



**Foundation for Sustainable Innovation  
Report on City Growers 2022 - 2023 Activities  
July 10, 2023**



A student in City Growers' American Sign Language residency workshop showing off the turnip his class grew!

## **INTRODUCTION**

City Growers is grateful to the Foundation for Sustainable Innovation for a \$4,000 grant to support the general administration of our environmental and food education programs for youth in New York City. Your gift helped City Growers ensure that the children who need our programs the most — those attending Title 1 schools, those living in neighborhoods with few green spaces, and those who lack opportunities to meaningfully interact with the natural world due to socioeconomic or geographical constraints access constraints — can access them.

This report of our activities that took place over the past year demonstrates the impact of your support. With your help, we saw over 4,800 young people over the course of the year, making countless discoveries, planting seeds, tasting leaves. Together we introduced New York City young people to the wonders of nature, inspiring them to see that nature and a diverse and thriving ecosystem can exist even in the dense urban jungle and benefit us all.



A City Growers Educator showing a class how to make native plant seed bursts

## **PROGRAMS**

In 2022/23 (Fiscal Year 2023), City Growers continued to grow and diversify our programs. We offered new programs and more sessions, giving young people even more opportunities to engage in nature, both on and off the farm. Each of our programs is designed to complement each other in a ladder of learning, what we refer to as the continuum model, allowing young people to learn more and “dig deeper” as they grow older and grow their interest in environmental learning and literacy. Each program we offer accomplished goals set by program managers with goals that correspond to our mission, including:

### *On-the-Farm Tours and Workshops*

City Growers' signature program uses Brooklyn Grange's commercial rooftop farms to host single and multi-visit field trips, known as farm workshops, as a starting point for learning about urban ecosystems, food and farming. Between April 1 and November 10th, we host workshops nearly every weekday hosting schools from all five boroughs as well as national and international groups. Farm Workshops took place on two rooftop farms which focus on different “themes.” At the Sunset Park farm, students make use of a hydroponic greenhouse and focus on how urban ecosystems entwine and support each other. At the Brooklyn Navy Yard, students interact with chickens and bees, and observe how each these creatures support a farm. Between the two farms, City Growers hosted over 3,000 students from about 130 schools on the farm. Students planted thousands of seeds, and sampled food straight from the earth. According to



surveys, favorites included chocolate mint, lemon sorrel, and strawberries. Teachers surveyed said were impressed by how our programs kept kids moving, asked questions, and how our educators were adaptable to students with fears and sensory issues. Visiting student quotes include:

*"I've never seen a place like this before! I don't need to be afraid of bugs anymore- they're helpers!" - Second Grader*

*"I learned that Farms help with community; they can bring people together" - 4th Grader*

*"This is the best day of 1st grade!" -First Grade Student*



### *In-School Programs*

City Growers' Farm to Youth Workshops were developed during the pandemic when classes could not travel, to engage young with the urban environment at parks, gardens and school yards near their schools. By using these non-traditional urban green spaces, youth gain a hands-on view of how nature thrives in urban areas, and allows them to see how urban nature can support an ecosystem. City Growers offers three programs in schools: Farm to Youth, Bees in Schools and Garden Residencies. This past year we offered 60 single visit Farm to Youth workshops and visited 32 school yards, parks and community spaces, reaching nearly 900 students.

Garden Residencies and Bees in School are longer term engagements with schools, typically over 8 weeks during the Spring growing season. City Growers, with the help of classes, parents

and teachers, operates and maintains the school garden, and sees classes outdoors for hand-on lessons about nature. Garden Residencies are adapted for each unique garden space and the individuals who care for them. Typically, school gardens are under-utilized, and City Growers educators will activate and work with the schools to create a program for using and maintaining the space even after the engagement is over, allowing schools to run their own nature based programs. Bees in Schools is nearly identical to Garden Residencies, but our staff Beekeeper will install and maintain honeybee hives at the school and teach workshops that focus on pollination and how the hive operates.

Our partners in the past year included two schools: a Garden Residency at PS347, a dual language school that teaches in ASL and spoken English, where most of the students are either Deaf, Hard of Hearing or Children of Deaf Adults; and Bees in School at Brooklyn Arbor School, a diverse public school that has benefitted from community investment in order to create a vibrant garden space. In each of these schools we worked with the entire population of the school to offer lessons in composting, gardening, nutrition and pollination, employing crafts, games, songs and hands-on activities. Students (and teachers!) reported these classes being their favorite time of day.

