



American Community Gardening Association 2026 National Conference Report

June 4-7, 2026
Little Rock, Arkansas

by Scott Morris

Sunshine Community Gardens
Community Garden Initiative of Central Texas, Inc.

Sunshine has been a member of the American Community Gardening Association for decades. Our members regularly attend ACGA national annual conferences to represent our organization, establish ties to other organizations, and to share and learn the best practices and latest trends in community gardening. Jennifer Boley and I were privileged to represent Sunshine at the American Community Gardening Association's annual conference in Little Rock, Arkansas, in June. Jennifer also presented a Pollinator Gardening workshop at the conference on behalf of the nonprofit N.E.O., Nature and Eclectic Outdoors, Inc.

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Pathways to Food Security: Localizing Solutions

Arkansas was chosen as the venue to host this year's conference, and the significance of the location soon became apparent to the over 500 attendees. Arkansas is the country's most food-insecure state. In its [2024 Household Food Security Study](#), the USDA found up to 19.4% of households were food insecure in the state. Feeding America found that 592,860 adults and 167,940 children in Arkansas were food insecure in its [Map the Meal Gap 2023](#) study.

In follow-up research, I found that Texas ranks second in food insecurity.

Community gardening delivers a wide spectrum of services, site formats, governance models and benefiting populations. That diversity in purpose was represented among the conference participants. However, I did not encounter any member belonging to an organization similar to Sunshine's allotment-style, large-scale model. Sunshine's location is in an urbanized and increasingly affluent Central Austin. Our site has a large number of resources available, and our organization is financially stable. Sunshine's stability, longevity and scale are a rarity and were in stark contrast with many of the community gardening organizations present at the conference.

Sunshine's nonprofit parent, the Community Garden Initiative of Central Texas (CGICT) addresses food security directly under its Micah 6 Foodbank Garden Program. It also provides food access to low-income members on the site as an incidental benefit of renting a garden plot. The impact of Sunshine's Micah 6 production is carefully measured. However, the site does not measure the benefits to food-insecure members. It's fair to say that not many Sunshine Gardeners worry about where the next meal is coming from, but it's certain that some do.

In the past, that impact was measured by Austin Community Gardens and the Sustainable Food Center, both former fiscal sponsors of the Sunshine Gardens program. If you joined Sunshine in the past, you were asked for income and demographic information when renting your plot. The practice was largely to support grant funding of the operations and was later discontinued after Sunshine became independent.

But commonalities were also apparent. The people I met were passionate and excited about what they do. Despite the differences in community garden models, there are many takeaways that can be considered to apply to Sunshine.

The conference was energizing and inspiring, and I recommend that the organization find a way to send all interested board members to the next one in Los Angeles.

Key Points

Food Insecurity

- Arkansas is plagued with the highest food insecurity in the nation: 19% food insecure statewide, 34% in Pulaski County.
- Community gardening is a solution in hunger relief, and food production is a strong focus.
- Free farm stand.

Community Gardening

- Claire Hambrick with the Multinational Exchange for Sustainable Agriculture, “There is no good reason to do hard work alone.”
- [Dunbar Garden](#) started for educational purposes, serving school-age kids. Produce was donated, then they began selling to the public on a pay-what-you-can basis. Restaurants also buy.
- Community garden members have real decision-making power: “People will follow rules that they had a hand in creating.”
- Parks departments are stretched thin and struggling to maintain; they can be approached for community gardening.
- There is a Birmingham, Alabama, for-profit that looks for vacant lots to farm, approaches landowners, employs local kids to work in the gardens, then sells to restaurants.
- Heavy metals testing costs about \$200, and there are things that you can plant to remove metals.
- Allowing yoga on site connects with community

Volunteering

- Volunteers want to see themselves in the task; be descriptive and assign roles.
- Used shipping containers make the perfect, secure tool shed and are \$2k.
- Bobby Wilson: Corporations will pay gardens to host their volunteer team. “Okay, you want me to put 50 people to work. What kind of funding can you provide to sponsor that workday?”
- Bobby Wilson: 150 Corporate volunteers coordinated by 50 internal volunteers. Sunshine should train members to coordinate volunteers.
- Corporate- Get them to PAY to be able to work
- Add beer to the garden events
- Community service
- Points of Light platform is a volunteer matching process. Work with courts and schools for com service vols.
- Get a group picture of your volunteers 30 mins before end
- 2.5-3 hours is the sweet spot for hosting a volunteer event.

