

Combating Food Insecurity with Urban Agriculture and Pollinators in Chattanooga

By Conor Fay, NRCS, Tennessee

In 2022, the Bethlehem Community Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee, was awarded a grant from USDA's [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) (NRCS) to install pollinator beds in their urban community garden, The Farm at the Beth. Pollinators are essential to food production, with three-fourths of the world's flowering plants and about 35% of the world's food crops depending on animal pollinators to reproduce.

The Farm at the Beth was created out of necessity in 2020. Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, residents of Chattanooga faced major issues related to food insecurity. The recognition of this communal need inspired Dr. Reginald Floyd Smith II, the executive director of the center, to take action to help serve his community through this garden.

The [Food Access Research Atlas](#) was created by the USDA Economic Research Service to determine food deserts on the basis of low income and low food access using census data. The southside of Chattanooga meets both criteria with 26.8% of total households in the area living without a vehicle and living over a half a mile from a grocery store.

The Bethlehem Center is located on Chattanooga's West 38th Street. Growing in this section of the city is not easy, as it's industrial past has earned its soil the label of a "brownfield site" by the Environmental Protection Agency, indicating potentially hazardous substances in the ground of the surrounding area.

Since 2020 the farm has expanded to over 20,000 feet of growing space with a hoophouse and rainwater catchment system. Despite the center's best efforts, it was clear to Lillian Moore, director of food security, and Damon Bartos, farm coordinator, that more help was needed to help manage the farm's growth. After 14,000 bees were generously gifted to the center, the need to develop infrastructure to support their new "winged employees" was apparent. This need led them to NRCS.

After they applied for the grant in 2022, the Bethlehem Center worked with Arthur Hawkins, NRCS assistant state conservationist for field operations, and Cameron Delligatti, NRCS district conservationist, to install the pollinator beds in the community garden. The pollinator beds have been a vital addition to The Farm at the Beth to attract and retain local pollinators, increasing production capacity and adding to the garden's aesthetic value.

"The monetary and technical support of the NRCS was invaluable in making this project a success," said Smith. "Creating a pollinator habitat in the urban core is a win for both environmental health and the beautification of our neighborhood, which ties in perfectly with our vision of creating a legacy of abundance."

As of August 2024, The Farm at the Beth has produced and given away over 2,000 lbs. of produce to neighbors and friends through its food pantry, after school program giveaway and weekly outdoor produce stands.

“Urban agriculture is growing in Chattanooga,” said Hawkins. “NRCS is proud to partner with the Bethlehem Center as it is a neighborhood centerpiece and hub of community engagement. With Chattanooga recently being designated as a National Park City, NRCS hopes this will be an impetus for future conservation projects.”

We wish to extend a huge thank you to the Bethlehem Center staff members who helped share their stories for this article, along with their 14,000 colleagues who helped make this project successful.

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