



Maya Guerin, manager of the Gardens of Millvale, waters plants in the raised beds set aside for neighborhood residents interested in growing their own food.



• U R B A N •

GARDEN



VARIETY



URBAN FARMS AND GARDENS HAVE BEEN GAINING INCREASED IMPORTANCE IN RECENT YEARS AS WAYS TO HELP ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ELEVATED THEIR RELEVANCE AND RESHAPED SOME OF THE GROUPS THAT OPERATE THEM. BY DONOVAN HARRELL

Donovan Harrell is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer. His last story for h magazine was published in Issue 1, 2022, and looked at how nonprofits and government agencies are trying to develop solutions to the affordable housing crisis.

Volunteer gardeners at the Gardens of Millvale, all community residents, meet at least twice a month to perform maintenance and work on other projects throughout the year. Helping to clean up plant beds are Rachel Maggio, top left, along with Trevor Southworth, Holly McDevitt and Gardens manager Maya Guerin, all above right. Root vegetables such as these beets, center, are among the types of food grown at the Gardens of Millvale. Mackenzie Hasley, below left, is another resident volunteer who joined the group that includes on the right, Mr. Southworth, Ms. Maggio, Nicole Ellison, Ms. Guerin, Walden Guerin, Denise Rudar and Leslie Lewandowski.



Millvale residents were fed up with a lack of grocery store options in their neighborhood, so they took matters into their own hands. Making use of two abandoned lots, where demolished homes once stood, residents created the Gardens of Millvale in 2010.

“It’s really a beautiful thing for that to have started with just a group of community members wanting to do some gardening,” said Gardens of Millvale Manager Maya Guerin. “That space as an urban farm area [was] able to give back to the community so much and be a resource for education and teaching people about the importance of growing your own food and healthy cooking and sustainability.”

Since 2016, urban farms in Allegheny County have increased, expanded and evolved to fit county residents’ growing need for new sources of fresh produce. These farms offer critical resources beyond food with their programming, sitting at the intersection of health, wellness, education and activism.

They’ve also been especially vital as neighborhoods already considered to be “food deserts” were forced to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic as it disrupted food supply lines and systems across the country. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service defines a “food desert” as a neighborhood or community that lacks access to supermarkets, supercenters, grocery stores, or other sources of healthy and affordable food. Food deserts are a form of “food insecurity,” in which people have limited access to all kinds of foods because of financial difficulties.

Ruth Kittner, executive director of Wilkesburg Community Ministry, said food insecurity is a long-standing issue in Allegheny County that was exacerbated by the pandemic shutdown and increasing food prices.

“Compounding this are other factors: the inflation, albeit modest compared to other countries, that Americans have faced in the past year; the avian flu, which caused the prices of chicken and eggs to skyrocket; the challenges to transportation and production; and the price gouging of food suppliers,” she said.

In Allegheny County, 174,110 people live in food insecure communities, according to the Pittsburgh Food Policy Council (PFPC), a think tank advocating for a more equitable and sustainable food supply system. Millvale is among those communities, according to Ms. Guerin. Other food insecure communities include Wilkesburg, Sharpsburg, Penn Hills and the Monongahela Valley, said Andrew McElwaine,



Garden photos: Nate Guidry | Beet photo: courtesy of Neighborhood Allies

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vice president of Sustainability for The Heinz Endowments. In Pittsburgh, where the 2020 FeedPGH report found that 1 in 5 residents live with food insecurity, among the most food insecure neighborhoods are Homewood and East Hills.

“Whether it’s the cost of housing or poverty and the people don’t have access to grocery stores other than maybe a dollar store . . . you’ve really got a crisis on your hands,” Mr. McElwaine said. “The same neighborhoods where we have problems with affordable housing, transportation and access to jobs are going to be the same places that are food insecure.”

Jo Deming, executive director of the PFPC, said the region has struggled with food insecurity and economic decline since the fall of the steel industry in the 1970s and 1980s. Even though the economy is growing, stagnant wages and inflation have left residents unable to afford to buy the food that they need on the wages they earn, she said, adding that this is particularly true for communities of color.

The neighborhoods more susceptible to a lack of accessible grocery stores are often located on hills or hilltops, which only add to food accessibility challenges, Ms. Deming said. “Additionally, Pittsburgh has many communities that are experiencing ‘food apartheid.’ These communities lack access to grocery stores and healthy food markets as a result of redlining and other policies that created disinvestment in these communities.”

For residents in these food deserts, especially residents who don’t own cars, the further they get away from Pittsburgh, fewer public transportation options are available, said Jackie Boggs, director of programs and services for North Hills Community Outreach.

Ms. Guerin, who has experienced poverty in the past, said there’s a general stigma around people seeking fresh food and the organizations that provide fresh food for people in lower-income areas. These people, she said, are seen as not deserving of fresh food — which is typically more expensive than canned or perishable goods — because of their lower income, especially if the food is free.