Composting

- Composting is an essential element of a closed-loop system, reduce, replenish, repeat.
- To engage the community, issue buckets to the public. When they bring them with kitchen scraps, send them home with a small bag of compost.
- Suggest Compost rule: chop up woody weeds, fit into 5-gal bucket
- Coffee chaff from roasters is a great source of nitrogen
- United States Composting Council for information on large-scale composting.

Funding

- Funding is available through hospital system partnerships, especially now on mental health.
- Bobby Wilson, former ag extension officer, ACGA President and founder of Metro Atlanta Urban Farm: “Print garden calendars, hand them out with the org’s story, and put it into the hands of potential donors!”
- There is USDA money awarded to community gardens for anything related to agriculture, e.g., hoop houses, composting programs.
- Community gardens need to obtain a “farm number” from the USDA. Take the deed or lease to the farm service office in your county.
- “Food is medicine” is messaging that is very attractive for grant funding.

Miscellaneous

- ACGA closing suggests we put our garden on their map
- Jennifer Boley has a large resource on milkweed species per state (let David Forrest know).
- ACGA newsletter articles are needed; reach out to Carter for submissions.
- “When you bring someone in with a lived experience, it is like paying a consultant.”
- Lobbying: Develop talking points for CGs to influence local and state policy development.

Conversations

Jim Hackler, coordinator of the Five Points Community Garden, Atlanta

I was seated and talking with a group when I brought up Sunshine’s year-long waitlist. Jim Hackler, coordinator of the Five Points Community Garden in Atlanta, overheard it and emphatically said, “No community garden should ever have a waiting list!” He pulled up a chair and described a garden model that had a significant communal aspect that allows him to absorb, involve and incorporate any number of people who want to get involved. Those members can always rent a plot as they become available, but some decide not to. Community volunteers have full member benefits but are not tethered to a plot. They’ve worked on a donated gazebo, a greenhouse, bed-building, the reclamation of a parking lot for planting, and a hydroponic center. He went on to characterize different age groups of volunteers and their demographics, drawing from fraternities and high schools for group volunteer projects. Finally, after hearing all about the site’s operations, I asked Jim what kind of land area he had. He responded with a smile, “One sixth of an acre.”

Five Points is 1/25th the size of Sunshine, and what's more, there is no on-site soil. It sits atop a gravel parking lot. He characterized it as a "hypermodel" with every square foot in use and all plots containerized in 3'x8' horse troughs. I attended his workshop the next day. [Five Points](#) is not a 501(c)3, but has a fiscal sponsor, a downtown management authority akin to Austin's Downtown Austin Alliance. One of the many amazing programs we learned about at the conference, Five Points, is a study in doing more with less and magnifying the impact in one's community with the resources available. If you are in Atlanta, please stop by and say hello from Sunshine.

Andrew Kirkpatrick, Urban Greening Coordinator, Farm Philly, City of Philadelphia

Andrew is a Parks and Rec employee, but they rely on a private foundation for funding, not the city general fund. Farm Philly serves 800 members across about 30 sites. Water access is a huge problem with hoses being strung across lots and streets to serve gardens. He recently developed a dispute resolution process, which is essential. They operate orchards, so I asked him to explain the food forest concept. Using permaculture concepts, their food forests are organized into small blocks that involve understory gardening, planting 2 to 3 trees, sheet mulching for weed control and assigning it to volunteers for maintenance. Crops are apples and sweet cherries.