#### *Teen Apprenticeship and Workforce Development Programs*



Students in Brooklyn Bee Corps conducting a live honeybee hive check.



Brooklyn Bee Corps trains high-school students to become beekeepers by engaging them in beekeeping and restoring native plant habitats that support pollinators and biodiversity. The program provides a \$15 an hour wage, so they do not have to decide between a retail job or a unique learning opportunity that benefits the environment and their futures. Students were recruited from Title 1 High Schools who applied through a formal application process. In 2022 we were able to double the size of our cohort from 4 to 8 apprentices, all BIPOC juniors who were deeply passionate about the environment but had no experience working directly with gardening or bees. All graduated as junior beekeepers and have remained active in City Growers programs; all of the students are now heading to college where they reported that they will pursue environmental studies.

Green Ambassadors is City Growers' newest program; offered for the first time this year from April to June of 2023. This paid apprenticeship program met afterschool three days a week from 3pm to 5:50 PM and enrolled 12 students, mostly from nearby Sunset Park High School, a highly diverse Title 1 school. The program was divided between weekly lectures, guest speakers, hands-on work on the farm that supported the learning components, and field trips to visit working practitioners in the field. Students reported great satisfaction with the program and have expressed the desire to return in the fall to harvest and prepare the soil for winter.

#### *Family Farm Days*

Family Farm Days (FFD) is a monthly series of free, environmental engagement activities that open young eyes to the wonders of nature. These events take place during the growing season from May to October at Brooklyn Grange rooftop farm at Sunset Park. These are a full programmed open houses with a market selling vegetables, tours, workshops, community partner programming, music and food. Visitors are welcome to spend the day exploring the farm, having lunch, and taking in the views, for free. Educators staff a station on the farm, and each week offer a new theme or set of activities, which have included scavenger hunts, seed saving, planting seeds, tasting honey, making "plant part salads," and plant related crafts, giving youth an interactive and experiential introduction to nature.

City Growers has hosted these events in Sunset Park since 2020 on a weekly basis, but in 2023 based on community feedback we changed to a monthly format with themes that coincide with community celebrations. This model represents a greater investment of money, outreach and marketing for each event to drive engagement.. So far we have seen this test work, with attendance ranging from 500 people to 1200 people, up from the usual 100 per week. Themes have included cultural celebrations, deeper looks at indigenous practices and a plant sale.

#### **Impact and Challenges in 2022/23**

Since 2020, City Growers' overall numbers have dropped, however we now engage in deeper and more substantive ways with youth, as schools engage us for more residencies, multi-part

programs and longer engagements. We have started to rely less on people coming to us, and have started reaching out directly to youth, and working to build long term relationships with schools, teachers and community groups working on issues parallel to what we do. Our team is small and stretched very thin, now allowing us to be consistent about necessary outreach and follow-up, which can hurt our relationships. To combat this challenge, we are hiring an Outreach Coordinator who will begin in fall 2023, who will be responsible for finding ways to best engage and maintain relationships with the communities we serve.

We measure the impact of our programs using surveys and participation. After each lesson, the educators fill out a survey, which asks them to reflect on the times in the lessons where students made connections or were most engaged. Through these reflections we were able to paint a picture of how subtle impact can be. For instance, we find that students tend to hang back until a specific hands-on interaction makes them instantly curious and excited. For some it is touching a worm, for others it is trying a weed that is very flavorful. These Aha Moments happen frequently, and point to the impact these experiences have on young people who rarely have opportunities to interact with nature.

Beyond what our surveys tell us, our educators have seen the impact these programs have on students and teachers in a year of stress and tension. Students naturally unwind upon coming outside, and the opportunity to move their bodies and use their senses brings smiles and laughter. We believe that this connection to the outdoors is the greatest impact we can offer.

### **Conclusion**

City Growers is grateful for the support of the Foundation for Sustainable Innovation through the 2022/23 year. This gift not only underwrote workshops for Title I schools and supported free programming, it allowed our educators to build curriculum. These lessons reached students all across New York City, giving them a valuable introduction to environmental education and sustainability. Thank you.

