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JULY/AUGUST 2011

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# Mob Mentality

*Armed with shovels and trowels, up-and-coming urban agrarians are leaving their mark on urban farms.*

BY JODI HELMER / PHOTOS BY TRACE RAMSEY

**B**umper stickers that read “Catch the Buzz: Keep Bees” and “No Farms, No Food” covered the tailgates of pickup trucks piled high with pitchforks, shovels and wheelbarrows. The group gathered on the sidewalk in front of a brick duplex in downtown Durham, N.C., and unloaded the trucks, stacking garden tools on the front steps or tossing them onto the mound of soil that towered over one corner of the front yard; a trio unearthed rakes and shovels from the trunk of a compact car, and a couple approached the house with gardening gloves tucked into the back pockets of their jeans.

It was shortly after noon when the flurry of introductions, hugs and handshakes was complete and work was set to begin.

“Let’s head out back to talk about the plans!” Nick Fox shouted over the din of the crowd.

Fox, a 20-something urban farmer with a ZZ Top beard, led the group to the backyard, where he perched on a folding table to go over the list of chores for the afternoon: digging new annual beds, pulling weeds, amending soil, building compost bins and plugging mushroom logs.

An eclectic group of 30 listened to instructions, raising their hands to indicate which projects they wanted to work on. It looked more like a group that was headed out to brunch or a nightclub than one that planned to spend its Sunday afternoon helping with farm chores; a few of the men were dressed in khaki shorts and button-down shirts, and a number of women wore dresses, colorful plastic sunglasses and sandals. By the end of the day, all of them had dirt under their fingernails.

Before everyone got to work, Fox offered a reminder of the reasons they came together: “I don’t own land, and I had to fight to be able to create a garden here. I’m proving that it’s possible to grow food, even if you rent and live in the city. We all have the right to grow food, and we need to support each other to make it happen.”

Over the next four hours, the group accomplished more on his urban farm than Fox could have tackled in an entire season—and it didn’t cost him a cent. Fox had just benefited from a crop mob.





< *Everyone pitches in with tools for a crop mob.*

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

A crop mob brings together wannabe farmers and curious foodies with experienced agrarians to work on a farm for an afternoon, trading labor for knowledge. It's an old-fashioned barn-raising with a modern twist.

Volunteers, known as mobbers, are mobilized through email listservs and online networks, like Facebook. They descend on small, sustainable farms to help with chores. The events typically draw anywhere from 15 to 100 mobbers who pull weeds, mulch gardens, spread manure, build greenhouses and clear fields. The event usually is limited to sustainable farms where the work is most labor-intensive because farmers aren't using machinery, pesticides or fertilizer.

The idea took root in Raleigh, N.C., in 2008 when a group of young farmers decided it would be more effective to talk about the issues facing up-and-coming agrarians while working in the fields instead of sitting around a table.

"We saw it as an opportunity to socialize and get something done," explains Rob Jones, one of the founders of the grassroots group, called Crop Mob.

The first crop mob was held at Piedmont Biofarm in Pittsboro, N.C. Nineteen mobbers harvested and boxed 1,600 pounds of sweet potatoes in less than three hours and agreed to meet again the following month. From then on, meetings were replaced by afternoons on the farm, where the farmers completed essential chores and strengthened their bonds with one another and the local agriculture movement.

## A GROWING DEMAND

Word about Crop Mob spread as quickly as kudzu in the South. The group grew from 19 farmers at the first event to 25 the next month and 30 the month after that. Their email distribution list has topped 500 members, and some events draw as many as 100 mobbers who are eager to get their hands dirty. To date, the group has coordinated more than 30 crop mobs at small-scale farms around Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, contributing upwards of 3,000 hours of volunteer labor while supporting sustainable agriculture.

Keith Shaljian is a regular mobber who isn't surprised by the interest in crop mobs. As the co-operator of Bountiful Backyards, a landscape cooperative based in Durham, Shaljian has seen a sharp increase in the demand for small-scale urban farms.

< *When the first crop mob harvested 1,600 pounds of sweet potatoes in less than three hours, the farmers knew they were on to something.*



> *Crop mobbing isn't just about the work. It's about the camaraderie, too.*

"More people want to grow edible landscapes but aren't sure how to get started," he says. "A crop mob is a great way to meet people who know a lot about growing food and get involved in the local community."

As word about Crop Mob has spread, the group has received countless emails from people all over the country who are interested in replicating the model.

"We were a little surprised at the amount of interest," admits one of the founding farmers, Trace Ramsey.

Although the group doesn't track numbers or require others who want to establish a crop mob in their region to ask permission before organizing, Ramsey believes at least 50 similar groups have popped up across the country. A quick Google search turned up crop mobs in all corners of the U.S., from Atlanta to Seattle and Madison, Wis., to Las Cruces, N.M.

Deb Taft decided to start Crop Mob NYC after reading an article about the concept in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2010.

"I know how valuable an experience it is for people to get their hands dirty," she says. "I also knew farmers in [New York] who were struggling and needed help."

"More people want to **GROW EDIBLE LANDSCAPES** but aren't sure how to get started. A crop mob is a great way to meet people who know a lot about growing food and get involved in the local community."

Taft, who grows food and raises bees on a 1-acre farm outside city limits, hosted the first Crop Mob NYC event in April 2010. She dispatched 100 mobbers to four urban farms, including a 6,000-square-foot rooftop farm in Brooklyn. All but two of the 13 mobs the group has hosted have been at farms in the heart of New York City.

Interest from the 850-plus members on the Crop Mob NYC Facebook page is so high that Taft has to request RSVPs from mobbers and limit the number of volunteers who can participate in events. "Urban farms are much more compact," she explains. "We can't have 100 people show up to a crop mob at a rooftop farm!"

