CLEVELAND SEASONAL HIGH TUNNEL INITIATIVE

FUNDED BY THE NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

Urban Agriculture

For the past 15 years, Cleveland's grass roots urban agriculture movement has grown steadily. Today, urban agriculture contributes to meeting the nutritional needs of residents, improving neighborhoods, and increasing employment opportunities in the city.

Cleveland is now recognized as having the second most active and successful urban agriculture movement in the country.

Laying the Foundation

In 2010, the City of Cleveland acted to encourage urban agriculture by:

- Modifying the zoning code to permit agricultural production in single family residential districts.
- Modifying the zoning code to allow farm stand sales, signage, limited animal agriculture (chickens, bees), and agricultural structures.
- Reducing city water rates for urban agriculture.

Cleveland farmer Avon Standard donates his produce to churches and the neighbors.

This high tunnel, shown here without the plastic cover, covers a portion of Avon Standard's bountiful 2 acres near Regency Park in Cleveland.

Why High Tunnels?

The Cleveland High Tunnel Initiative grew from discussions between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Congresswoman Marcia Fudge about the need for USDA assistance to help Cleveland residents grow fresh food in an environmentally friendly manner for potentially 12 months a year.

Twenty-five percent, or 323,850 of Cuyahoga County residents live in "food deserts," areas with limited access to food near their homes. In the City of Cleveland the percentage of residents living in food deserts (56%) more than doubles. USDA created a map of food desert areas within Cleveland to help target the areas most in need of access to fresh, nutritious sources of food. To address the critical needs of these residents, high tunnel applicants from these areas receive higher priority for funding.

High Tunnel Benefits

"High tunnels make it possible to grow food locally in an environmentally beneficial manner. Many urban farmers grow food for local farmer markets, which stimulates the local economy and improves air quality by reducing air emissions from transportation."

State Conservationist Terry Cosby

The 2012 Pilot Project

In 2012, NRCS State Conservationist Terry Cosby allocated a portion of Ohio's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds to pilot a seasonal high tunnel project in the Greater Cleveland area. Cosby also hired a full-time Urban Conservationist to lay the groundwork for the project. NRCS leadership at the national level amended an agreement with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives to assist with project development and local outreach.

Pilot Project Results

The 2012 Cleveland High Tunnel Pilot Project EQIP application period took place from May-June 2012. All 23 applications received the 90 percent payment rate allowable for beginning or historically underserved farmers.

The majority of applicants had not worked with USDA before, which required them to obtain farm numbers from the Farm Service Agency (FSA). The FSA office in neighboring Medina County services Cuyahoga County, so applicants completed the FSA application process via mail.

Environmental justice, or the inequitable distribution of environmental burden, came into play during this project. The potential for hazardous substances on the abandoned lots leased from the City of Cleveland for urban agriculture necessitated soil testing to make sure the soil would not pose a threat to the health of people consuming produce grown in this soil. The city notified those leasees of the lead content on their site and provided them with soil tests to make them aware of the lead threshold. Those participants with soil lead levels above the EPA threshold for safety used raised beds as a precautionary measure.

Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative - The Customers

In July of 2013, Jamal Rahkeera and his wife Lawanda hosted a seasonal high tunnel (also referred to as hoop houses) training build in Cleveland. The 50 training participants helped build two hoop houses, both 30 ft. by 72 ft. from start to finish. This hands on experience provided the participants an opportunity to ask questions while they contributed their skills and energy to the build. Volunteers and staff from the Fair Food Network, Ohio State University Extension, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Farm Credit Services of Mid America, Wells Fargo Advisors, LB Construction LLC, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and many more organizations helped make this build a great success.

The seasonal high tunnels will allow the Rahkeera's to extend their growing season to produce crops such as onions, sage, parsley, thyme, cucumbers, squash, peppers, collards, mustards, turnips, and more year-round, which they sell at their on-site market. Seasonal high tunnels, such as the two completed by the Rahkeera's, will no doubt help to improve these residents access to fresh and healthy food, build community spirit, and perhaps even plant a seed in a childs mind that will grow that child into tomorrow's farmer.

Getting Results

Since 2012, 95 seasonal high tunnels have been constructed or are scheduled for installation.

- 47 installed
- 35 scheduled for installation
- 10 contracts pending

Total funds obligated = $449,440

Neighborhood builds bring together volunteers to erect the high tunnel structures. Volunteers learn about the purpose of high tunnels and build community pride.

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