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Rooted in Community

South Lawn Farm Expands Fresh Food Access and Urban Farming Opportunities



GROWS participant, Miyana Campbell, with a bountiful August harvest.

As the growing season concludes on Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County's South Lawn Farm, the field tells a story of abundance and impact. This 2025 season, South Lawn Farm has grown, harvested and distributed a record breaking total of precisely 1,562.75 pounds of fresh produce. That produce supports three local Rochester food pantries (The People's Pantry, Trillium Food and Nutrition pantry, and The Irondequoit Community Cupboard) as well as CCE Monroe's nutrition education programs. These donations help fill a critical gap in fresh food access, working towards providing healthy options to those who need it most.

South Lawn Farm is home to the GROWS (Gaining Relevant and Outstanding Work Skills) program, a transitional workforce program that serves Rochester urban adults facing barriers to employment. GROWS is made possible in part thanks to the Avangrid Foundation, philanthropic arm of Avangrid, parent company of Rochester Gas & Electric. Those participating in GROWS learn soft work skills and responsibilities through the hands-on experience of urban farming, teamwork, and community engagement. South Lawn Farm and GROWS, both established in 2022, were created to provide urban farming education and opportunities to Rochester communities experiencing a disconnect with land, agriculture, and food systems. This year, efforts to reach more marginalized communities were strengthened through expanded outreach, new partnerships and inclusive programming designed to make urban farming more accessible and welcoming. In addition to GROWS participants, South Lawn Farm became a weekly worksite for groups from Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD), Lifetime Assistance



Inc. (LAI), and Arc of Monroe's ExperienceWorks! and Employment Training Programs.

Over the course of the growing season, an average of 20 individuals returned week after week to gain work experience on South Lawn Farm. Each of those regular individuals spent approximately 32 hours on site at South Lawn Farm and CCE Monroe grounds and gardens, participating in demonstrations, trainings, workshops, and hands-on clinics. Kymesha, Morgan and Cliff, all community volunteers through LAI that visit with a Career Preparation Specialist, expressed interest in starting gardens at home. Meanwhile, Dave, a fellow LAI participant, noted that "the experience was interesting," and that, "I got to do different things that I normally wouldn't do." Most everyone commented that they loved getting to know new people.

South Lawn Farm's GROWS participant, Miyana Campbell, had an extremely successful season of personal and professional growth, contributing 286.5 hours to South Lawn Farm and GROWS. In that time, she completed her OSHA-10 certification, registered for and completed 3 driving classes in pursuit of her driver's license, took a course to improve her Microsoft Word skills, gained confidence in her social skills, gave public farm tours, and participated in a panel discussing the merits and importance of accessible healthy food and nutrition education. She took a 3-part series of classes from Monroe County's Nutrition Educator on "How to Extend the Harvest," learning how to preserve produce through dehydration, fermentation, and freezing. Miyana also took it upon herself to learn the detailed craft of insect pinning, to support Cornell's IPM team's spotted lanternfly educational display.

Participating in GROWS marked Miyana's first ever job experience and through learning work skills on South Lawn Farm, now feels not only confident in her gardening knowledge, but in her ability to navigate her young professional goals, saying, "Prior to working at GROWS I had very little gardening experience and I thought when I was done with it- that's all I was gonna have, gardening experience. But I was wrong, gardening ended up meaning much more than I expected. I'm not really a social person, but working there made me socialize and be more outgoing. I met tons of cool people who have impacted my life differently in such amazing ways. I'm so happy that I got the opportunity to grow closer with my community and will continue to." Miyana demonstrates wonderfully that learning how to grow food generates more than just healthy vegetables, it cultivates a sense of connection to something greater, community amongst peers.

GROWS concludes its 2025 season, organizers are already planning for next year's program and inviting new participants to join. Interviews for the 2026 GROWS season will open in mid-January 2026. GROWS is specifically for young adults from Rochester, NY, aged 18-24 that are facing barriers to employment. South Lawn Farm is a worksite for RochesterWorks, and all interested participants are paired with a Navigator from a local agency (Community

Place of Greater Rochester, Greentopia, RochesterWorks, Starbridge, or The Center for Youth Services) to help them navigate career opportunities and life changes and challenges. GROWS participants partnered with RochesterWorks Navigators get paid by the hour, and receive weekly direct deposits from TES Staffing. Those interested in building skills in horticulture, urban agriculture, food systems, and connecting with a passionate community are encouraged to contact CCE Monroe's Garden Outreach Educator, Rachel DeVona, at rad346@cornell.edu to learn more. Other local organizations that support a paid workforce development program are also welcome to reach out to learn more about becoming involved with GROWS. GROWS is designed to be a stepping stone to develop participant work skills and build a stronger resume, with a goal of securing long term employment or enrolling in further education, and GROWS and Navigators are present to support each step of the way.



Youth from Rochester School For the Deaf and GROWS participant, Miyana Campbell, after a successful morning of harvest.



A weekly volunteer group from Lifetime Assistance Inc. harvests basil in preparation for a pesto workshop.

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