Elizabeth Dry, Promise of Peace Gardens, Mineola

Elizabeth has been a successful founder of gardens for decades, beginning in Dallas, implementing multiple community gardens and school gardens. As a former teacher and principal, she is based in Mineola, Texas and has focused on youth interventions. The name [Promise for Peace](#) was coined by one of her students. She received 14 acres in Mineola to begin a Sunshine Acres Farm for Food Justice, but influencing food policy there has been difficult. In general, the key issue with school gardens is that kids are not in session during the summer and teachers return to an overgrown plot. The takeaway there is to start small and get volunteers over the summer to maintain. She expects to relocate to the Austin area in 2 years and had recently toured the Sunshine site with Elaine Dill.

Rose Rains and Megan Ruth Wilkins, Arkansas Interfaith Power & Light

A former AmeriCorps volunteer and city council member, Rose is involved in several environmental and community garden projects in the Little Rock Area. Rose and Megan are active members of the [Oak Forrest Community Garden](#), which operates a USDA grant-funded mobile farmer's market. It is a walk-through gooseneck trailer complete with produce aisles and a checkout register.

Maddie Price, Queer the Land, Seattle

Involved with [Queer the Land](#) in Seattle, Maddie is researching governance models for her 501(c)3. They work across a broad spectrum of urban agriculture. She is working on integrating collective food production among transitional housing clients.

Aaron Michael, Earth Love Gardens, Denver

[Earth Love Gardens](#) focuses on community garden development and fundraising for raised beds. Permaculture is more than gardening; it ends up as a social organization tool. He discussed the large Denver Urban Gardens, which has hundreds of sites. Recently, Linda Appel Lipsius, formerly of Denver Urban Gardens, founded an urban garden association with worldwide impact, and their conference is in May in New York.

Sarah Pitman, Nithya Neelakantan, University of Arkansas Medical School, and Prachi Chavan, Old Dominion University

Before the conference began, Sarah Pitman reached out to introduce herself and her work. She resides in the Austin area and was attending the conference to present a poster. She, Prachi and Nithya are all researchers who work in prevention science, an emergent interdisciplinary approach of epidemiology and public health. Their purpose in attending the conference was to meet the people and learn about the organizations applying their research. Sarah will tour the Sunshine site in the future and asked to refer others at UT working in the same field to our organization.

