Organizational Overview
Urban Tree Connection (UTC) is a non-profit, community-centered organization whose mission is to build a neighborhood rooted food and land system through community leadership development and land-based strategies in West Philadelphia. Our aim is to build a people’s food and land system that is sustainable, just, and community governed. UTC has partnered with residents to redevelop 29 vacant lots, including Neighborhood Foods Farm, a 3/4 acre urban farm. Together, we have repurposed these spaces for communal gathering, sustainable food production, and multi-generational community health and wellness education.

Program Overview
UTC’s Youth Apprenticeship Program (YAP) hires and mentors around 10 high school aged youth annually during the growing season. This unique five-month (June to October) paid Apprenticeship introduces young people of color that primarily live in Haddington, to agroecology in an urban context. Each Apprentice receives one-to-one mentorship from UTC Staff as well as five all day educational sessions. These sessions dig deeper into issues of food, land and environmental justice – in relationship to our local work, and the world at large. We work to implement the framework of Just Transition both to cultivate critical thinking and practices of cooperation and regeneration.

Youth Mentorship
At UTC we believe that growth does not happen alone, but in relationship to one another. We utilize an Apprenticeship Model to deepen the youth apprentices’ (YA) ties with both the land and the community. The Apprenticeship model focuses on delivering scaffolded and adaptive education to address the needs and interests of the YA in our program. Each YA interviews for a track and each track has a mentor.
Farm Apprenticeship: Farm apprentices work primarily with Nykisha our Farm Manager. Nykisha organically rose to this leadership position from being a community volunteer in the Pearl Street garden years ago. She has extensive knowledge, through practice and research, of the roles and responsibilities required to meaningfully and healthfully tend to urban land. She now focuses on developing engaged youth into organic community leaders who can lead urban farms. The youth apprentices (YA) can grow food from start to finish, assess what needs to be accomplished on the farm, lead volunteer groups and give farm tours to engage community members around agroecology.

Market Apprenticeship: Youth in the Market Apprenticeship worked with our Community Markets Coordinator, Devin. Apprentices prepared harvest for markets and the CSA program, set up and broke down markets, engaged customers and managed the cashbox. Apprentices worked at weekly Saturday markets, one at Neighborhood Foods Farm and the other in Rittenhouse Square. For these markets, YA learned how to harvest, package, and price produce. When not working a market, market YA learn about how to grow food for a market and how to excite the community around local, black produced food.

Community Engagement Apprenticeship: Community Engagement YA worked with the Community Land Coordinator Mike who emerged as a leader in UTC through his avid community gardening. Mike worked with YAs to maintain 6 pocket parks and community gardens, and excite neighbors to grow their own. Over the course of the season, YAs co-led volunteer groups to complete garden projects, recruited neighbors for events through door to door canvassing, learned how to grow food without chemicals, and distributed the harvest from the garden to neighbors.
Just Transition

The 2019 YAP piloted the Just Transition framework in our educational programming. The Just Transition framework was born out of environmental and labor movements:

“Just Transition is a vision-led, unifying and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. This means approaching production and consumption cycles holistically and waste-free. The transition itself must be just and equitable; redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be. Just Transition describes both where we are going and how we get there” - Climate Justice Alliance.

UTC introduced Just Transition to our community of leaders through a 5-part summer workshop series with YAs, embedding practices in hands-on learning through YA tracks, participation in national Climate Justice Youth Summit, and hosting two multigenerational community conversations.

This graphic was developed by Climate Justice Alliance and Movement Generation
YAP Framework: Just Transition

For five Fridays during the summer the Executive Director, Noelle, and Community Educator, Marissa, led popular education-based workshops based on the concept and practices of Just Transition. These educational sessions were intended to be a deeper dive into the learning that transpired during the YAP tracks. Through these sessions we created a shared understanding of essential concepts, such as ecology and economy, and built practices around cooperation and healthful communication.

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<tr>
<th>Title of Session</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Extractive Economies Explored</td>
<td>What is Redlining and How does it Impact Us Today, Building a Living Economy in Puerto Rico, Straight Talk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living Economies, Self-Determination, Imagining Alternatives</td>
<td>Exploration of the Meaning of Living Economies, Imagining Alternatives Collective Activity and Presentation, Straight Talk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control Mythologies Socratic Seminar and Project Production</td>
<td>Control Mythologies Activity, Theater of the Oppressed centered on Control Mythologies, Socratic Seminar, and Youth-Led Video Creation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project Presentation, Community Building</td>
<td>Youth Apprentices presented their video production at the yearly Work Ready Youth Conference</td>
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Community Conversations
After successfully completing the summer Just Transition series, two YAs emerged as leaders to support staff in piloting two community conversations with neighbors, community gardeners, and leaders across all ages. The YAs led portions of the activities and contributed their experiences and knowledge bases to the conversations, making them richer in perspective. The YAs were also able to provide feedback after the Community Conversations, informing how they could be more aligned and engaging for next season. The YAs involvement in the feedback process required that they reflected on not only their performance but the material itself. The YA leaders and staff conducted an evaluation of the sessions – reviewed attendee feedback, provided their own insights of the strengths and areas for growth for future conversations and workshops – and potential new topics to explore. In this process we aimed to empower the YAs to have conversations around Just Transition with their peers and elders alike.

