

## GROW WITH EXTENSION

# Community learning farm coming to Cape Fear region



Lloyd Singleton

**M**y fascination with plants was fostered by spending time in the garden with my grandfather as he worked the rocky Ozark soils to produce food. Asparagus, tomatoes, and cucumbers were abundant with his instincts and green thumb. Granddad taught me how to carefully use thumbnail and forefinger to pluck strawberries while leaving the hat on to keep the berry fresh. The clothesline post did dual duty as a pole bean trellis; I was in charge of picking the lower half. The rhubarb patch was enhanced every spring with horse manure bedding. Mama Midge's strawberry rhubarb pie was the perfect reward for a boy's earthy work. I was very lucky to receive this experiential training.

This past week brought some good news for potential local food producing learners in our region. A grant was awarded from the United States Department of Agriculture's new Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovation Production (UAIP) to the Cape Fear region's venerable Feast Down East organization <https://www.feastdowneast.org/> to plan a community learning farm. The mission of the farm will be to provide programming that generates a pipeline for future farmers from communities that would not otherwise have opportunities to explore a career in agriculture. Reducing barriers across all ages is key to opening up the possibility and providing necessary support; urban farming is feasible, attainable and profitable.

To instill a lifelong love of good food and better understanding of where it comes from, the learning farm will work with local youth and family organizations to bring children to the farm for field trips, afterschool programs, and special events. Ideally some of those students will eventually become involved in youth employment opportunities at



Planning for a community learning farm is underway in the Cape Fear region. [COURTESY OF ROBERT COLLINS]

the farm, which will offer not only agricultural education, but widely transferable job skills. For those who express an interest in pursuing a career in farming, the more advanced business management training program for aspiring farmers will provide the next step toward incubating new urban agriculture businesses.

The UAIP funds will support the planning process for this mission. Feast Down East is working in partnership with a local farmer, Rob Collins and several other organizations including N.C. Cooperative Extension. The primary focus of the planning process will be to develop a strategic implementation plan, grounded in a feasibility study and assessment activities involving key stakeholder groups. Asset mapping will identify partnerships and available resources, a community needs assessment will determine opportunities for responsive programming and initial participant recruitment, and research will be conducted on local ordinances regarding innovative urban farming practices. A site development

plan will be created with input from a variety of technical support providers with expertise in construction and engineering, environmental conservation, urban agriculture, and public policy.

The outcome of this planning phase will be a written plan for the development of both the physical site and the programming that will create access and opportunities for the community, especially people who live in food deserts and face greater barriers to involvement in producing and consuming fresh, healthy foods.

I was so lucky to have a grandfather teach me to grow food; I'm pleased that N.C. Cooperative Extension can work with this partnership to teach others in our community these useful skills.

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