

COOP VENDORS WORKING WITH THE WONDERS OF THE NYC ECOSYSTEM

April 1, 2025



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By Kim Velsey

In April, when everything in Brooklyn is once again blooming and blossoming, native wildflower bouquets grown on Greenpoint rooftop gardens will start arriving at the Coop. Marni Majorelle, a Coop member who runs a landscape design and build company, created the green roofs in 2016 and 2019, using state and city grants, as well as financial support from the buildings' owner Broadway Stages. After the grants ran out she started Untamed Flowers, a cut flower business to help cover the costs of maintaining the 60,000 square feet of gardens. "I was looking to create a business

that supports biodiversity and also make something unique and different—no one else grows native wildflowers on rooftops in industrial North Brooklyn and sells them,” Majorelle said. The bouquets, which include native plants like wild indigo, golden alexanders, wild columbine, mountain mint and a smaller variety of sunflowers, have been sold at the Coop since last year.

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UNTAMED

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Untamed Flowers is one of several small, local vendors who work with the Coop and are doing new and interesting things with the city's ecosystem. Others include After-life Ag mushrooms, BK Rot, Greenspace on 4th, Gowanus Nursery and the (no longer very small) Gotham Greens. "We're part of a community network and we feel like it's part of the Coop's mission to support community initiatives," says produce buyer Cecilia Rembert. Also, things grown and produced in the city's ecosystem are often unique, exceptionally fresh and due to the small scale of many operations, not available at other stores.



Marni Majorelle, Coop member and founder of Untamed Flowers

“Small vendors will often come to the Coop because it’s easier to partner with us than to get a toehold in with bigger distributors,” said Rembert. “We have a little more flexibility and bandwidth for managing all the pieces involved. Bigger suppliers are much more systematized, so if your product is unique, it can be hard.”

AFTER



CIRCULAR MUSHROOM FARMING
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For examples, the Coop is the only retail store that sells mushrooms from Afterlife Ag, a circular indoor farm that grows mushrooms in a Queens warehouse on compost it collects from restaurant kitchens and then sterilizes. Coop members can buy chestnut mushrooms and pink and yellow oysters. Co-founder Winson Wong noted that one of the big reasons Afterlife works with the Coop is that it doesn't require individual packaging, which "is better from a waste-management perspective and better for us as a company—it's a lot of work for us to put everything into 6- or 8-ounce containers." Afterlife, which also grows other varieties, including blue oyster, lion's mane and black king, primarily sells its mushrooms to schools, hospitals, and restaurants (they're delivered in 5 lb. boxes), including Pecking House, Craft, Hav & Mar and Two Boots. Wong added that they're also still scaling up, but at the moment, demand is not the limiting factor—it's financing and space, an issue for a lot of local companies that grow or make food in the city.



Perhaps it's not surprising then, that several of the companies the Coop work with a focus on breaking stuff down—that is, compost. BK Rot, a bike-powered compost and food-hauling service, sells its compost at the Coop. And as of this spring, so will Greenspace on 4th, the native plant community garden between Sackett and Union,

which makes “nice compost for a nice price. They do a really good job of balancing the nutrients and sell it in reused mesh coffee bags,” said Rembert.

Working with small, local vendors, however, means that supplies are often limited, seasonal (like the Vermont wreath-maker who incorporated foraged materials into Christmas wreaths) or fleeting. Brooklyn Grange operates rooftop farms in the Brooklyn Navy Yard and Sunset Park, and also rents them out for events. They used to sell at the Coop, but now only sells at farmers’ markets and through their own CSA. Others, like Gotham Greens, have become so big that they’re available not only at the Coop but also at thousands of other grocery stores around the country, although Rembert always tries to stock Gotham’s ugly greens mix, a scrap assortment of loose leaf lettuces, which the Coop sells for \$2.58 a bag, and is less widely available than many of their premium varieties.



Native-plant supplier Gowanus Nursery

Sometimes vendors relocate to (literally) greener pastures. Michele Paladino ran

Gowanus Nursery, a native plant supplier on the corner of Van Brunt and Carroll Streets, for more than 20 years. She still works with the Coop and does pop-ups in Brooklyn, but she relocated full-time to northwest Connecticut in 2023. “I’m collecting native seed for many of the plants I grow and observing the wild locations they prefer to grow first-hand,” she wrote in email. She still considers herself a New Yorker, she added, and a big part of her decision to leave was more about the grind of running a small business in Brooklyn than her need for more nature. Still, she was thankful “to be able to connect the dots in a more profound way” and to be someplace where “there’s a bounty of protected public lands, and diversity, and wildlife is part of my everyday life.”

Kim Velsey has been a Coop member since 2020. When she’s not writing for the Gazette, she’s a staff writer at New York magazine.

NO LONGER LOCALS, BUT STILL SHOPPING AT THE COOP

April 1, 2025



By Jess Powers

The Coop experienced a precipitous decline in membership during the pandemic, for a variety of reasons. But some members hold on to their ties to the institution despite moving out of the city. That sense of connection shows that there is more to Coop membership than good produce at fair prices.

General Coordinator Joe Holtz laments that there is a “problem in terms of the statistics,” regarding membership numbers and the attrition rate. The stats show membership rising throughout the pandemic, with people rejoining during the pause in member labor and others joining existing households. Interestingly, in the year before the pandemic, the Coop experienced historic lows in terms of people who departed

(12.3%).

Holtz believes that around 4,000 people left the Coop during the pandemic. That number will become more apparent with the return of member labor and people dropping off after not completing their shifts. Many left the city on or around then, as remote work and social distancing led to a desire for more space. But some members have hung on to their membership despite moving away.

