

Our Story



Uncommon Ground started off as a small coffee shop in the Lakeview neighborhood in 1991. Slowly but surely owners Helen and Michael Cameron began transforming their little coffee shop to a full service restaurant and music venue. As their business grew, so did their personal values in sustainability, conservation, and local and organic food. They believed their business model had to follow suit.

In 2007, the Cameron's set off to expand to a second location and found the building at 1401 W. Devon Avenue the perfect spot, as it had already seen over 80 years of bar and restaurant service previously. Steadying a ladder on a beautiful sunny day in February, Helen climbed up to inspect the roof. Seeing a vast open expanse of sun and the image of a summer tomato, she yelled down to Michael, "Hey, we could grow food up here!" And thus the seed was planted.

Shortly thereafter, Uncommon Ground on Devon became home to the first, certified organic rooftop farm in the country.

If you add it all up, we have 654 square feet of space dedicated to growing, which works out to 0.015 acres of tillable land. In 2014 we produced over 1,300 pounds of produce and we surpassed 1,500 pounds in 2015! Though our farm cannot support the restaurant entirely, it does make a dent. Producing almost 2 pounds per square foot proves that you can produce a lot in a very small space.

So if the produce of the restaurant isn't largely off-set by what we grow on site, what's the point? For one thing, the amount of time between harvest and eating is shorter this way. Fresher produce is tastier and healthier too.

There's no waste in packaging materials and no gasoline used for shipping. We're also able to grow varieties of vegetables that are generally hard to source. For example, if you order tomatoes from a distributor, there's generally two or three varieties available. In a farmer's market, there might be a couple dozen varieties available. But through all the seed resources available to us, there are around 3,000 varieties of tomatoes that we could possibly grow. It opens up a whole new world of flavor and beauty.

Between the roof and the downstairs growing area we have grown arugula, basil, beans, carrots, chives, cilantro, currants, cucumbers, garlic, gooseberries, grapes, ground cherries, hops, kale, lemon balm, lettuce, lovage, malabar spinach, melon, micro greens, mint, mizuna, mustard greens, nasturtiums, oregano, parsley, peas, peppers, radishes, strawberries, sage, savory, sorrel, spinach, squash, sunflower sprouts, rutabagas, tarragon, tomatoes and thyme.

An important part of our work involves not only growing food, but educating others about organic, urban agriculture as well. During the summer months we conduct an educational farm internship program in addition to providing tours of the farm to individuals, families, and school groups.

