

Conservation Notes

USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service - Michigan

July/August 2021



Building a Farming Community in the Vehicle City

When in 2014 the Flint water crisis struck an already economically struggling community, people started looking for ways to help.

Proper nutrition as a way to help abate the harm caused by lead in the city's drinking water got the attention of Tommy McDoniel. McDoniel, who came to Flint in 2010 as the new pastor of Asbury United Methodist Church, found out he was not the only one who saw locally grown food as a way to help the people in his community.

Life-long Flint resident and community activist Terry Kinzie was involved in what he called "guerilla gardening" through a non-profit organization of local artists called the Peace Mob. Guerilla gardening meant establishing gardens on vacant properties, not necessarily with the permission of the owner. Kinzie was working in one of the Peace Mob's gardens when he met McDoniel who was out "walking the neighborhoods." Together, McDoniel, Kinzie, and Israel Unger, another activist with a passion for local food systems, decided to create something more permanent.

Access to land is the biggest obstacle for new farmers but abandoned properties in Flint could be



Reverend Tommy McDoniel and NRSC Soil Conservationist Haley Dukes with one of the high tunnels at Asbury Farms in Flint.

purchased cheaply through the area land bank. Unger had a background in fund raising and a Community Development Corporation was created with Asbury United Methodist Church as the fiduciary. Unger found funding sources and became the finance director for what became Asbury Farms and Kinzie was the first farm manager.

A critical component to the project is the use of high tunnels with financial assistance from NRCS. High tunnels, metal framed structures covered with plastic, allow Asbury Farms to extend their growing season and produce more food.

"We grow year-round, we didn't miss a week (of production) last year," said McDoniel.

Asbury Farms has 17 high tunnels in production and three more constructed in 2021 that will begin production in the fall. Most of the tunnels were obtained with financial assistance provided through the NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program. Asbury Farms obtained EQIP contracts for some of the tunnels while others were contracted by growers leasing lots. Unger obtained a high tunnel through EQIP and was the farm's first independent farmer, said McDoniel.

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State Conservationist's Message

NRCS and its predecessors have been serving American farmers for over 75 years. However, we know that USDA resources have not always been provided equitably. Recently USDA announced \$50 million in available funding for agreements to support historically underserved farmers with climate-smart agriculture and forestry.

The Racial Justice and Equity Conservation Cooperative Agreements are available to entities and individuals for two-year projects that expand the delivery of conservation assistance to farmers who are beginning, limited resource, socially disadvantaged, and veteran farmers.

I encourage individuals and entities in Michigan who can provide outreach assistance to historically underserved groups to consider applying for this initiative.

The deadline for submitting grant applications is 11:59 p.m. Eastern Standard Time on Oct. 25, 2021. More information is included in the [news release](#) and the formal announcement and application instructions are posted on [grants.gov](#).



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Congratulations to the organizations who submitted successful grant proposals to Sustain our Great Lakes, a public-private partnership that supports habitat restoration in the Great Lakes basin and administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. NFWF recently announced the award of 35 grants totaling \$8.6 million for project proposals in states surrounding the Great Lakes. The grant award categories included; riparian habitat restoration, coastal habitat restoration, green stormwater infrastructure, regenerative agriculture, and invasive species control.

Among the Michigan recipients are the Mason-Lake Conservation District, Huron Pines, the Conservation Resource Alliance, and The Nature Conservancy. NRCS looks forward to collaborating with Michigan's grantees to help make their projects a success.



*State Conservationist
Garry Lee*

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On Aug. 30, the Farm Service Agency designated Sanilac County as a Primary Natural Disaster Area due to drought. The [designation](#) also applies to the surrounding counties of Huron, Lapeer, St. Clair, and Tuscola. The

designation makes producers in those counties eligible for emergency loans through FSA.

Now more than ever Michigan producers need to be prepared both for drought conditions and extreme rain events in the same growing seasons. The best way to do this is by implementing the fundamental

soil health practices of conservation tillage and cover crops. These practices help hold precious soil in place through heavy rain events and extended drought conditions. In addition, when both practices are implemented together, they will increase soil organic matter and improve water infiltration over time.

The deadline for producers to apply for disaster assistance through this declaration is April 11, 2022. For more information, producers should contact their local FSA field office.

