



# THE GARDEN DISTRICT



Local  
Produce  
from  
FARMERS  
Marked by  
10/10

# 2025 Annual Impact Report

Celebrating 5 Years of Growth



# A Letter from Our Founder & President

In 2025, the Garden District experienced significant growth, expanding our footprint, deepening partnerships, and nearly tripling our food production compared to the previous year. With new growing capacity, including hydroponics, and new spaces like Garden District Community Farm and Southside Fruit Park, we increased both the amount of food we produced and the ways our community accessed it.

Across Columbus, community gardens and food access efforts often struggle to survive in the long term. Many rely on short-term funding, informal leadership, and volunteer labor without the infrastructure needed to sustain them year after year. Garden District exists to address that gap by pairing food production with leadership development, shared systems, and earned revenue that help community agriculture last.

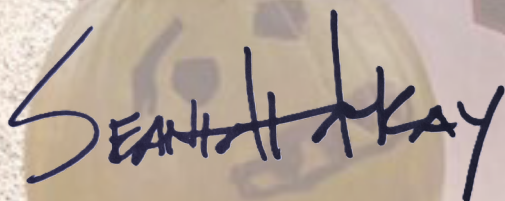
This year marked significant progress in how we build leadership and long-term stability. We strengthened two core pathways: Become a Farmer, which reduces barriers to urban agriculture through land access and technical support, and Garden Cultivators, which develops leaders who manage sites, make decisions, and learn through real responsibility. Leadership grows through practice, including moments of challenge and failure, supported by a community that allows people to learn and improve.

This work matters, especially during times of uncertainty when shifts in public systems and funding can threaten food access. Even so, our network kept growing. Neighbors showed up. Volunteers stayed committed. Our gardens produced. Community-based agriculture became not just a project, but a source of stability, dignity, and connection.

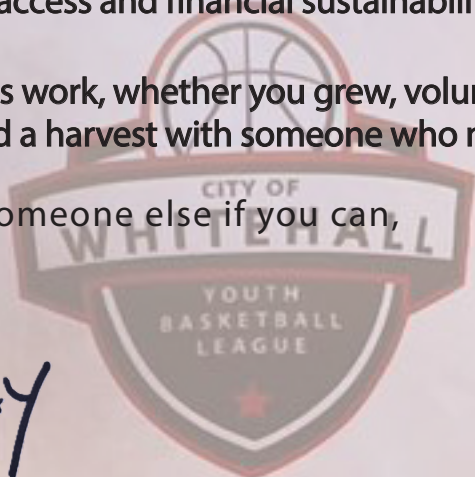
As we look to 2026, our focus includes renovating Southside Fruit Park and launching our Fresh Share CSA to strengthen food access and financial sustainability further.

Thank you for being part of this work, whether you grew, volunteered, donated, purchased local food, partnered, or shared a harvest with someone who needed it.

Take care of yourself and someone else if you can,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "SEAN MCKAY". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "S" and a prominent "M".

SEAN M MCKAY







# THE GARDEN DISTRICT

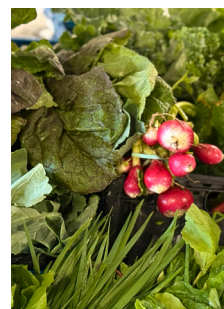
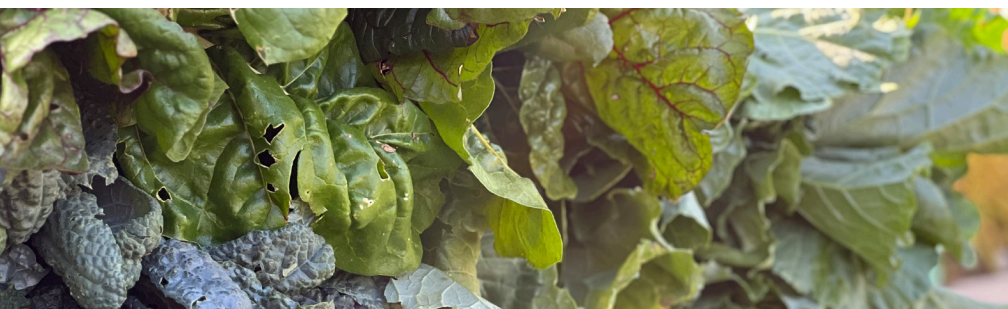
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## Our Mission:

To cultivate food access through sustainable urban agriculture, leadership development, and community-based solutions.

## Our Core Values:

1. Take Care of Yourself — and Someone Else If You Can
2. Kindness Comes First
3. Leadership Is Learned Through Practice





# Celebrating Garden Cultivator Volunteers

Garden Cultivators are our site leaders who keep gardens thriving through consistent care, coordination, and community building. Six Garden Cultivators helped lead **305 volunteers** who contributed **3,840 hours** across our network. Their leadership turns shared green spaces into places of belonging, learning, and real food access.



## SUSAN COUDEN

### South Bexley Giving Gardens & Wexner Heritage Rooftop Garden

Susan leads with radical kindness, empathy, and deep care for the natural world. She brings strong stewardship through community green projects like Bexley Love Your Alley, and she carries that same spirit into every garden space she touches. With her background as a retired art teacher, Susan adds creativity that makes the garden feel welcoming, beautiful, and full of joy. She is constantly learning and always sharing, inviting others into the work and the harvest. Because of her, growing food becomes a form of community care.