Workshops

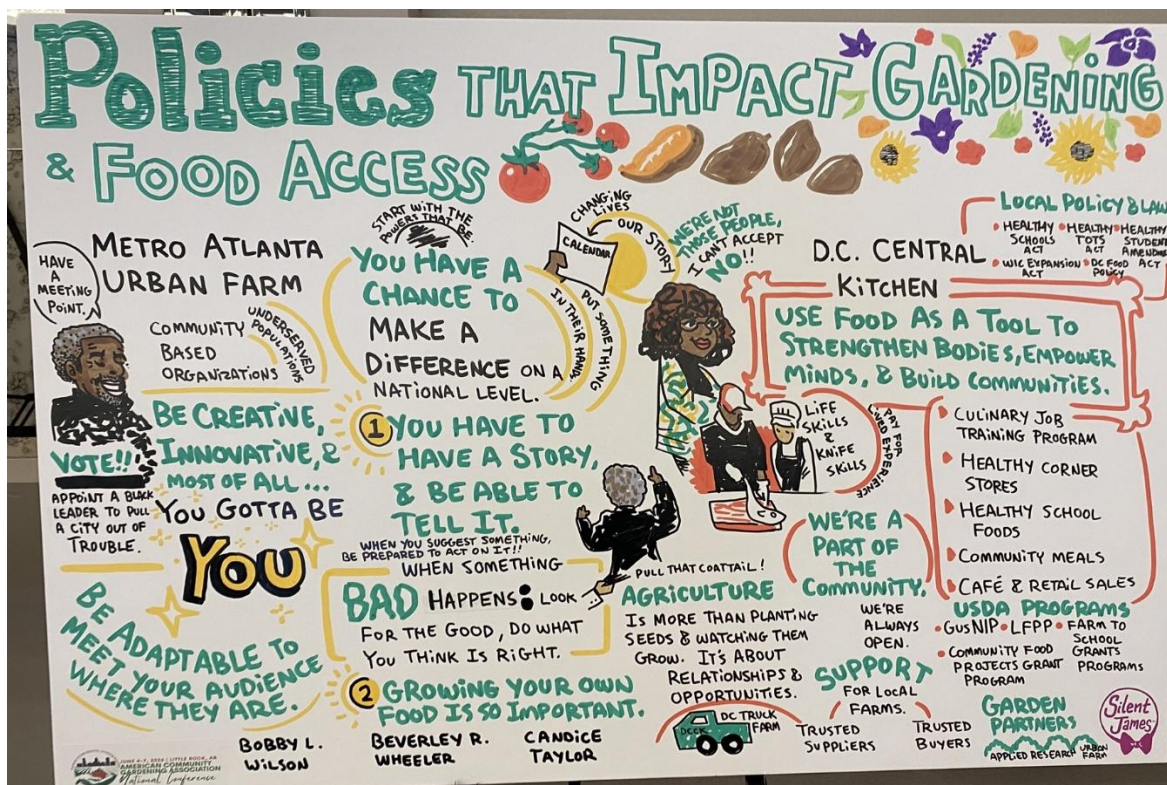
Food Access and Security Through Community Gardening

Sylvia Blain with the [Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance](#) held a talk that focused on food security issues in Arkansas. She also dove into her rich background as a leader and founder of several community gardens and hunger relief organizations. This was the longest workshop at 3 hours, and several of the key points were taken from it. Members need to have real decision-making power; she stressed that members will tend to follow rules that they had a hand in creating. Succession planning is important at every level, so that operations continue. Shipping containers have been cost-effective and secure toolsheds. She tries to write a handwritten thank you note to volunteers. In the development of community gardens, soil must be tested for environmental issues and analysis before planting.

Avoiding Member Burnout: 9 Steps to Grow a Volunteer-Powered Garden

Jim Hackler is with the Five Points community garden in Atlanta, and he had several tips on volunteer coordination. Do not overload a volunteer with so much that you create a martyr; let them focus on their plot or garden. Volunteers can come from service organizations, schools, neighbors, or corporate groups. Conduct workdays when the temperature is comfortable, and make them between 2.5-3 hours. Organize the tasks before the event, and have 1 volunteer who knows what they are doing for every 3 who do not. Use colored stakes so that volunteers know what to do unsupervised: blue for watering, red for plant removal, yellow for weeding and green for harvesting. Let volunteers own their projects. About a half hour before the end, call everyone together for a group photo. Show appreciation with personal thank you messages sent to the volunteers.

The conference hired a professional illustrator to capture each presentation in a storyboard format.



CULTIVATING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE THROUGH URBAN PERMACULTURE

NASA's Plant the Moon CHALLENGE



OUR MISSION

TO BE A CATALYST IN TRANSFORMING FOOD ACCESSIBILITY

EDUCATION

NETWORK

FARMER'S MARKET

SCHOOLS

MOBILE MARKET

RESILIENCE
PATHWAY TO FOOD SECURITY
REGENERATIVE FORESTS

PERMACULTURE

INDIGENOUS SCIENCE OF WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE LAND & CYCLES OF NATURE.

IT IS A HOLISTIC APPROACH OF APPLIED DESIGN FOR THE CREATION OF SUSTAINABLE HUMAN HABITAT.