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Building a Farming Community in the Vehicle City

Asbury Farms is hoping to build a farming community within Flint by making land available to would-be farmers. “A successful farmer doesn’t have to own land,” McDoniel pointed out.

Another obstacle to urban farmers growing in high tunnels is water. The cost of city water in Flint is among the highest in the country, McDoniel said. Through donations, they were able to install their own well with a solar powered pump. A local donor provided a semi-trailer that sits on the property to provide equipment storage. They are also working with a beekeeper who plans to donate hives for the farm next year.

In addition to independent farmers, Asbury Farms has two full-time employees including a farm manager, and another part-time employee. Youth summer employment programs and volunteers provide additional labor. Some of the kids involved in the summer youth employment program are on their third season, said Kinzie. The farm sells its produce through “vegie box” subscriptions, at local farmers’ markets, through a traveling food trailer purchased by the CDC, direct sales to restaurants and to the Flint Fresh Food Hub. The Food Hub is probably the farm’s largest buyer, said McDoniel.

Asbury CDC has grown beyond just a community farming operation. The CDC operates Asbury Café which offers pay-as-you-can meals as well as culinary and nutritional education utilizing produce from the farm. The farm has a youth program that hosts monthly “Sizzles” where they demonstrate the preparation of produce from the gardens into healthy meals.

“We’re still young in the process,” Kinzie says of the farm. “We’re not there yet, we’re taking the right steps I feel.”

Asbury Farms hopes to provide opportunity to more young people looking to urban agriculture as a way to live affordably.

“Each generation is entitled to create their own view of the world,” McDoniel said.



(top) Panels created by local artists line the street at Asbury Farms in Flint. The panels were recently replaced with new art. (middle) Tommy Doniel at Asbury Farms, a donated solar panel powers wells on the property, the trailer was donated and is used to store equipment. (above) One of the high tunnels operated by an independent farmer on the property.

Two New Pollinator Partnership Programs Available in Michigan

POLLINATOR PARTNERSHIP by Connie Crancer, MI-NRCS Liaison & Project Wingspan State Coordinator

I would like to share with you two programs from [Pollinator Partnership](#) that are valuable resources to guide producers to create pollinator habitat.

Project Wingspan Agricultural Lands

Project Wingspan is a landscape habitat enrichment program managed by Pollinator Partnership and funded by the Fish and Wildlife Foundation. Project Wingspan has focused for the past three years on creating and enhancing pollinator habitat on privately and publically managed land in eight states. The success of our programs has gained the Partnership another grant - [Project Wingspan Agricultural Lands](#). The grant's focus is enhancing pollinator habitat on agricultural landscapes and is a unique resource for you to share with your producers.

Project Wingspan enhances habitat by facilitating the collection of bioregional native plant species, (35 target species), by teams of volunteers trained in best management practices of native plant seed collection. The seed is cleaned and packaged at Mason State Nursery, a DNR facility in Illinois. It is then distributed as seed and seedlings to shovel-ready projects in the same bioregion from which the seed was collected.

Each project is vetted by habitat surveys completed by participants. The surveys also capture pollinator habitat acreage in each state. In return, survey participants receive a document with state-specific pollinator habitat resources and are invited to either an in-person field day or webinars that emphasize successful native habitat restoration and management to support pollinators, T/E insects and other wildlife. Those participating in our [Agricultural Lands Habitat Survey](#) receive state-specific pollinator habitat resources plus an invitation to either a field day or webinars that address integrating pollinator habitat into agricultural landscapes and crop production.

Bee Friendly Farming

[Bee Friendly Farming](#) is a unique program created in response to the increase in consumers interested in sustainably sourced and Bee Friendly Farming



Pollinator habitat established near a blueberry orchard in western Michigan.

Certified products. Producers receiving Bee Friendly Farming can use the logo and signs to promote their products. Producers also have access to the Bee Friendly Farming team for support including regional plant suggestions, site visits, and connection to seed sourcing. Bee Friendly Farming recommendations are based on the best science to support both pollinators and crops. Certification also gives producers access to seed grants, monthly newsletters, our Bee Friendly Farming blog, and a website featuring articles and producer profiles.

For more information about Project Wingspan Agricultural Lands or Bee Friendly Farming please contact Connie Crancer at cc@pollinator.org.

