

How Salem, MA Launched a “Food Farm” to Provide Thousands of Pounds of Organically Grown Food to Local Families



In 2019, the Mack Park Food Farm, a municipal farm and food forest, replaced an unused baseball field at a city park in Salem, Massachusetts. Today, it encompasses about 10,000 square feet, along with a recently constructed pond that captures water for irrigation and overflows to a nearby urban wetland.

The Food Farm grew from the efforts of local residents and agriculturalists Matt Buchanan, Pat Schultz, and Andy Varela. It was built in 2020 with about \$40,000 in grants, including a \$5,000 grant from the [Healthy Babies Initiative](#) sponsored by [Bright Cities](#) and the [Mayors Innovation Project](#).

Salem, a city 25 miles north of Boston, has a population of approximately 43,000. Salem has a higher percentage of food insecurity and unemployment than the state average – numbers that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.

Over half of community responses to the Salem Community Food Assessment’s Resident Food Survey reported that fruits and vegetables are difficult to find near their homes. Salem also had one of the lowest estimated fruit and vegetable intakes of all Massachusetts communities per the [2015 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey](#).



BRIGHT CITY: SALEM, MA

CONCERN:

- Lack of accessible, organic produce

PROJECT OUTPUT:

- 10,000 ft² municipal farm and food forest
- 7,000 lbs of organic veggies, from the farm, distributed in 2021
- Participation from > 100 volunteers who helped on the farm and learned how to grow food at home
- A new Farm to School Team to build school gardening into the district curriculum

KIDS IMPACTED:

- ~300 kids received food - and some volunteered too!



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Infants, toddlers, and women get more than 50% of their total daily exposure to organophosphate pesticides — one of the neurotoxins with the strongest link to harming babies' brain development — from pesticide residues on fruits and vegetables.¹

Salem's highly successful initiative to build a local, organically-grown food farm accessible for all residents is a pragmatic model for other cities' sustainable and healthy food initiatives.

Today, the farm has hundreds of pounds of organic lettuce, celery, carrots, peppers, eggplant, kale, cucumbers, tomatoes and more. Salem distributes the food to families most in need in fun and unique ways.

A free mobile farmers' market pilot program was established to distribute the produce from the Mack Park Food Farm to three neighborhoods where many families have young children but low access to organically-grown fresh foods.

“Watching the space transform from an empty field to a lush, inviting space capable of providing essential nourishment to our neighbors has been an incredible experience. It has also been a great opportunity for connection with others in the community during a difficult time for all of us,” said Cat Connelly, a Salem resident and Mack Park Food Farm volunteer.

Nearly 100 Salem residents volunteered their time, including many parents with children who were excited to learn about urban farming. **Getting young people involved in healthy eating habits and the effects of toxic chemicals is just one of the positive outcomes from this fantastic project.**



“The funding we received from HBBF and MIP allowed the city of Salem to distribute over 7,000 pounds of healthy, locally grown produce to Salem families in summer 2021. In addition to improving access to healthy food, it was also a tremendous community building experience.”

Mayor Kim Driscoll | Salem, Massachusetts



Three Keys to Kick-Off Your City's High-Yield, Organic Produce Farm

- 1 Engage support from city leaders.** Strong support from Mayor Driscoll was essential to the success of the Mack Park Food Farm. She recommended using municipal land to grow food, advocated for the project to the Parks and Recreation Commission and others, helped to secure internal and external funding, and volunteered on the farm. Strong leadership greatly increases the probability of success.
- 2 Identify members of the community who are experienced agriculturists to take the lead.** Volunteers were wonderful and crucial to developing the Mack Park Food Farm, but without experienced farmers/gardeners leading the project, it would not have been as successful.
- 3 Identify funding sources.** Though this project wasn't hugely expensive, startup and maintenance costs exist. Secure funding before getting your community farm/garden underway.

The Mack Park Food Farm was launched using Community Preservation Act funding to cover the biggest startup expenses (e.g., fencing, supplies, plants, etc.); seek other appropriate funding sources in your city.

How is the Mark Park Food Farm Organized?

