

All Fleet operations are carbon neutral, and utilise pedal power and human steam only. **opposite page** Lawn owners who chose to have their petrol-guzzling grass converted to a productive garden can elect to have it maintained by Fleet or do it themselves.

# Food For Thought

text: **Susanne Kennedy**

An American social enterprise proves that an under-utilised lawn can be used to confront pollution and improve food systems – ingenious.







**Orlando-based social enterprise, Fleet Farming, is tackling** some of the world’s most pressing problems by challenging suburbia’s favourite house accessory: the manicured green lawn.

According to the non-profit’s website, the traditional lawn has a lot to answer for: “Between 30 per cent to 60 per cent of the fresh water in US cities is used to water lawns ... and 800 million gallons of gasoline are used annually to mow these under-utilised resources.” In the US, unproductive lawns currently total a vast 16 million hectares. And then there’re the thousands of tonnes of pesticides and chemicals used to maintain them.

Rather than respond to these statistics with despair the Fleet Farming team takes inspiration from the mantra that wherever there is grass, sun and water, be it residential or commercial yards, there is a future farmlette – or mini organic farm!

In 2013, the bones of the Fleet Farming concept were presented to an Orlando design-thinking workshop known locally as The Hive, which is hosted monthly by Orlando-based non-profit IDEAS For Us, an accredited United Nations NGO. IDEAS later incubated a Fleet Farming business model with Fleet’s co-founders – Chris Castro and Heather Grove – and provided some technical and financial support to make the non-profit operational.

Fleet Farming now has three key branches advancing its mission to improve food systems and reduce pollution: Fleet Gardens, Fleet for You and Fleet Fruit.

A skilled Fleet Farming team can be contracted to convert a dormant yard into an easy-to-maintain mini crop; the resulting farmlette is then maintained by the owner (Fleet Gardens) or Fleet Farming (Fleet For You). The Fleet for You arrangement leaves five to ten per cent of produce with the owner and the remainder is sold by the non-profit to restaurants or farmers' markets within an eight-kilometre radius. The non-profit also coordinates the educational Swarm Ride program, and establishes partnerships with fruit tree owners (Fleet Fruits) that connects produce to markets within the same radius as for Fleet for You. ➔

Suburban lawns throughout the United States consume three million tons of chemical fertilisers and 30,000 tons of pesticides. **opposite page top** A happy Fleet Farming volunteer. **bottom left** Over 300 lawns were donated to Fleet in Orlando in its first two years of operation. **right** There are many ways to get involved with Fleet, including becoming an gardening apprentice, participating in the Swarm Ride program, or registering a fruit tree for some Fruit Gleaning.



Oakland Branch Coordinator and IDEAS Board Member, Justin Vandenbroeck of Fleet Fruit, the organisation’s newest program to put a spin on “sharecropping” says: “Sometimes you’ll see a mango tree suddenly produce 100 ripe mangoes, and the owner doesn’t know what to do with all that fruit. Soon it starts dropping, and the rodents get in there.”

If the owner of the mango tree is, however, partnered with Fleet a potentially frustrating situation becomes a mutually beneficial one. “We remove 90 per cent of the fruit to sell at one of our markets, and provide the owner with a tax deductible receipt for the value of the fruit taken.” This in turn generates local commerce and reduces food wastage.

Fleet’s bi-weekly, three-hour long Swarm Rides are like moving workshops, which show participants some of the farmlettes in their local community.

“The rides are meant to be both educational and experiential,” says Vandenbroeck. “You see the whole cycle from seeding to harvesting and take a tour of three to five farmlettes.” Pedal power is also promoted, like-minded people are introduced and Swarm Ride participants are eligible for half-price produce at the farmers market.

Having already received enquiries from 24 different countries about its model, the Fleet team is committed to growing an international Fleet Farming community. To this end, they will launch a membership program in January 2017 enabling other communities to adopt the Fleet Farming model, name, online platform and resource and marketing materials for an annual fee.

Meanwhile in a country where the average plate of food travels up to 2900 kilometres to get to a table, Fleet Farming is contributing to shorter food chains, promoting chemical free commuting and gardening, and expanding home-grower networks and communities.

Vandenbroeck and his colleagues have seen first hand how urban crops coupled with Swarm Rides create wonderful “opportunities to nourish minds, bodies and communities”. And watching their parents and neighbours growing, sharing and making income from organic food is the best way for children to learn about local farming.

[fleetfarming.com](http://fleetfarming.com)



**top** While farmlettes house a wide variety of veggies, edible flowers, fruits and roots, most commonly they are comprised of an assortment of baby greens - from Siberian Kale to butterhead lettuce. **bottom** Fleet Farmers hard at work.

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