

Philadelphia, NRCS and Partners Working Together to Establish Pollinator Gardens in the City July 9, 2012

Do you know that there are farms and orchards in the City of Philadelphia? Small city farms are growing tomatoes, beans, and carrots, and backyard orchards are producing cherries, pears and apples.

The roofs of buildings house beehives to increase pollination and help with crop production. The USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has partnered with two nonprofit organizations, SHARE and POP, in order to help them establish pollinator gardens to help with food production in the city. SHARE (Self Help and Resource Exchange) is a non-profit organization that sells food at lower costs so that people with lower incomes have access to healthy food. POP (Philadelphia Orchard Project) works with volunteers establishing fruit orchards to supplement the diets of low income city dwellers.

More flowers mean more bees and more bees mean more fruits on the trees. Currently POP has around 40 established orchards in the city of Philadelphia. They want to create pollinator gardens to attract more pollinators near their orchards and increase fruit production.

The SHARE garden focuses on community agriculture. Local residents work together to take care of the garden and then receive the vegetables and/or fruit in return. The garden is about the size of a backyard and contains eight to ten fruit trees. A corner of the garden is dedicated to organic production and contains two high tunnels which grow vegetables on raised beds. They also produce organic vegetable seedlings and have a small orchard. The farmer, Bill Shick, keeps bee hives on the roof of the SHARE building, and creates some compost. Shick has plans to collect rain water from the roof to use for irrigation and to reduce the storm water bill. He is also interested in planting a pollinator garden on the property, as well as growing plants for distribution to other farms/gardens and orchards within the city. This farm has high crop production and has a farmer's market that they are planning to expand due to high demand.

When NRCS initially contacted POP about helping with the pollinator gardens, POP was enthusiastic about the partnership. When visiting the gardens, an NRCS engineer and soil scientist, as well as a compost expert from The Rodale Institute, gathered information on the farming practices and learned firsthand from the farmers about their operations. NRCS's goal from this partnership is to help these non-traditional urban farmers solve their resource concerns. Currently, they are working to create better irrigation techniques for the urban farms, and a way to collect and store water to lessen runoff and the storm water bills. The USDA/NRCS Big Flats Plant Materials Center (PMC) is growing enough plants for five orchards and providing seeds, which can be grown in the SHARE nursery. The PMCs from New Jersey and Maryland have joined Big Flats in helping support the pollinator garden projects.

The People's Garden Initiative is a program designed to bring people together and benefit the community through the creation of gardens. Caring for these gardens helps bring people together in a community setting, as well as grow healthy produce which is donated to help those in the community. The POP and SHARE gardens accomplish both of these things. Community members volunteer in the gardens to help grow food which is then sold at a lower cost making healthy food affordable for those with lower incomes.



A view of one of the gardens that involves POP and SHARE