

DC's Urban Agriculture Scene

Providing food, building skills and protecting the Anacostia!

By **Catherine Plume** - December 11, 2018



The greenhouse also serves as a classroom at DC's East Capitol Urban Farm. Photo: Geoff Livingston Photography

In DC, urban agriculture doesn't just result in locally grown food crops: it's also providing stormwater control and job training for local residents. DC's East Capitol Urban Farm was established in 2015 with a goal of helping to meet the fresh produce needs for residents in Ward 7 – an area that, with its lack of grocery stores and available fresh produce, has been considered a food desert. The three-acre site includes community gardening plots, demonstration plots, walking trails, community art and a play space for children.

Now the farm is also serving as a hands-on training site, preparing young people to become National Garden Industry Professional (NGIP)-certified landscapers through an onsite exercise of establishing a raingarden at the farm. Raingardens are an important tool for absorbing rainwater and runoff, which can sometimes include motor oil from cars and chemicals from lawns that are toxic to aquatic life.

The raingarden at the East Capitol Farm will minimize stormwater runoff into the Anacostia River. The construction of the raingarden, sponsored with funding from the National Fish and

Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), should be completed before the end of this year.

But how exactly did a three-acre farm come to be located in an ever-more populated DC?

East Capitol Urban Farm was created by a team of partners that include the University of the District of Columbia's College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability, and Environmental Sciences (UDC CAUSES), the DC Housing Authority (DCHA), the Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP), the DC Building Industry Association (DCBIA), the Department of Energy & Environment (DOEE), Groundwork Anacostia and the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities (DCCAH).

NFWF provided funding to UDC and the nonprofit Low Impact Development of Beltsville, Maryland, to create an urban stormwater control raingarden in the middle of the planted farming space.

This raingarden is unique. While raingarden vegetation typically consists of grasses and mulch, in this raingarden, food crops such as kale, lettuce and chard are a part of the design. Low Impact landscape architect Suzy Cho notes, "This is the first time I know of that food crops are being used to mitigate runoff into storm sewers in a city environment. I hope we can replicate some of our findings and best practices in other urban spaces."

Ward 7 residents such as Tyrone McNeal are gaining important job-training skills by working on the project. A UDC CAUSES student, McNeal notes, "I live in the public housing overlooking the farm, and I've been watching it develop and grow for all of my teenage years. I want to become a master landscaper and help with the planting and cultivation of crops for families in my own community. Maybe in a year or two I can have my own landscaping business."

McNeal is on his way to making his dream come true. Harris Trobman, a green infrastructure specialist at UDC, is helping McNeal and two other hard-working, adult students become certified NGIP landscapers through classes he is teaching at Maya Angelou High School, located across the street from the garden. There are scientific aspects to be considered when constructing a raingarden, and classroom instruction includes lessons on pervious rock and

hydro- and aquaponics. The lessons also address how storm sewers and combined sewer overflows work.

Trobman notes, "The raingarden we're constructing at the farm will have a big impact. The area we're currently excavating will keep over 770 pounds of sediment and over seven pounds of unwanted nitrogen from flowing into the Anacostia River annually. The site used to be a vacant lot, so the excavation takes time. The soil we dig out will be reused to create berms along the fence line."

Kerry Harrington, with the nonprofit Seeds for Success, is partnering with Trobman on the project. "We try to minimize the use of chemicals and fertilizers as we grow the plants for the raingarden, so we seed them in a greenhouse – which becomes another classroom for our students. The greenhouse allows students to develop gardening skills, which can translate to a job in landscape construction work – and they can take the crops home and share them with their families!"

So, the next time you're looking for an urban adventure, consider a trip to the East Capitol Urban Farm. It's located across the street from the Capitol Heights Metro station. Check out that new raingarden and say "hi" to Tyrone and his buddies if you see them!

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