



Meet farmer TC, Willow Run Acres Executive Director

By Willow Run Acres volunteer Eric Geiser with excerpts from the [WCCD's Article](#) by Summer Roberts

Willow Run Acres is a non-profit 501(c)3 run by Takunia "TC" Collins, Washtenaw County's oldest black farmer.

Since 2018, Willow Run Acres has expanded and contracted, based on funding and TC's capacity as a staff of one, to manage farms and gardens across southeast Michigan and northern Ohio. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Willow Run Acres had engaged over 2,500 youth in classes, workshops, and volunteerism. It focuses on the growing and transfer of produce and the transfer of knowledge - making fresh food accessible in food deserts as well as sharing the skills and understanding of how to grow food. Although Willow Run Acres encourages community members to donate time managing the crops in exchange for produce, food is often given away for free.

TC's farming knowledge was handed down from past generations of his family – his great-grandparents, who had been forced to farm through enslavement, and his sharecropper grandparents. While living in the Danbury Park apartment complex, he earned the nickname "Ghetto Gardener" for transforming the turf grass outside his home into a fruit and vegetable garden. Neighborhood kids were the first to approach, curious about the transformation occurring outside their windows. They were the impetus behind more neighbors getting involved, until 18 families had gardens lining the block. TC recognized the dual benefit of engaging kids – giving them a creative and immersive outlet to benefit themselves and their community and the potential to seed change at home and with the adults in their lives.

With the help of dedicated volunteers, TC has turned his focus to two properties: a community garden at Apple Ridge Park in Ypsilanti Township and the development of a small farm operation, farm market and agricultural learning center (STEAM) called Clay Hill Community Farm and Garden on MacArthur Blvd in Superior Township.

In 2021, the Washtenaw County Conservation District partnered with Willow Run Acres at Apple Ridge Park, holding a "Community Tree Planting and Celebration" to kick-off the commencement of the space with 25 fruit and nut trees. Willow Run Acres also received a water pump through the WCCD's Farmer-Cost Share Program until a well could be drilled to provide water for crops. Since that time, raised beds, rentable plots, a sensory garden, and an Underground Railroad Garden (featuring plants that were prized and cultivated by indentured peoples) have been installed.

At Clay Hill Community Farm and Garden, TC is laying the groundwork with partners, including Township officials and County staff, to erect a thriving farm and farmstand, as well as perform invasive species removal and restoration along the banks of the Bazley-Foster drain that divides the site and runs into Fowler Creek. The Clay Hill location is especially meaningful since directly south across McArthur Blvd is Danbury Apartments, the former home of the "Ghetto Gardener" and where his new direction in life took root.

WRA is grateful for the great support received from many organizations including Ann Arbor Farm & Garden. This support allows TC to serve students and communities in Washtenaw County focusing on the Apple Ridge Community Garden and establishing the Clay Hill Community Farm and Garden and Learning Center in Eastern Washtenaw.

Interested in learning more about what Farmer TC and his volunteers are doing? You can follow Willow Run Acres on [facebook](#) or browse the website at willowrunacres.com.