There’s been a sense for lower-income people of “take what you can get,” Ms. Guerin said. “And that’s usually food that has low nutritional value. Food is for everyone. I mean, no one should ever have to be made to feel guilty about wanting to eat.”

PANDEMIC IMPACT

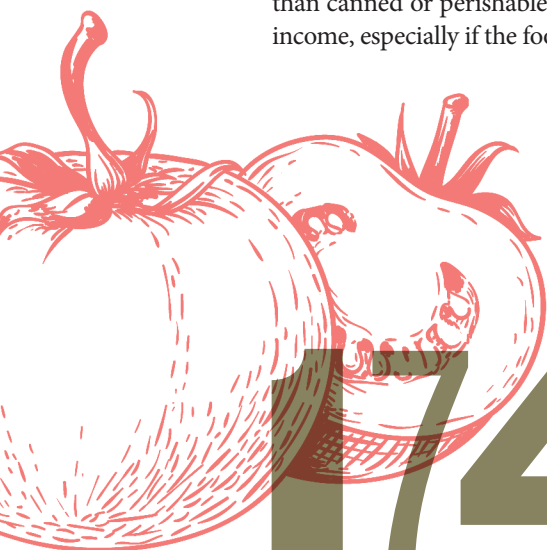
The COVID-19 pandemic had a range of effects on farming operations with some urban farms encouraged to expand and others pushed to reposition their services.

Originally a family farm north of Pittsburgh, the North Hills Community Outreach farm has been around for 12 years and harvests about 5,000 pounds of fresh food each year, according to Executive Director Tom Baker. The organization operates eight food pantries per month at three different locations. The main one is based in Allison Park, while additional offices and food pantries are located in Avalon, at the Greenstone United Methodist Church, and the Millvale Community Center.

The pandemic didn’t have a significant effect on farming operations or the amount of food produced, Mr. Baker said. However, the organization’s food pantry operations had to evolve. Before the pandemic, the farm encouraged customers to shop around and pick the produce they wanted at each food pantry.

During the pandemic, the organization started allowing drive-through pickups, especially at the Allison Park office. Now it uses a hybrid model in which customers can pull up and have pre-packed food and other items handed to them, or they can go into the pantry to look around and shop.

Wilksburg Community Ministry serves fresh food to about 100 families a day through a storefront pantry open five days a week and a mobile pantry that distributes to five sites each week, Ms. Kittner said. The pantry receives local donations from the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, Costco, Giant Eagle Market District, Trader Joe’s and Whole Foods Market.



174,110 PEOPLE IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY LIVE IN FOOD INSECURE NEIGHBORHOODS

174,110



1 IN 5 PITTSBURGH RESIDENTS EXPERIENCES FOOD INSECURITY

The pandemic also pushed that organization to go beyond its usual operations. It started exploring gardening in a small, 1,500-square-foot space that grows kale, chard, green beans, lettuce, tomatoes and more, Ms. Kittner said. Since then, much of the garden has been repurposed to educate children on how food is grown.

Ms. Guerin said the pandemic led the Gardens of Millvale to grow into a more structured, urban farm setup where it has increased food production. The gardens have two lots dedicated to raised beds for neighborhood residents interested in growing their own food. Residents initially weren't charged for this service for the first year because of the pandemic, but they will have to start paying a fee on a sliding scale sometime this year.

Providing the raised beds for residents to garden has helped to offset the economic challenges that some people experienced during the pandemic, during which they struggled with sudden unemployment and rising food prices. This change was also made to encourage residents to become more self-sufficient, Ms. Guerin said.

INCREASED SUPPORT

In fact, as neighborhoods across the Pittsburgh region have increasingly turned to urban farms in recent years to help address food insecurity, they have captured the attention of policymakers, news media and philanthropic organizations.

"There is a growing understanding among funders and the City of Pittsburgh that growers need secured land access in order to justify significant capital and labor investments in urban agricultural sites," Ms. Deming said.

Since 2016, several policies and initiatives have helped expand urban farms in the area, she added. The Urban Agriculture Infrastructure Grant, a component of the PA Farm Bill that went into effect in 2019, has helped to develop infrastructure for urban farms such as hoop houses and greenhouses at the farms run by the Homewood-based Black Urban Gardeners and Farmers of Pittsburgh Co-op, or BUGs, and Grow Pittsburgh's Garden Dreams in Wilkinsburg.

In the summer of 2020, the Pittsburgh City Council passed legislation in support of urban farming. City officials later created the City Farms program to specifically support urban farming. Additionally, there has been an increase in urban agriculture-focused technical assistance positions created at Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA), Pennsylvania State University and the City of Pittsburgh.

"All of these changes highlight the way the urban agriculture sector has really grown and is maturing in the region," Ms. Deming said. "We are excited to see how that will translate into more growing spaces, more growers, more locally produced food, etc."

