

The Columbus Dispatch

Gardens scattered across Franklinton add up to big produce operation

By Emily Williams

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Rows of Cherokee Purple, Brandywine and Sungold tomatoes hang like leafy streamers from a sunny, steamy tunnel filled with plants.

Low-lying patches of kale, bundles of Black-eyed Susans and unassuming rows of corn sidle up to side yards and houses.

If pieced together, the 12 plant-filled sites scattered throughout Franklinton cover more than 2.5 acres of land and produce more than \$50,000 worth of produce every year. The unobtrusiveness of the plots almost makes it easy to mistake it for a garden-variety operation, but the urban farming effort in Columbus's oldest neighborhood isn't quite like any other in the city.

Soon, the organization will take on a more fitting name: Franklinton Farms. The old title, Franklinton Gardens, just wasn't representative of the scale of the operation, said executive director Nick Stanich.

"People think we're just a community garden, but we're not," Stanich said. "We're an urban farm."

The network of urban gardens was the first in the city to utilize high tunnels. Also called hoophouses, the unheated greenhouses help to extend the growing season by trapping heat from the sun.

Franklinton Gardens currently uses five high tunnels, but that number will double during the next several months.

Stanich said three more sites also are about to be added to the network: two on Sullivant Avenue and one on Hawkes Avenue, all of which will be operational by mid-September.

All three were Land Bank sites, meaning the land was owned and managed by Columbus's Land Redevelopment Division. Through the Land Bank, the city acquires and repurposes forgotten and foreclosed properties.

The Hawkes Avenue location will be completed first as a "learning garden." Funded by the city's Parcels to Places program, the space will be used to teach families and children about farming and, unlike the farm's other sites, will not focus heavily on production.

As a non-profit, the expansion of the scatter-site urban farm during the past decade has been made possible by a patchwork of grants, many of them local — such as a \$20,000 annual gift from the Mount Carmel Health System — but the operation also has received federal funds.

In September, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture announced an \$8.6 million investment in local food and farming projects across the country.

Franklinton Gardens was one of 33 recipients of the grant and received \$135,010 to pursue its three-year plan, "Unearthing Franklinton's Potential: Cultivating a Vibrant Foodscape."

The grants were funded through the Community Food Projects grant program, a project focused on meeting the food needs of low-income families and supporting neighborhood agriculture projects. Of the all applicants, just 18 percent received the grants.

One of the main components of the Franklinton plan is the expansion of a community supported agriculture (CSA) program, which provides fresh produce for community members.

By 2019, the program will serve 75 members, Stanich said, with half of those shares subsidized to meet the needs of low-income residents.

The CSA program now has 40 members, split evenly between subsidized and unsubsidized shares. On average, the participants receive about \$25 worth of food for either their \$20 full fee or a \$10 subsidized fee, said Katie Brokenshire, who helped lead the program.

When the box arrives on Thursdays — hand-delivered by volunteers — it usually includes some kind of greens, such as kale, collards or salad mix. There's usually a root vegetable — think beets, radishes or carrots. Tomatoes, cucumbers and zucchinis

frequently fill summer boxes, and sometimes herbs such as basil or dill are thrown in, too.

Lately, there have been fresh raspberries and black raspberries, and, though fruit trees are difficult to grow, they were able to harvest their first peach crop this year.

Participants also receive emails with information about what's in their CSA box each week, any news from the organizers, and recipes using that week's produce. The organization also hosted a potluck for CSA members this summer.

"We're trying to make the program more than a box of food every week," said Brokenshire.

Hannah Ely, 34, has been a member of the CSA program since it began three years ago. Ely has four children, ages 2, 5, 6 and 8, and having the subsidized option makes a big difference, she said.

"I believe it's helping the community," Ely said. "It's a more affordable way to get fresh foods, and I like the people who deliver it, too."

It's the organization's hope that opportunities such as the subsidized CSA memberships and the Franklinton Farm stand, which accepts Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) cards, will help address the food insecurity that affects the neighborhood.

Michelle Kaiser, an assistant professor at Ohio State who specializes in food security and community engagement, led a food mapping project to better understand how residents of central Columbus eat. Through surveying residents, Kaiser and her team found that about half of the people surveyed in zip codes 43222 and 43223, which includes Franklinton, experienced some kind of food insecurity.

"The reason why we grow the food is for these people," Brokenshire said. "They're honest about their struggles and where they are and where they want to be."

Though the grant requires that they set quantifiable goals, many of the ways these urban farming sites affect neighborhoods can't be tracked, Kaiser said.

"Flowers and gardens aren't going to solve all the problems of poverty, but they can certainly make people feel good," Kaiser said. "That piece, because it's not measurable, often gets lost."

Part of the goal of the organization is to build a sense of community in the neighborhood, but Brokenshire said she already sees a strong sense of community in Franklinton.

“We’re just trying to support it in the best ways we can,” Brokenshire said.



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