure to fill the lines.

And how deep is the soil?

We use raised beds. The soil is deep compared to standard green roofs with sedums and native plants and such but from an agriculture perspective the depth of our soil is a huge challenge. At times, it prevents us from growing certain crops and from keeping valuable nutrient in the soil when it rains. We have no sub soil up here so some of the nutrient goes down the drain.

Did you ever think to yourself: What am I doing growing food on top of 12-story building?

In the beginning, a lot of folks were like, oh, these guys are a bunch of hippies trying to grow food on roofs. And I get that. They'd say, "Why don't you just go out to the country where you can get 100 acres and grow as much food as you want?" But after a year of hearing people say that, it started bothering me. Everyone at Brooklyn Grange is committed to the same movement, so to speak, and to making sure that our youth understand what it means to eat well. We have a nonprofit called City Growers that cycles thousands of school kids through both farms every year and when you watch a city kid pull a carrot out of the ground it's mind-blowing to see what goes on. Those little things make the whole project worthwhile.





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An event at Brooklyn Grange Navy Yard Farm (Photo: Brooklyn Grange)

What are your hours like?

I get my day going early and try to get home at a reasonable time so I can spend time with my family, too.

How early are we talking?

It depends on the time of year and day of the week. Right now, I'm in at 7:30 and out by 5. During the busiest harvest time of the year, which is August into September, I'm in at 5:30 and out by 5.

What happens when the weather gets cold?

We work all 12 months of the year. In the wintertime, it definitely slows down. I mean we close the farms and grow microgreens in our three greenhouses. We can supply chefs with 30 varieties of microgreens year-round. The winter's also a nice time to rest your body because the work we do is physically demanding. And we have a lot of meetings where we talk about the season and think about the next year. Winter goes by pretty fast.

What is spring like?

Spring is slammed with physical bed work, getting seeds in the ground, getting the greenhouses ready for transplants. Then summer is a lot of crop maintenance. Still we plant greens every week. We're planting, planting, planting. But then you get to reap the rewards of all the hard spring work when the plants get real big and tall and you have all your fresh summer vegetables. That's always exciting.

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