Connie is our new MI Pollinator Partnership NRCS Liaison. She is onboard to support producer outreach focused on NRCS farming programs that support pollinators and imperiled insects and wildlife. Pollinator Partnership also identifies demonstration farm sites throughout Michigan that have successfully implemented or manage pollinator habitat for the specific consideration of NRCS field days. She is available to support, promote and participate in pollinator habitat trainings, field days, farm conferences and virtual and in-person events to share information about the importance of pollinators and pollinator habitat and how NRCS's practices and programs, as well as Bee Friendly Farming and PWAL, can help sustain pollinators, E/T insects and wildlife.



Bee in the Know: Assistance for Honey Producers

A new informational campaign highlights USDA resources for honey producers. The “Bee in the Know” campaign includes a video and print materials promoting resources from NRCS along with the Farm Service Agency and the Risk Management Agency.

The campaign includes information about USDA programs for honey producers including pollinator habitat establishment, loans for marketing and honey storage, disaster assistance, and revenue protection. An informative 2-minute video is available on [YouTube](#) that provides a brief overview of USDA assistance available to honey producers. More detailed information is provided in the campaign’s brochure.

The Bee in the Know brochure is available for



download on the [NRCS-Michigan SharePoint](#) site in 8.5 by 11 inch, and 11 by 17 inch formats. If you do not have access to the SharePoint site you can obtain a copy by contacting your local NRCS office or by contacting the state public affairs specialist at brian.buehler@usda.gov. Preprinted brochures may be available in the future from the NRCS Distribution Center, a notice and link will be posted if that occurs.

Sign Up for Local USDA News Through Gov Delivery

Did you know that your local USDA Service Center sends out an electronic monthly newsletter? The latest information on USDA program application deadlines, notifications of disaster assistance and local field days can be sent to your email by signing up for GovDelivery.

Anyone can sign up for USDA [GovDelivery](#) newsletters online. You can subscribe to your local USDA Service Agency newsletter as well as state and national USDA newsletters and you can unsubscribe at anytime. In addition to monthly newsletters, your local Service Center will send out more time sensitive notices when needed. The newsletters include information from USDA Farm Production and Conservation mission area agencies which include NRCS, the Farm Service Agency, and USDA Risk Management. GovDelivery participants will also



have the option of receiving text message for more urgent news.

Farmers.gov Tools

Knowing what services are available from the USDA and what agency offers them can be challenge for both beginning and long time producers. The [Farmers.Gov website](#) has several online informational tools available to help producers find the USDA resource they need. They include the Farm Loan Discovery Tool, the Disaster Assistance Discovery Tool, the Conservation Concerns Tool, the Service Center Locator, and the Create Your H-2A Visa Checklist.

Another way to find about USDA resources is the AskUSDA which provides answers to questions online, by phone at 1-833-ONE-USDA, or by email at askusda@usda.gov.

Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events - Upcoming Events

September

- 9 Michigan 4R Field Day, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., SKS Farm, 545 N Van Dyke Rd. - Marlette, for more information and to register go to bluewatercd.org
- 12 Mid-Michigan CISMA Eco Expo, noon to 4 p.m., Woldumar Nature Center - Lansing, more information at inghamconservation.com
- 15 Gaining Ground, Soil as a Renewable Resource Field Day, 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. (landowner session) 3 to 6:30 p.m. (farmer session), Eaton County Fairgrounds - Charlotte, for more information and to RSVP go to www.eatoncd.org or call 517/543-1512 ext. 5
- 15 Michigan State University Extension Field Crops Virtual Breakfast: Scouting for Weed Escapes and Management with Christy Sprague, 7 - 7:30 a.m., for more information go to www.canr.msu.edu/events

September ctd.

- 25 Fall Stream Monitoring, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., Ingham Conservation District - Mason, for more information go to inghamconservation.com

October

- 14 Tree Care and Pruning with an Arborist, 10 a.m. to noon, 21885 Dunham Rd. - Clinton Twp., for more information go to www.canr.msu.edu/events
- 29&30 Michigan Beekeepers' Association & MSU Extension Fall Conference, online event, for more information go to www.canr.msu.edu/events

November

Save the Date - Wednesday Afternoon Native Pollinator & Habitat Technical Training Workshops, planned for Nov. 3, 10, 17 and Dec. 1 & 8, webinar series produced by the Pollinator Partnership, details TBA



Asbury Farms, Flint

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Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.