7th Annual Youth Climate Justice Conference in New York City
Three YAs had the opportunity to travel outside of Philadelphia to participate in a conference with organizations leading the Just Transition movement. At this conference the YAs were able to see people of color from all over the country, and world, who are focused on creating a new social contract through the lens of Just Transition. The YAs built relationships, shared insights, and told their stories about working with Just Transition and Agroecology.
Just Transition: Building Social & Emotional Intelligence Through

Critical to the success of YAP was implementing an accountability framework based on The Food Project’s “Straight Talk” model. Straight Talk, which uses guiding principles for giving and receiving feedback, offers YAs an opportunity to reflect on the strengths and areas for improvement they observe for both their team members and themselves.

The YAs participated in two sessions of Straight Talk weekly. One session would be with their tracks and one was as a whole group during Friday workshops. During both sessions YAs set goals for how they could incorporate the feedback into their work and lives outside of work. The next week we would check back in with the set goals and see how the YAs were able to adapt. Each YA had an accountability partner throughout the week to keep them striving towards their group set goals. Overtime this built a culture of deep trust and support that allowed for the identification and management of emotions, and ability to work through grievances. Ultimately this allowed the YAs to show up more fully for themselves and for their teams.

Field Trips and Partnerships

The YAs visited, Norris Square Neighborhood Project, an organization in North Philly that offers youth and community residents a safe space to explore culture and social-justice issues, create art, and develop their sustainable-agriculture skills. YAs connected with NSNP’s youth by exploring their culturally rooted Latinx community gardens, and by sharing skills through making valued added products. This experience was a container to practice being adaptable in new environments and fostering relationships.
Zafir, a 16 year-old and first year YA shares that the program has “given me a reason and the means to travel within Philly and outside of it; and helps me develop my socializing skills that I can use in many other areas of my life. Working at the farm and in the gardens has helped me develop a strong work ethic to help other people in our community.” Zafir came to the program with a passion for cooking and growing food. In addition to increasing his farming knowledge and skills, Zafir was challenged to also develop connections with his peers and mentors and to think about the conditions of the neighborhood and how things can change for the better.

Through this program, Zafir found himself moving beyond his particular block for apprenticeship workdays, visits to other farms, and inter-organizational events. Navigating new parts of the city and spending time outside of his most familiar environment gave him a deeper perspective of the world around him. Zafir also traveled to New York City the Climate Justice Youth Summit this summer; which introduced him to frontline communities and young people from across the country fighting for a just Transition. This was Zafir’s first time outside of Philadelphia; throughout our travel his horizons were expanded and possibilities were seeded.

We had three YA return to from previous programs (above), retaining and developing leadership AND two YA returning next year (bottom).

They tryna turn us into better speakers public leaders learn to love the land we leavin, feelin completed sowin the seeds the only reason was growth easy sequence but the process was slow slowly seen the roots to our goals see community grow watch corruption unfold love and peace can be the balance be the high to these lows

-Syrine, 17
YA Skills Gained

1. Management: we started by teaching YAs the importance of self-management, relationship management, time management, management of farmers markets and exploration around farm management. YAs demonstrated this through their growing capacity to be leaders in farm/market responsibilities, as well as developing cooperation measured through their ability to give constructive, considerate feedback and facilitate events.

2. Soil remediation: the YAs were taught concepts around sustainability within urban agriculture, the importance of beneficial insects and soil remediation. They were taught specific methods of how to care for soil that has been damaged with pollutants from industrialized environments and what types of plants can be paired to create a healthy ecosystem to produce the most nutritious food.

3. Growing Food: YAs cared for the crops they were growing, harvesting, and planting while exploring cooperation and teamwork. During the season, the YAs were able to take care of the crops without directions, grew culturally significant food and food without chemicals, learned food safety and handling procedures, and grew food for neighbors that have limited access to fresh, organic produce.

4. Being a Change Agent: the YAs could all recognize before the program that the lack of equitable resources and opportunities in their neighborhood was unjust. Now, after the program, they have tools (such as outreach, cooperation, and managing resources) to imagine a more just neighborhood.

5. Critical Thinking: the YAs were trained to use holistic thinking when considering the how to of growing a community-based food system. Additionally, the YAs placed their individual experiences in a historical context and connected it to, not just their own lived experience but systematic issues of inequality.

6. Social and Emotional Intelligence: using Straight Talk the YAs were able to build their feedback muscles. Feedback is essential to cooperation but often goes unpracticed. UTC works to shift this reality through sustained practice and reflection. At the end of the program the YAs were offering constructive feedback with a mission in mind-- building a unified community.