

TRUCK FARMER

I first heard about Ian Cheney's mobile farm on Twitter. Next, I caught a glimpse when it made a Carroll Gardens cameo at a party to benefit young farmers. Then, over in Red Hook, I finally had the chance to feast my eyes: I showed up just as Cheney was pulling a U-turn on Van Brunt Street to catch some sun for the farm, which grows in the bed of his '86 Dodge Ram pickup. Part CSA, part documentary, part pure automobile, the truck farm was on a roll.

A few years back when Cheney and chum Curt Ellis were filming their feature film "King Corn," Old Faithful—that's the name for the Dodge, a hand-me-down from Grandpa upon graduation from college—loyally ferried the crew cross-country. When Cheney decided to settle in the city a year ago, he considered letting the aging vehicle go, but it takes much more than alternate parking to come between a man and his Ram.

Cheney had caught the farming bug and soon his truck was infected too: With help from his brother, a poet with experience building green roofs, he drilled drainage holes in the truck's bed, laid down a water-absorbent mat and topped it with Gaia soil made from recycled Styrofoam. (It weighs next to nothing yet still provides a root structure for crops—just the thing for a farm on wheels.) A layer of compost polished off the truck's terroir, then Cheney set about planting seeds he'd sent away for from Seed Savers in Iowa.

The interns across the street at Added Value donated heirloom tomato plants, and with the help of a "very friendly physicist," the filmmaker fashioned solar panels on the roof of the cab to power a digital camera that snaps a pic of the plot every five minutes and posts it online.

Six weeks later, the nasturtiums were a fragrant decoration, the arugula was nice and spicy and the tomato vines had grown so tall they were covering the lens. "I don't think I could feed myself for a year out of my pickup," admits Cheney, "but it feels better than buying greens from 3,000 miles away."

"King Corn," admits Cheney, was somewhat of a downer: an exploration of a "really bad food system. It's nice to come back with such a positive follow-up." He plans to interview others planting crops in creative milieus—in windows and tree pits, on boats and roofs. "We want to show how rewarding it is to grow food in unusual places."

A \$20 share in the CSA promises members a copy of the finished Truck Farm DVD, an invite to the farm's summer picnic, and unpredictable amounts of produce.

"I don't even call it the truck anymore," says Cheney, "I say, 'I'm going out to the farm.'"

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—JH



Photographs: Left, Ian Cheney. Right, Michael Harlan Turkell