The Mack Park Food Farm (MPFF), launched in 2020, is a municipal project spearheaded by the City of Salem's Health Department. Located in an underused area of a city park, the MPFF is a 120'x70' vegetable farm filled with organic, high-yielding produce such as lettuces, nightshades, squash and cucumbers. Primarily built and maintained by contracted local farmers and staff along with more than 100 community volunteers, the food farm is a true community collaboration. The MPFF hosts children's tours, demonstration projects, and a free farmers market for Salem residents.

A unique and value-added part of the MPFF is the associated mobile farmers market. This mobile market requires two part-time (8 hours/week) mobile market assistants who operate three mobile markets and procure any additional produce needed for the markets.

The mobile program also requires funding for gas mileage; market supplies including sanitation supplies, tables, produce crates, digital scale, compostable produce bags, promotional/outreach materials; and fees for the purchase of supplemental produce from the Boston Area Gleaners. The Boston Area Gleaners is a nonprofit organization that sells discounted produce "gleaned" from local farms (food that would otherwise go to waste) to food assistance programs.

One of the biggest challenges was the logistics of procuring storage and refrigeration for the produce grown in the MPFF. During the first year, it was stored off-site and picked up each week by volunteers creating a very labor-intensive process. The next step is to raise funds to support storage and refrigeration on-site.



"Mack Park Farm brought people from so many different backgrounds together during a time of crisis. The level of engagement from both the community and the city brought me the most joy."

Kerry Murphy,
Health & Wellness
Coordinator for Salem's
Board of Health



Three Inspiring (and Replicable) Outcomes of the Mack Park Food Farm

Using municipal land to grow food for the community was a change in practice for the City of Salem – **and one that exceeded all expectations.**

Three top outcomes from the Mark Park Food Farm include:

- Increased interest in urban agriculture resulting in an urban agriculture ordinance under consideration by Salem's City Council (Fall 2021).
- A new Farm to School Team, appointed by the Superintendent of Salem Public Schools after visiting the farm, to build school gardening into the district curriculum.
- Participation from over 100 volunteers who helped on the farm and learned how to grow food at home.





What Next?

The food forest areas were planted in early 2021 with fruit and nut trees, berry bushes and perennial herbs. The trees will take a few years to establish, but the berries and herbs are available for residents to pick.

The next phase of the project will include the construction of a solar-powered shed with a water catchment system and walk-in cooler, as well as an ADA-accessible pathway that will lead from the parking lot to an area of the food forest that will have accessible picnic tables, benches, and educational signage.



The Bright Cities program provides up to \$35,000 in grant funding for US cities and community based partner organizations to reduce exposures — in pregnant women and children under 2 years — to the nine neurotoxins with the strongest associations to developmental delay.² These neurotoxins are arsenic, flame retardants, lead, mercury, combustion byproducts called PAHs, banned industrial chemicals PCBs, organophosphate pesticides, a rocket fuel component and fertilizer contaminant called perchlorate, and plastic additives called phthalates.

Curious about funding and technical support to reduce neurotoxic exposures in your city? Contact **Kyra Naumoff Shields**, Bright Cities Program Director, at knaumoff@hbbf.org



The Mayors Innovation Project is a national learning network for mayors committed to shared prosperity, environmental sustainability, and efficient democratic government. Around the country, mayors are taking the lead on pressing issues— climate change, racial equity, economic revitalization, housing, and more. The Mayors Innovation Project supports mayors by providing cutting-edge thinking and concrete examples that mayors can implement.

Looking for peer networking and best practices for city leaders focused on equity, sustainability, and democracy? Contact **Katya Spear**, Mayors Innovation Project Managing Director, knspear@mayorsinnovation.org.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Curl et al. *Estimating pesticide exposure from dietary intake and organic food choices: the Multi-Ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis (MESA)*. *Environ Health Perspect*. 2015 May;123(5):475-83.
- 2 Bennett D, Bellinger DC, Birnbaum LS, et al. *Project TENDR: Targeting Environmental Neuro-Developmental Risks The TENDR Consensus Statement*. *Environ Health Perspect*. 2016; 124(7):A118-A122.