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## SWEATING THE SMALL STUFF

Take refuge in Urban Sanctuary Farm's theory that your yard can be your livelihood



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**Chris Tran** talks about her farm with frenetic passion. The former construction foreman turned urban farmer — and owner of Urban Sanctuary Farm — is determined to make her new gig work. In the construction industry, she made six figures. Her goal is to get there again, doing something she feels good about: bringing eco-produced, non-GMO, hyper-local greens, microgreens, and veggies to the community.

"I was working on apartment buildings; apartments that would eventually rent for \$3,300 a month," Chris says. "I put so much time and energy into my work, but I realized who I was ultimately doing that work for. It didn't feel good."

Chris runs two businesses on her quarter-acre property, less than a mile from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. Separated from 176th Street by an insulating row of bamboo, her 560-square-foot house sits at the property's east edge, its wood-shingled façade faded by the Northwest weather. Her home is a working studio — headquarters for the more established of her two companies, Soapy Business. Inside, tall metal racks loom large and hold hand-crafted bars of soap. Essential oils in bulk bottles are stuffed onto shelves lining the kitchen. It smells amazing, but there's little room for rest here. Even the couches have been removed to create more workspace.

"It's never been a 40-hour-a-week job," she says. "If it's waking-hours, I'm working."

Despite the hectic pace, Urban Sanctuary Farm is true to its name — it's a place of peace alongside the constant whirl of city life. Pressed up to a busy thoroughfare, a stone's throw from one of the nation's busiest airports, the farm — Chris's year-old second business — is a little piece of the country. Chickens peck at microgreens, two friendly farm cats move stealthily between rows of greens, and seasonal vegetables grow in tidy symmetry.

"This property used to be full of junk cars and spare parts. It's where drivers would pull off to make a U-turn," says Chris. "The community doesn't look at it that way anymore. They've been really supportive of what I'm doing here."



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Chris built the farm's three greenhouses, each one better and more durable than the previous. Every slice of her property, regardless of how it's being used, is utilitarian. Her construction expertise and ingenuity emanate as she talks about the research and planning involved in setting her farm up to succeed on her terms, in a way that's good for people and the planet.



A life-long Seattleite, Chris had no previous farming experience before starting Urban Sanctuary Farm. She's quick to rattle off a short list of her small-scale farming heroes — pioneers in getting the highest sustainable yield out of a little plot like hers — such as Curtis Stone, Richard Perkins, and Conor Crickmore. They remind her that it can be done.

"My partner gave me a hard time when I told him I wanted to quit my job and start a farm. He knows how regularly I kill houseplants," she says. "But he also knows that when I make a decision, bam, it's done."

The farm, whose logo includes a block-headed dog with a carrot in its mouth, uses all-natural practices, pesticides, and fertilization methods to produce its crops. Chris preps, plants, and harvests everything by hand. Inside one greenhouse, a 1,000-gallon aquaponics system hums. One of several closed-loop systems on site, it delivers water, made nutrient-dense by goldfish waste, directly to plants' roots. The plants clean the water, which gets pumped back to the fish. The rest of the yard is covered in ground crops, save for a chicken coop along the southwest fence line.

Chris takes 40 trays of veggies each Sunday to sell at the Ballard Farmers Market, and 20 trays to smaller markets throughout the week. Her offerings include salad mixes, radishes, kale, tomatoes, and microgreens.



In addition to the challenges inherent in learning any new skill, Chris faces some obstacles that are specific to her space. Constrained by a lack of square footage, what and how she grows are calculated decisions. The aquaponics system helps — plants grown without soil aren't usually impacted by pests or soil-borne disease, can be stacked vertically to save space, and regrow quickly because everything they need to thrive is delivered directly to their roots.

To that end, both inside and outside of the greenhouses, Chris's focus is on foods that regrow at a quick clip and fetch a premium price. Her salad mixes — which sell for about ten dollars a pound — regrow every week, but garlic takes nine months to mature. She has limited flexibility to explore what *might* work.

"It would be much different if I had five acres," says Chris. "But I need to get things out the door — and get them out fast."

Her dream — and all the infrastructure and materials needed to bring it to life — isn't cheap. Chris's savings are down, and her credit card debt is up — even more reason to focus on harvesting foods that replenish themselves quickly and fly off the farmers market tables. "I didn't break even my first year, not even close. I grossed about 20 percent of what I invested," she says.

She hopes to double that in the farm's second year and become a more sustainable business by its third season.

Walking through the farm, Chris picks up a long, thin stick that has fallen across the path. She digs one of its ends into the ground and uses the opposite end to prop open a window on the front of a greenhouse. She laughs at her high-tech tool of choice. This greenhouse is the newest and most well-constructed of all three; the upgraded plastic covering she used makes a substantial difference in the amount of heat trapped inside. It'll make a big difference in her efforts to extend the growing season.

Chris is testing the idea that your yard can be your livelihood. She doesn't understand why yards are mostly ornamental; a space homeowners wrestle to keep maintained but that provide little tangible value outside of aesthetics. Soon, she'll build a walk-in storage space, water-intake storage for the aquaponics system, and a composting system, but looks forward to wrapping up these projects so that her sole focus can be on growing, selling, and cashing in. If Chris is nervous about the future, she doesn't show it. What she does show is a laser-focused work ethic and an impenetrable drive.

"My goals are to continue making the farm more efficient," says Chris. "I also want to offer all-natural gardening and microgreen-growing classes, as well as expand into working with local chefs and grocers."

She picks a fistful of chamomile blooms growing in a small bed just outside of the aquaponics greenhouse. Chris says that the small white and yellow flowers make a delicious, healthy herbal tea — a varietal that has long been used to boost immunity, promote sleep, and treat colds — and wonders aloud if there's a way she might package and sell them.

Her thoughts mirror her entire approach to farming: "I've got to hustle to make it work."

**Kelly Knickerbocker** is a Seattle-based writer with Texas roots. She enjoys exploring the city on two wheels, listening to NPR podcasts, and making travel plans (*almost* as much as actually traveling).

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