



United States Department of Agriculture



Montana Urban Agriculture

A Community Agriculture Strategic Plan

2022



Montana
Natural
Resources
Conservation
Services

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Introduction

In August 2021, the Montana Urban Agriculture Strategic Planning Team convened to develop a strategic plan for Montana in response to Secretary Tom Vilsack's emphasis to prioritize urban agriculture. The planning team was tasked with defining urban agriculture in Montana and providing guidance to producers, conservation partners, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) employees, and the public.

Purpose

The purpose of this strategic plan is to acknowledge socio-economic barriers and adapt innovative approaches to recognizing resource scarcity and food deserts found in Montana. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Montana aims to increase sustainability and resiliency of agricultural operations that contribute to local food systems and community-based agriculture by:

- assisting with the implementation of soil health practices,
- increasing food and fiber production,
- developing and maintaining pollinator habitat,
- addressing invasive species, and
- developing sustainable conservation practices.

Urban agriculture in Montana will be delivered by fostering and partnering with grassroots efforts that fuel local agriculture using a collaborative approach emphasizing the human consideration in NRCS's Soil, Water, Air, Plants, Animals, Energy, + Human (SWAPAE + H) planning guidelines. Strengthening our presence within the urban agriculture community will be accomplished by providing technical assistance, Farm Bill financial assistance, education, and outreach for our Tribal customers, socially disadvantaged/historically underserved communities, and non-traditional agriculture producers at all scales.

Definitions

Urban Agriculture - The USDA describes urban agriculture as, "City and suburban agriculture [that] takes the form of backyard, roof-top and balcony gardening, community gardening in vacant lots and parks, roadside urban fringe agriculture and livestock grazing in open space." Among the types of foods grown are vegetables, mushrooms, medicinal and ornamental plants, and fruit trees. Animal and livestock options in urban agriculture include chickens, fish, goats, and honeybees.

Montana Community Agriculture - *Land that is managed for food and/or fiber production within or for a landscape predominated by residential, commercial, industrial and transportation uses.*

Montana is a large agricultural state in which urbanization is minimal in comparison to many other states. Overall, agriculture in Montana is seen as a rural endeavor and may not be considered profitable on small acreage in urban areas. Very few known agricultural entities utilize land within Montana city limits though most small-scale producers use innovative techniques or produce commodity crops and livestock that are typically categorized as "urban" agriculture.

Due to the rural nature of Montana, the term "urban agriculture" and how it applies to our state does not accurately capture our local agriculture communities. In addition, the term does not resonate and is often misinterpreted by our customers, our conservation partner groups, and NRCS Montana staff members. The NRCS Montana Urban Agriculture Strategic Planning Committee members propose the use of the term "community agriculture" in lieu of urban agriculture.

Montana Community Agriculture Goals

Goal 1: Increase community agriculture through Montana Focused Conservation (MFC), special initiatives, and NRCS program delivery.

Goal 2: Improve community agriculture education and outreach in Montana.

Goal 3: Adopt new ideas and innovations.

Goal 4: Strengthen Montana NRCS partnerships, collaboration, and coordination.

Goals and Action Objectives

Goal 1: Increase community agriculture through Montana Focused Conservation (MFC), special initiatives, and NRCS program delivery.

Action Objective 1.1:

Develop a community agriculture program framework to fit MFC.

- Support locally led efforts with the development of new MFC Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPs) to deliver Farm Bill program funding directed towards community agriculture across Montana.
- Optimize existing ranking questions to include more community agriculture producers.

Action Objective 1.2:

Program delivery through partner relationships.

- Encourage participation and development of other funding opportunities such as Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), and national special initiatives.
- Collaborate with other USDA agencies to be proactive with processing workload demands associated with small-scale producers, Tribal customers, and beginning farmers/ranchers. (Example: Rural Development and Farm Service Agency)

Goal 2: Improve community agriculture education and outreach in Montana.

Action Objective 2.1:

Create a Community Agriculture Specialist position at the state level to facilitate and guide outreach, education, and training. The position duties will include:

- Leading and expanding public outreach efforts,
- Developing partnerships with community agriculture organizations,
- Promoting conservation practices appropriate to community agriculture in Montana,
- Facilitating community agriculture education and training for NRCS employees,
- Providing NRCS field offices with a point of contact for education and outreach,
- Working directly with the Beginning Farmer and Rancher State Coordinator, Public Affairs Coordinator, Montana Tribal/Partners Coordinator, and State Soil Health Specialist promoting community agriculture and improving community agriculture technical assistance,
- Facilitating program delivery and technical assistance for community agriculture producers regardless of scale and incorporating the principles of soil health within the context of MFC, and
- Coordinating many of the action objectives in this plan.

Action Objective 2.2:

Create an internal Community Agriculture Committee.