EARTH CARE

FAIR SHARE

PEOPLE CARE

- PRINCIPLES
1. OBSERVE & INTERACT
 2. CATCH & STORE ENERGY
 3. OBTAIN A YIELD
 4. APPLY SELF-REGULATION & FEEDBACK
 5. RENEWABLE RESOURCES
 6. NO WASTE
 7. PATTERNS → DETAILS
 8. INTEGRATE
 9. SLOW SOLUTIONS
 10. DIVERSITY
 11. EDGES & VALUE
 12. RESPOND TO CHANGE



CAROL BURTON

URBAN HARVEST

DEEBEE KEITHLEY

MISTY STUKENBORG



GROWING BEYOND EARTH

6TH GRADE STUDENTS EXPLORING AGRICULTURE



ENTER STEAM COMPETITIONS!

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING & STEM

- GLOBAL SCIENCE PROJECT
- GROW PLANTS IN LUNAR REGOLITH SIMULANT
- CONDUCT CONTROLLED INVESTIGATION
- COLLECT & ANALYZE DATA
- DEVELOP SOLUTIONS FOR FUTURE SPACE EXPLORATION

REGOLITH: MOON'S SOIL NOT THE EASIEST THING TO GROW ON.

DATA COLLECTION

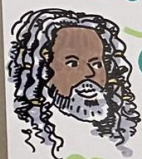
- GERMINATION RATE
- LEAF DEVELOPMENT
- PLANT HEIGHT

- ADD COFFEE GROUNDS/LIME/VINEGAR
- SEED START: NO
- SOIL PREP
- PH LEVELS
- OBSERVATION
- MONITORING PLANT HEALTH

WE'RE SO IMPRESSED WITH THEIR WORK!!



GROWING THE GARDEN MOVEMENT TO ADDRESS FOOD INSECURITY



GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD

IS A REVOLUTIONARY ACT.

FLANNER HOUSE

RENTERS → HOMEOWNERS

NEIGHBORHOOD WEALTH

FLANNER FARMS

FLANNER HOUSE B.C. (BEFORE COSBY)

PASSION FOR MY NEIGHBORHOOD & MY COMMUNITY.

HERE TO HELP (NOT SAVE)

THIS IS A REAL FOOD FIGHT!!

WE HAVE TO DO BETTER.

"ACCESS" IS NOT ENOUGH! OUR PEOPLE HELP EACH OTHER WHEN NO ONE ELSE WOULD.

- AT COST
- EQUITY
- ACCESS POINT

AGRICULTURE PROGRAM

FARMING

EMPLOYMENT

CLEO'S CREW

EDUCATION

DISTRIBUTION

GREEN HOUSES

FLANNER HOUSE B.C. (BEFORE COSBY)

TODAY ANCESTRAL ENERGY TO ARTIFACTS.

ABC MODEL

FLOWER FARM

FOOD CULTIVATION FROM THE SEED

HOLONOMY: FOR LEARNING TO BE DEEP, THE ENTIRE ORGANIZATION MUST WORK TOGETHER IN HARMONY FOR THE GOOD OF THE WHOLE.

ARKANSAS BLACK UNITY!

JUSTICE!

OUTSIDE! PRODUCING 40K+ POUNDS OF FOOD! INSIDE!

OVER 2K VOLUNTEERS! COMMUNITY CELEBRATE!

JUST TO FEEL IT'S WARMTH!!

RESTORE DIGNITY! INTENTIONALITY! BUILD A FOOD INFRASTRUCTURE! PICK A SIDE!

CULTIVATING THE LAND TOGETHER!



DR. BRANDON COSBY



THE STORY OF ARKANSAS



PEBBLES FAGAN • ARMANDO WHITE

• DENA PATTERSON • DR. MINNIE HATCHETT • CHRIS WYMAN • AMANDA MATHIS • KALVEN TRICE



HIP-HOP, History, & AGRICULTURE



THE FOOD HISTORY OF THE VICTORY GARDENS



TERRI CARTER TAWANNA GIBBS