ON THE NORTH FORK

Kendal Bayer never imagined living outside of the city. But after having a baby at 47, she realized that rather than juggling the logistics of childhood activities in Brooklyn, having outdoor space for her child to play was a priority. After living in the same apartment in Prospect Heights for 23 years, Bayer and her family moved to Mattituck, on the North Fork of Long Island. Even so, she says, there was “no way I could give up the Coop.”

Kendal and her husband Michael would drive into Brooklyn, and he would work their Coop food-processing and office shifts, while she would do their shopping for the month. They would spend roughly \$800–1000 and pack food into about 14 boxes. “I created a whole pantry system in our basement,” she mused.

When the pandemic hit, nearby Greenpoint Harbor Brewery in Suffolk County experienced an early outbreak. Suffolk County rates of infection were higher than those in Brooklyn. They “felt terrible,” but briefly put their membership on pause to “buy some time” and not risk exposing fellow Coop members.

After shopping at the local King Kullen and IGA, Kendal “came home crying, depressed at how the rest of the world shops.” They started driving to Whole Foods in Lake Grove. Kendal describes the experience as a kind of “scavenger hunt,” attempting to “piece together the Coop shopping experience.” She even called a beef supplier for the PSFC, who shipped directly to the Bayers as a one-off.

Currently, the Bayers both work individual office shifts. They are “thrilled to be back” to working and shopping at the Coop. Kendal enjoys running into people she knows and the energy of the place. She fantasizes about bringing the model out to Long Island.



A sampling of the Coop’s fresh local produce.

ON THE SOUTH FORK

For me, the pandemic and fully remote work provided an opportunity to realize a life-long dream and live at a house my family owns in Sag Harbor, on the South Fork of Long Island. It’s not as rural as it was during my childhood, and a favorite farm stand has since closed, but easy access to nature is a gift.

I BELIEVE IN THE VALUES OF COOPERATIVES, AND IT FEELS LIKE A COMMUNITY

WHENEVER I SHOP THERE.

I concur with Bayer's assessment of many of the local markets. Notoriously over-priced, they generally don't have the quality of the produce at the Coop, either. Here, local eggs cost \$9 a dozen and products such as the sprouted grain bread I purchase at the Coop cost \$2 more. It adds up. Acquaintances who live nearby and terminated their membership lament missing the reasonable cheese prices—and the smaller portions available for single-person households.

Prices aside, I lived in cooperative housing in college and joined the Coop decades ago. I believe in the values of cooperatives, and it feels like a community whenever I shop there. I lived in Gowanus for 20 years and used to shop at the Coop several times a week, depending on what I was inspired to cook. These days, the schedule and logistics are different.

I travel, to use the local parlance, “up island” to Brooklyn frequently. (Up island, derived from seafaring lingo, means traveling west, or “up” in longitude.) Adding shopping at the Coop when I'm already visiting friends and taking care of other business in the city makes sense to me. I fill in my larger Coop shops with items from local stores. I mainly buy local seafood out east.

Having a shift on the *Linewaiters' Gazette* means that I can do my work shift remotely, which is an added convenience. During the height of the pandemic, I reported on General Meetings that I watched over Zoom.

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We can best serve the Coop if our squad reflects the PSFC's overall diversity.
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IN NEW JERSEY

Taigi Smith and her daughter, Savannah, split their time between Prospect Heights and the New Jersey suburbs. Smith wanted to give her then-newborn daughter access to a less urban environment, as well as to Brooklyn. Now 10 years old, Savannah is “100% a Jersey girl,” Smith shares. But “she loves the pummelos, kale, and plantanos that she’s enjoyed from the Coop her entire life. Before she bites into a piece of fruit, she’ll often ask, ‘Is this from the Coop?’”

As a writer and editor for this publication, Smith reflects on a time when, without child-care, she brought her daughter to a disciplinary hearing that she covered as a reporter. “To this day, [my daughter] remembers all the details of the meeting, and at one point, used to act out the more salient parts of the hearing.” Watching someone defend themselves against accusations of theft for the first time and Coop’s system of democratic governance left quite an impression on Savannah.

“Time moves so quickly, and I find myself asking Savannah: ‘What job will you do for the Coop?’” adds Smith. Savannah is intrigued by the idea of working on the shopping squad doing checkout, at least at this time.

Since, unlike Savannah, new members generally hear about the Coop through word of mouth, rather than their parents, Holtz believes that it is important that the Coop remain a “compelling place to be a member of.” He’s invested in ensuring that people are “satisfied enough” that they help to spread the word.

Holtz stresses that onboarding new members is critical to the financial stability of the PSFC. He is optimistic that by the end of October there will be an interim system in place to admit new members.

Smith acknowledges that even though she still shops at the PSFC, with recent price increases at the Coop and decreases in prices for organics through big box retailers, it is less cost- and time-effective to make the drive. Holtz also wonders about the future of a brick-and-mortar store like the Coop, with the increase in home delivery competitors.

“BEING A MEMBER OF THE PSFC IS A CALLING. IT SOMETIMES SUPERSEDES LOGIC.”

TAIGI SMITH

And, yet, Smith and others—even those who have moved out of Brooklyn full time—continue to shop at the Coop.

Despite any doubts about practicality, she explains: “Then I get to the PSFC. And I see folks like Allen Zimmerman. And I talk to him about the difference between pummelos and grapefruits. I have a chat with the walker or listen to someone brusquely say, ‘Excuse me.’ And then it all makes sense.”

Besides the feeling of community, there is something intangible to membership. “Being a member of the PSFC is a calling,” Smith continues. “It sometimes supersedes

logic. At this moment, it all makes sense. I'm all in."