

APS Victory Gardens

2020 Final Report

The Friends of Urban Agriculture (FOUA) appreciate the support provided by our institutional partners - Arlington Public School (APS), the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) and the Healthy Community Action Team (HCAT) program during 2020. The School Victory Gardens program enabled Arlington County to combat food insecurity, build community, and demonstrate Arlingtonian's resilience and civic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The year 2020 was a whirlwind of activity as FOUA transformed four classroom instruction gardens at Hoffman-Boston Elementary (HFB), Wakefield High School, Thomas Jefferson Middle School (TJMS), and Tuckahoe Elementary into scalable 'urban farm' sites to support our Arlington community's food insecure neighbors. Over 1,588 pounds of fresh produce from these 2020 Victory Garden sites were distributed to food pantries throughout the County. Looking to the future, the pandemic's far-reaching economic impacts will require a continued emphasis on food production and food pantry distribution in the communities of Arlington county and beyond.

According to Urban Institute and Arlington Economic Development data, over 4,200 low-income jobs in Arlington were lost to COVID-19 in 2020. This is in addition to the more than 18,000 unemployment claims filed by Arlingtonians between March – September 2020. In an October 2020 survey, 38 percent of Arlington businesses indicated that they are at risk of closing. The COVID-19 pandemic increased Arlington's food insecure population from 15,570 (2018) to a current estimated 27,150 residents resulting in significant pressure on our area's food pantries. In 2020 the demand for donated food was staggering. The School Victory Gardens responded quickly to support this unprecedented demand. Most importantly, the school garden sites were strategically located adjacent to the prioritized neighborhoods in need, which allowed the harvests to stay within the communities who needed them most.



Harvested Yield



1,588 lbs of fresh produce donated

Volunteer Network



Over 1,300 hours involving 84 Arlingtonians

Economic Impact



Volunteer hours harvest equivalent
\$39,825 value

Project Stakeholders

Healthy Communities Action Team (HCAT)

This program would not exist without the generous financial support from Arlington Partnership for Children, Youth and Families' (APCYF) Healthy Community Action Team (HCAT). HCAT's contribution supplied plants, mulch, soil, tools, growing supplies, and fencing materials across all four VG sites.

Arlington Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) and Extension Master Gardeners

The success of the VGs rests solely on the dynamism of Arlington's own VCE Extension Agents, Kirsten Conrad and Aisha Salazar. Kirsten recruited and curated a team of Extension Master Gardeners to provide the VG's with on-site technical support, and hosted regular weekly virtual meetings with all VG participants to discuss issues and challenges in the gardens. Aisha developed tailorable safety guidelines to provide VG participants with thorough hygiene COVID-19 practices in the gardens.

Rock Spring Church Bagging Site

Master Gardener Rebecca Halbe and VCE Agent Aisha Salazar orchestrated a County-wide donation program, to include creating a centralized distribution hub at Rock Spring United Church of Christ, to collect freshly grown produce from VGs sites, established community gardens, and Arlingtonians' backyard gardens. Dozens of volunteers from Master Food Volunteers, church members, Marymount University students, and others properly cleaned, packaged, and distributed directly to Arlington neighborhoods in need. Marymount University provided a grant to purchase supplies for the program.

Victory Garden Coordinators

The Victory Garden Coordinators (GCs) epitomize the ideals of selfless, civic stewards. The GCs have invested years of experience at their site, to include prior donations to Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC). In addition to their service in the gardens, they also serve as APS faculty members, PTA members, and/or parents of current students. The GCs led their assigned volunteers and were responsible for the successful yields each VG site produced. The GCs are the sentinels of the VG program. Their countless hours in the dirt and tireless dedication cannot be overstated.

Volunteers

With over 80 volunteers who raised their hand to join this initiative, FOUA and VCE leveraged a deep bench of talented and motivated Arlingtonians to provide the daily 'muscle' in each of the VG sites. From first sow to final reap, all gardening tasks were carried out by our volunteer cadre.

Friends of Urban Agriculture (FOUA)

FOUA provided the program management, volunteer recruitment, strategic communications, and organizational and financial oversight to support the GCs and volunteer cadre. Each VG was assigned a FOUA Board Member who provided on-site support and complemented the GCs' efforts.

Gardens

Wakefield High School

Garden Coordinator and Wakefield Senior Project Advisor, Lisa LaBella, undertook the Herculean task of doubling the footprint of *Lucas' Place*, Wakefield's memorial instructional garden. Lisa selected a team of experienced gardeners willing to clear almost 400 square feet of adjacent grasslands and engineered a modular fencing solution to deter deer and local wildlife.

Thomas Jefferson Middle School

With over 5,000 square feet, the TJMS instructional garden is APS' largest. Led by GCs Reidy Brown and Enid Dunbar, TJMS is fueled by a dedicated crew of volunteers who grow a diverse variety of greens, vegetables, and fruits. TJMS infrastructure - dedicated 700 foot irrigation system, permanent fenced enclosure, large tool shed, trellis support system - is a model for future VGs.

Hoffman-Boston Elementary

Meticulously maintained by GC Ilana Rea, the beautiful HFB VG is formed by two separate gardens. This separation provides unique microclimates to simultaneously grow shade tolerant leafy greens and heat-loving summer fare. The most productive site, per square footage, this site gained the admiration of the community and provided food directly to South Arlington's North Asian immigrant population.

Tuckahoe Elementary

A perennial contributor to Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) Plot Against Hunger program, Tuckahoe was repurposed this year to support the VG initiative. Tuckahoe neighbor and EMG, Rebecca Halbe, and Tuckahoe outdoor learning educator, Margaret Egan, reconditioned soil in the recently installed raised beds to improve soil health and nutrients for summer plants. Their hard work paid off handsomely as the beds thrived with new growth.

Partnerships

The VGs illustrate Arlington's All Hands on Deck approach

In addition to our institutional partners - APS, VCE and HCAT - we are thankful and humbled by the outpouring of support from individual Arlingtonians and local businesses who provided both material and non-material resources to make the VG effort so successful. Our partners included:

- Puwen Lee
- Renee Whiffen
- 4-H (Alexandria)
- Melwood
- Shelton Tree Service
- We Recycle Trees
- Meadows Farm
- Merrifield Garden Center
- Mom's Organic Market

Winter Planning

Garden Improvements and Volunteer Education

The end of the growing season provided a unique opportunity to make improvements on small portions of APS land. Beds were repaired, invasive weeds knocked back, and cover crops planted to ensure soil health in 2021. Similarly, FOUA and VCE continued educational opportunities to volunteers to ensure they are prepared to start again in the spring.

Based on the outpouring of community and individual support -- coupled with the coronavirus' forecasted persistence over the next 18 months -- FOUA hopes to continue the VG program into the 2021 growing season. We also plan to provide recommendations for how VGs can expand, in both current footprint and into new sites, to meet increased community demand for fresh produce. FOUA is committed to working with APS to provide sustained and equitable support to school gardens across the county.

The Friends of Urban Agriculture appreciated the productive partnership with APS-VCE-HCAT, and enjoyed the opportunity to serve the Arlington community in 2020. We look forward to a continued focus on urban agriculture, food security, and community outreach in the years ahead.