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Small Scale, Big Yield

USDA invests in urban agriculture



PRESTON KERES/USDA

By Robin Roenker

WHEN SCHARMEL ROUSSEL AND her team at Arkansas Interfaith Power and Light set out to support urban gardeners in central Arkansas, the effect

was positive and immediate.

With \$100,000 in funding to build infrastructure from the first round of grants given out by the USDA's new Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIP) in 2020, Roussel's group has seen its network of local growers climb from 43 sites to

240 participating gardens from 2020 to 2021, among them both large community gardens and small private backyard plots.

"Our work targeted communities in low-wealth areas that are food deserts, where people don't have access to fresh local food," Roussel says. "We brought in tools and demonstrations and gave

people everything they needed to get started building their own gardens."

In addition to providing seeds, soil and training — on gardening basics as well as raising chickens and bees — the USDA grant allowed Roussel to supply recycled cypress wood so growers could create raised planting beds and, in one case,

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even paid a community garden's water bill for the year.

Roussel's team, part of a national network of interdenominational groups working to address climate change, also encouraged Arkansas youth to get involved through gardening demonstration projects targeting elementary schools, church youth groups and police department outreach initiatives for at-risk kids.

"We had a lot of people growing a lot of food. The mindset of participants became, 'I'm not just growing food for me.' It was, 'I'm growing food for my community,'" she says.

SUPPORTING GROWERS

Recognizing urban farming's popularity — and its potential to help improve public health by giving more Americans ready access to fresh fruits and vegetables — UAIP was created in the 2018 Farm Bill. The office, which is led by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) with support from the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) and other divisions, aims to provide support and training to help urban growers succeed. In its second year, the UAIP announced the availability of \$4 million in grants for urban farming planning and implementation.

"When we're talking about urban agriculture, we're dealing with small-scale farms — perhaps tenth-of-an-acre backyard plots or small community green spaces — and these growers have unique needs," says NRCS Chief Terry Cosby, who helped develop urban farming programs in Cleveland as an Ohio state conservationist prior to his NRCS current appointment in May 2021.

To help extend the growing season and improve the yield of small growing spaces, for example, NRCS offers financial support to build high tunnels — polyethylene-covered structures that operate as affordable greenhouses.

In addition to high tunnel development, Cleveland's community farming initiatives, which began in 2012, also included workshops so urban growers could learn how to incorporate their fresh produce into healthy recipes, as well as preserve harvests for later use, Cosby says.

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**DIGITAL FARMERS MARKETS**

The pandemic has spurred the growth of digital markets that allow growers to sell produce via online shopping platforms. Sites such as Harvie farm, which pairs customers with community supported agriculture groups in their area, and OurHarvest, which serves the greater New York City area, create opportunities for a network of small local growers to expand its customer base.

— Robin Roenker

GETTY IMAGES



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— TERRY COSBY,
chief, USDA's Natural Resources
Conservation Service



ARKANSAS INTERFAITH POWER AND LIGHT

Community members build raised planting beds in Little Rock, Ark.

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grow,” he says.

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Recent food supply challenges — which have plagued grocery stores throughout the pandemic — have further amplified the value of supporting small community growers, says FSA Administrator Zach Ducheneaux.

“We feel as though there is a lot of potential to be unleashed in our urban centers, with regard to more ag production — thinking about farmers markets and local food movements that we’re seeing — especially on the heels of the pandemic, which really laid bare the weaknesses of our industrial and commoditized food systems,” Ducheneaux says. “There’s a lot of opportunity for us to leverage the willingness of people to take some control of their own nutrition destiny, if you will.”

Beyond the obvious health implications of encouraging Americans to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables — which include reduced rates of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer — leaders in the urban agriculture movement say it also offers a tool of empowerment for communities that have lacked equal access to resources in the past.

In New Haven, Conn. — where 27 percent of the population lives in poverty — a team led by Latha Swamy, the city’s food system policy director, believes supporting urban growers’ potential can be an effective means of addressing climate resilience, socioeconomic inequality and racial justice.

“Our mission is to support and help manifest community-led efforts that envision and create an environmentally sustainable and socially just food system,” Swamy says.

With \$500,000 in funding from UAIP, Swamy and the city’s Food Policy Analyst Kimberly Acosta are working to develop a citywide urban agriculture master plan that will help reduce agricultural zoning barriers, which can sometimes make farming within city limits difficult, develop educational toolkits on urban farming best practices and increase access to land and food entrepreneurship opportunities — such as raising bees to produce honey — for historically low-income or disadvantaged communities.

“Ultimately, we want to create an environment that will support all residents, so we can all benefit from urban agriculture and its positive health, social, economic and environmental impacts,” Acosta says. “Our USDA funding has been critical in allowing us to build long-term, authentic relationships with our residents, which is essential in doing this work.”



Latha Swamy, right, and Kimberly Acosta visit Huneebee Project hives in New Haven, Conn.