## HELPING HANDS

Over the course of the afternoon, more than 50 mobbers helped out at the crop mob in Durham.

In the spartan kitchen of the duplex, Jones took a break from stirring a pot of beeswax that was melting on the stovetop and looked out the window. He identified three farmers who were attacking a patch of



overgrown brush with pickaxes and hoes as beneficiaries of past crop mobs, spotted several regular mobbers, and pointed out a woman wearing a gray fedora who was another founding member of the group. There were also a lot of faces he didn't recognize.

"There are a lot of new people here; word is getting around and more people are showing up," he says. "It's great to have the extra hands."

It really is about extra hands and a willingness to work, not experience, explains Jones. In fact, the majority of mobbers aren't farmers. The group on this Sunday afternoon consisted of students, waitresses, teachers and several out-of-work laborers; one of the mobbers who was plugging mushroom logs has a PhD in micrology. "Crop mobs aren't just about the work. ... We want to connect people, to build community," Jones says.

Outside, Vanessa Hernandez used a pitchfork to remove brush from an area along the side of the house where compost bins were being constructed. She heard about Crop Mob during an edible-landscape class.



**A** *A hard-working crop mob can accomplish in a few hours what would take one farmer weeks.*

“It makes me feel so alive to be with people who are so into working together to grow food,” she says. “I just moved here [from Orlando] and thought this would be a great way to get to know the community a little better; I love the whole concept.”

At its core, Crop Mob is a simple concept. The group operates with just two rules: All labor is reciprocal, which means that in order to have their farms mobbed, farmers must first work at another crop mob, and no cash is ever exchanged. Instead, farmers thank the mobbers with a simple post-mob meal.

It’s clear that mobbers are after payback of a different kind: Hernandez wanted to work alongside more experienced urban farmers to gain information that would prove valuable when she planted her own vegetable garden. Mobbers also come to share information and network—according to Ramsey, farmers often connect with apprentices through Crop Mob. In the front garden, one mobber pulled weeds from the vegetable bed and talked about laying the groundwork to have food stamps accepted at the local farmers’ market; others debated the merits of square-foot gardening and traded

## Getting Started

No crop mob in your area? Organize one! The founding farmers encourage others to replicate their model. Here are a few tips to get started:

### ESTABLISH RULES.

You should decide how the crop mob will operate, and create guidelines for mobbers and farmers to follow. Remember, the crop mob concept is based on reciprocal labor: In order to be mobbed, a farmer must first participate as a mobber. All labor should be free; mobbing is not a paid service. In most crop mobs, farmers are asked to provide snacks and a simple meal to be shared when the work is done.

### ASK FOR HELP.

The organizers of other crop mobs are great resources for those just getting started. If you have questions about how to pick farms, the best chores for mobbers or how farmers should prepare to be mobbed, ask. Mobs are almost always organized through social-media websites like Facebook, so their contact information is easy to find.

### SET A SCHEDULE.

Decide how often crop mobs will be held (most groups hold one mob per month), and post the details online. Organizing a mob in advance will ensure there are enough mobbers available to help.

### SPREAD THE WORD.

Set up a Facebook page or email listserv to share details of upcoming events. Social media helps you promote the mission of the group and lets wannabe mobbers know how to get involved.

### WATCH IT GROW.

New members have been quick to join new crop mobs. Within 48 hours of setting up a Facebook page for Crop Mob NYC, Taft had 65 fans. The number climbed to 200 by the end of the first week and is about to break 900—in less than one year.



music reviews; there were promises to share contacts, email resources and meet for coffee.

“Sustainable farming is much more work than industrial farming; it’s not always possible for one or two people to do it all themselves,” Jones explains. “Crop Mob helps alleviate the workload of sustainable agriculture, but it also helps to support personal relationships.”

## GIVING BACK

Brandon Hines hosted a crop mob at his North Carolina farm in August 2009. A group of 70 mobbers showed up to help him build and shape beds, accomplishing in a few hours work that would have taken him weeks. Hines has participated in a handful of crop mobs since then, pitching in whenever he can. He came to the crop mob that Fox hosted to help clear brush and build a new vegetable bed. “There is something so motivating about working with other people and seeing progress happen so fast,” he says.

Over the course of the afternoon, Fox benefited from the efforts of 54 mobbers. Although he has attended almost every crop mob the group has coordinated since 2008, this was the first one he’d hosted.

As he moved between projects, answering questions and making sure mobbers had tools, Fox took time to greet everyone who showed up, shaking hands with new volunteers, patting regular mobbers on the backs and thanking everyone for

**A** Jobs as simple as pulling weeds are on the chore list for a crop mob.

helping out. He explained his vision to the group that was using lumber and wooden pallets salvaged from neighborhood dumpsters to build compost bins and then surveyed the scene.

The transformation was remarkable. The entire front garden had been weeded, and a brick border was laid around its perimeter; the mountain of soil that towered over the front yard just a few hours before had been distributed among the vegetable beds; dozens of mushroom logs were plugged and moved to a shady corner to sprout; the compost bins were almost finished; and the brush and debris in the once-overgrown backyard had been loaded into a pickup truck and replaced with fresh soil, ready to be planted.

“I can’t believe how fast everything is getting done; it would have taken months to accomplish all of this if I had to do it on my own,” he says. “This is an amazing group of people who are helping each other out and expecting nothing in return, and it proves that if we work together, we can be productive stewards of the land.” **uf**

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Jodi Helmer is the author of *The Green Year: 365 Small Things You Can Do to Make a Big Difference* (Alpha, 2008). She feels much more confident about her veggie-gardening skills after spending an afternoon at a crop mob.