Today, urban farms also have more opportunities to access funds and other resources, particularly Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture infrastructure grants, she added.

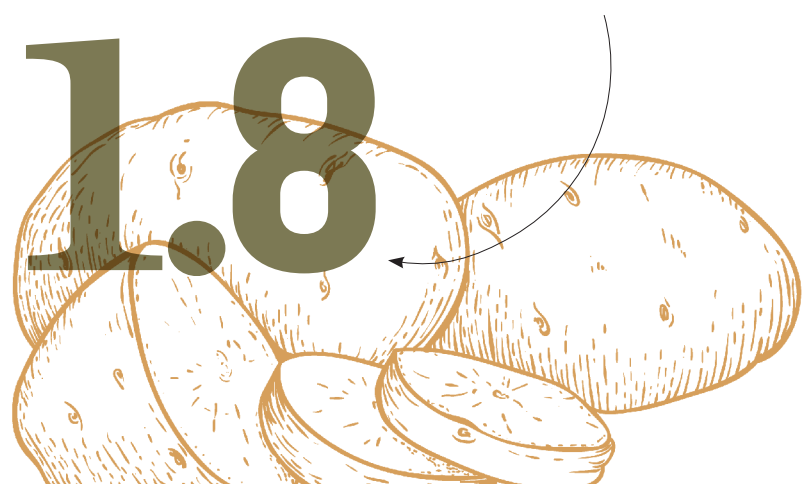
In November 2022, The Heinz Endowments board approved \$267,500 in grants for urban farming and food access projects on top of nearly \$1.5 million awarded to these projects since the previous year, for a total allocation of nearly \$1.8 million during the two years. Mr. McElwaine, who has formed relationships with urban farms across Allegheny County, explained that the pandemic was a major driving force behind the grants.

"The pandemic really showed that the food supply chain was broken and really made the case for more resilience in our food supplies, including more local food and regional food," he said.

Urban farms and their advocates in the county have been able to use the support from the Endowments and other foundations to expand their farms, services and number of employees.

Funding from the Endowments has helped North Hills Community Outreach with planning the construction of a bio shelter to help food grow year-round, even in colder weather, said Lizzy Zimmerman, the organization's director of development and communications. The shelter also will help the farm produce an additional 1,000 pounds of food

THE HEINZ ENDOWMENTS AWARDED GRANTS TOTALING NEARLY \$1.8 MILLION IN 2021 AND 2022 TO URBAN FARMING AND FOOD ACCESS PROJECTS.



per year for the organization's food pantries and provide additional volunteer opportunities for residents.

Ms. Deming said the Endowments has always been a generous supporter of the PFPC, awarding it with \$190,000 in 2016 in support of its sustainable food systems work. Between 2018 and 2020, PFPC received annual awards of \$190,000 from the foundation in support of the Greater Pittsburgh Food Action Plan project as well as of healthy food access and urban agriculture initiatives.

The Endowments has also given the Wilkinsburg Community Ministry \$50,000 annually for two years and emergency support during the pandemic, Ms. Kittner said. These grants have helped the organization retain employees and hire new workers to manage the pantry and food delivery services.

Further, funding from the Endowments has helped the Gardens of Millvale expand and sustain its infrastructure, Ms. Guerin said. Ms. Raqueeb Bey, the executive director of BUGs, said support from the foundation has helped the organization sustain operations since 2016, a year after BUGs was founded.

"We are grateful for Heinz and what they have done, for not just us but our community in general," Ms. Bey said.

MORE THAN JUST FOOD

In addition to fresh produce, urban farms provide their communities with a variety of resources and services that include K-12 education programs, food pantries and transportation services.

At North Hills Community Outreach, Mr. Baker said he hopes the food is just the start of an ongoing conversation that connects with the organization's 20 other services, which are designed to help meet the basic needs of people who contact them and include financial, utility, rental, transportation, tax and grant-writing assistance programs.

Urban farms can enrich the communities they serve in a variety of ways, Ms. Bey said. With its 31,000-square-foot property, BUGs offers farmers markets and classes to help educate Homewood residents about how to grow food. These services are essential for the neighborhood since it struggles from "food apartheid," and it hasn't had a grocery store since 1994, she added. This summer, the organization hopes to establish a co-op grocery store operation in the neighborhood.

"No one should have to travel outside of their neighborhood to go grocery shopping," Ms. Bey added. "In BUGs, we grow food, minds and leaders because we're farmers. But it's more than just growing food. It's growing communities. It's teaching people how to grow." **h**

BEE SMART

**NEW VACCINE PROTECTS
HONEYBEES FROM DEADLY DISEASE.
BY DONOVAN HARRELL**

Donovan Harrell is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer.



A beekeeper removes a tray from a hive to harvest honey.