- Members will be comprised of one area representative selected by each Assistant State Conservationist-Field Operations (ASTC-FO), and State Soil Health and Plant Materials specialists. Members of the Montana State Technology staff (Agronomist, Range Specialist, Forester or others), Public Affairs, ASTC-Partners, ASTC-Programs, and State Engineer will assist upon request.
- The Community Agriculture Specialist will assemble and facilitate all committee meetings.
- The committee will develop a community agriculture education/outreach plan identifying active partners, leaders, and opportunities for future collaborations.
- The committee will annually collect feedback from NRCS Montana employees on areas of interest for educational and training opportunities, for both internal and external audiences.

Action Objective 2.3:

Provide community agriculture education and training to NRCS employees.

- The committee/Community Ag Specialist will promote outreach, training, and education through webinars, videos, workshops, farm tours, publications, and presentations.
- The committee/Community Ag Specialist will provide training to NRCS employees based on annual feedback.
- The Community Agriculture Specialist will disseminate information to NRCS Montana from national teleconferences.

Action Objective 2.4:

Improve distribution and accessibility of technical information and program delivery to community agriculture producers including Tribal and historically underserved producers of all scales.

- NRCS will participate in facilitating local outreach and education activities as well as farmer-to-farmer networking.
- Expand outreach via websites and social media to reach more community agriculture producers.
- Increase outreach to local communities regarding innovative conservation practices and new or updated practices adopted by NRCS.
- Develop and distribute any needed outreach materials. Communication with these entities external to NRCS may also include webinars, videos, workshops, farm tours, publications, presentations, etc.
- Communications will emphasize the importance of community agriculture to our food supply and work to challenge the paradigm that community agriculture operations (especially small-scale) are less important to our agricultural economy.

Action Objective 2.5:

Provide education to NRCS customers and conservation partners concerning the principles of soil health and regenerative agriculture as it relates to community agriculture.

- Outreach efforts will work to reach all customers including our Tribal partners and historically underserved (HU) communities.
- Outreach may include the following (but not limited to):
 - Videos, farm tours, workshops, attending farmer markets, farm to school programs
 - Incorporate community agriculture topics into the annual Soil Health Symposium
 - Identify opportunities with producers and partners for demonstration farms or demonstration plots.
 - Explore opportunities to organize and facilitate a Community Agriculture Symposium.
- Participate in or create community agriculture round-table forums with partner groups to share expert advice, opinions, challenges, and commonalities to improve partner coordination and collaboration.
- Coordinate with the Soil Health Action Committee as needed.

Goal 3: Adopt new ideas and innovations

Action Objective 3.1:

Promote the adoption of innovative practices by community ag producers of all sizes by collaborating with partner groups to explore alternatives and opportunities.

- Encourage and advocate for the adoption of NRCS conservation practices promoting healthy soils and improving and protecting natural resources within a community agriculture setting.
- Identify conservation practices geared toward community agriculture producers. Identify opportunities to use practices that may not traditionally be considered for these operations. Improve payment scenarios to advance and encourage integration throughout Montana's communities through MFC.
- Identify resource conservation innovations that have been successfully applied and promote their further implementation through NRCS technical assistance and programmatic opportunities including MFC and special initiatives.
- Provide outreach and education to both external and internal audiences supporting the application of these practices.

Goal 4. Strengthen NRCS Montana partnerships, collaboration, and coordination.

Action Objective 4.1:

Identify potential partner groups, agencies, Tribal organizations, non-governmental organizations, and colleges/universities that support community agriculture in Montana.

- Develop and maintain relationships with partners, Tribal, and community organizations both internal and external to USDA.
- Consider the creation of a cross functional community agriculture partner flow chart categorizing the role, function, and available resources of each partner group by education, accessibility, assistance, innovation, and resources.
- Explore the creation of a community agriculture story map that geospatially references each community agriculture partner group, identifies the role/purpose of each group, and identifies resources available (technical and financial) to the public and NRCS staff.

Action Objective 4.2:

Through discussions with partner organizations, evaluate how to improve program delivery, technical assistance, and the adoption of new and innovative practices.

- Engage community ag partners to evaluate the need for a Montana community ag coalition to address the coordination of education activities.
- Collaborate with Montana colleges, universities, and research institutions to facilitate the information transfer of new and innovative community agriculture conservation practices.

Action Objective 4.3:

Explore partnership agreements with agencies, Tribes, and non-governmental organizations to improve the participation of Tribal, historically underserved, and size neutral community agriculture in Farm Bill programs. Explore opportunities with the development of cooperative and contribution agreements to assist in the outreach and development of MFC TIPs. Partnership agreements should seek to:

- Collaborate with partners to enhance and expand both technical and financial opportunities for historically underserved community agriculture producers and to Tribal communities.
- Address excessive workload demands from community agricultural practices by exploring the opportunities for partner staff assistance funding through agreements (i.e., high tunnels).
- Collaborate with partners to provide specialized community agriculture training for Montana NRCS staff, Tribal participants, conservation partner organizations, and customers.
- Collaborate with conservation partners to promote climate smart, soil health, food security, and direct to consumer market initiatives in support of community agriculture through MFC TIPs.