

Cultivating Connections

Enhancing Community Garden Access for New Americans

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Organization

Through its many-branched approach to fighting food insecurity in Middle Tennessee, The Nashville Food Project has established itself by providing people with the ability and resources to “grow, cook and share nourishing food, with the goals of cultivating community and alleviating hunger in our city” - TNFP website. Because of this multi-faceted approach, TNFP has been able to establish itself as one of the most impactful food organizations in the Nashville area, providing hundreds of thousands of freshly-prepared meals on a yearly basis and enabling dozens of under-resourced families to grow their own food.

TNFP’s Community Farm at Mill Ridge provides over 50 Nashville households with the space and resources to garden. In a matter of months, participating community members can go from sowing seeds to harvesting culturally relevant, healthy, organic food for their families, all while learning in a collaborative and diverse community of fellow growers, staff members, and volunteers.



Community

Due to structural inequality in Tennessee, many of the garden community members hail from under-resourced, New-American backgrounds. The Community Farm provides 56 diverse households with a place to grow their own culturally significant food that they can’t find elsewhere in Nashville, all while learning and sharing with other community members through regular workshops and events.



First-Generation American



Racially Diverse



Using the Food they Produce to Support their Families



Living in Southeast Nashville (Significant Overlap with a Major Food Desert)

Issue

Big Picture

Both food insecurity and lack of growing space access are, sadly, major issues in many communities in the US. First-Generation Americans are particularly affected by these conditions, with higher rates of food insecurity shown consistently in New-American households. In nearly all studied populations, increased food security and growing space access has caused significant, sustainable improvement of key health and social indicators. TNFP’s mission at the Community Farm at Mill Ridge is twofold. 1) To provide families with the space and resources to produce their own healthy food they can trust, and 2) to encourage the social and inter-cultural benefits associated with community gardening.

Focus

The Community Farm at Mill Ridge has no access to municipal water, despite multiple attempts at securing funding. Alternative methods for meeting the significant water demand have included a drilled well and six rainwater catchment structures throughout the garden. However, the production of the well has historically been seasonally dependent and could possibly have been permanently stunted by nearby construction. The permanent rainwater catchment structures were previously the only sources meeting the demand of the individual plot holders, but many community members experienced water shortages. Some gardeners also found it inconvenient or inaccessible to walk back and forth between catchment system and plot to fill up a watering can. This system lacked the level of equity necessary to support community members as they worked to fulfill the two missions of the garden. It also limited the addition of more garden plots despite growing demand on the waitlist (now numbering over 30 households).

Project

In collaboration with TNFP staff, my project was devised both to fit the demonstrated needs of the community and fulfill the requirements of the Ingram Scholars Summer Project. I primarily worked on-site at The Community Garden at Mill Ridge to improve access to irrigation and other garden support resources. This overarching intention was divided into four actionable pieces:

- 1) Building smaller-scale, accessible, relocatable rainwater collection systems
- 2) Hosting building workshops where I collaborate with garden members to build other “garden support structures” for their plots and familiarize them with the new irrigation systems
- 3) Creating and compiling a series of videos and manuals documenting the collaborative building process throughout the eight weeks to share with TNFP to aid in future additions/repairs/workshops
- 4) Working with TNFP staff and volunteers to both increase crop yield from the production garden and increase capacity for individual plots.



Timeline

Pre-Project: Designed, built, and tested catchment prototype

Week 1: Built and implemented 2 catchments / Began work on increasing indiv. plot capacity and production crop yield

Week 2: Began “batching out” 8 catchments / Began leading land clearing efforts at McGruder Garden / Designed, facilitated interpretation for, and deployed “Water Surveys” to indiv. plot holders to gauge severity of lack of water

Weeks 3-5: Continued work on 8 catchments/ Continued land clearing / Continued work in the production garden / Hosted Building Workshop (1,2)

Week 6: Collected and compiled water access data (including survey data) to analyze project need and impact / Continued work on 8 catchments / Continued work in the production garden / Prepared for Main Building Workshop (3)

Week 7: Finished, implemented, and finalized all 11 rain catchment systems / Hosted Main Building Workshop (3) / Upgraded old rainwater catchment structures

Week 8: Finished upgrading old catchment structures / Finished work on increasing indiv. plot capacity and production crop yield / Compiled and synthesized instructional manual and video outlining how to build and fix my catchment design

Measurable Impact

900 Lbs of Produce Harvested

42% Increase in Water Catchment Capacity

43% Increase in Water Catchment Yield

54% Decrease in Mean Distance from Plot to Water

3 Building Workshops, 16 Successful Participants