## CYNTHIA MARSHALL

### South Bexley Giving Gardens & Wexner Heritage Rooftop Garden

Cynthia shows up with dedication and consistency, bringing steady care to the day-to-day work that keeps a garden thriving. She is always willing to help others, and she is a strong advocate for community members, ensuring people feel welcome and supported in the space. Cynthia also brings a broad sense of worldliness shaped by a lifetime of travel, and retired as a flight attendant supervisor. That perspective shows up in her calm leadership, her openness to learning, and her ability to connect with people across ages and backgrounds. Because of Cynthia, the garden feels dependable, inclusive, and deeply cared for.



## MARTI MERCURI

### Berwick Alternative Community Garden

Marti leads with kindness, patience, and a deep sense of belonging that makes the garden feel like a safe place for students and neighbors alike. She coordinated closely with teachers, supported garden-based learning for multiple classes, and helped bring the school's hydroponic system to life through consistent, hands-on lessons. Marti made growing feel fun and meaningful, from harvesting basil and cooking with cafeteria staff to creative activities like pumpkin observations and decomposition learning in the garden. She also helped power the free farmstands, making sure families had access to fresh produce with dignity and care. Because of Marti, students experienced the garden as a place to learn, grow, and feel connected.



## BENJAMIN ADAMS

### LIFE Community Farm

Ben is an avid volunteer whose kindness is unmistakable. He can talk to anyone and make them feel welcome. A recent OSU Master Gardener Volunteer, he shows up across multiple organizations and brings that same steady energy to LIFE Community Farm and our farmers market work. He is always willing to jump in at the last minute, support the booth, and strengthen connections with the church congregation and community. This year, Ben welcomed his first baby while still showing up consistently and caring for the garden. Because of Ben, the work feels lighter, more connected, and more joyful.



## DAVID BLANKENSHIP

### Garden District Community Farm

David helped transform our largest greenspace into a more connected, productive place—installing beehives, supporting the Become a Farmer program, managing intense weed pressure, and welcoming neighbors into the work. He created ways for nearby older adults to access produce through U-pick opportunities and daily neighbor-to-neighbor care.



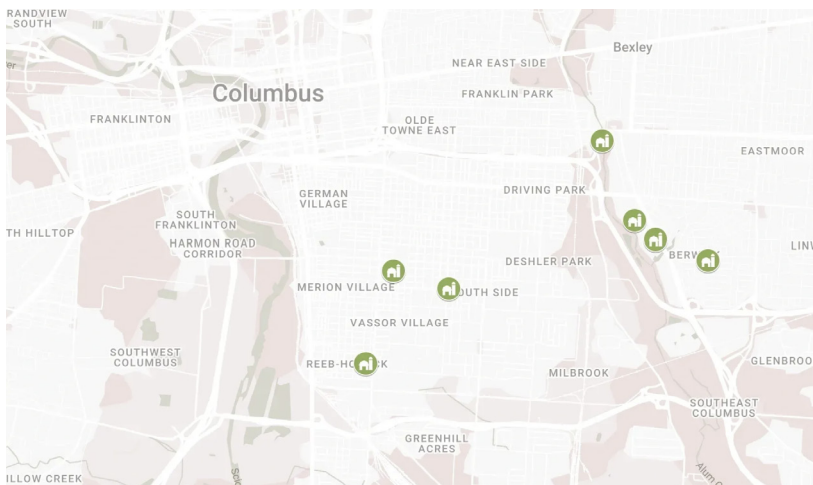


# THE GARDEN DISTRICT

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We are proud to be part of Columbus' growing local food story and to contribute to a healthier, more resilient food system. Access to nutritious, locally grown food is not just a preference; it is a foundation for community well-being and stability. When neighborhoods can grow and share fresh food close to home, we strengthen food security today while building resilience for future generations.

## Local produce from farms tended with love.



Network of Community Green Spaces



Pop-up Markets



Honey Production



Community Gardens





Community Farms

"In 2025, Columbus City Schools (CCS) deepened its partnership with the Garden District to expand hands-on, garden-based learning and increase access to fresh, locally grown food for students and families. At South High School, students extended their learning at a nearby Garden District community garden. At Berwick K-8, students learned seed planting, system maintenance, and harvesting a hydroponic system, complemented by the renovation of the Berwick Community Garden, which now serves as an outdoor classroom and hosts a free farmers market for local families. Throughout the year, The Garden District supported schoolwide agriculture events, delivered garden club lessons across multiple schools, led Farm to School professional development, and assisted with new staff training, strengthening food education, sustainability, and community engagement across the district."

—Katie Young

CCS Farm to School Coordinator



Hydroponic Production



Partner Garden Program



Community Events



Microgreen Production



Become a Farmer





# THE GARDEN DISTRICT

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## 2025 AT A GLANCE



970+ lbs  
total distributed at our FREE farmstands



11,310 lbs  
total donated



806+ lbs  
grown by our program participants



178 lbs  
total donated by  
the community

14,802+ lbs  
PRODUCED & VALUED  
AT  
\$67,356.61

1,716 lbs  
total sold



13 Pop-Ups  
Free farmstands

35 Farmers Market Events  
68% produce purchased with WIC/SNAP/  
Senior Farmers Market Coupons/Produce Perks



137 Deliveries  
Pantry visits





# Community-Based Agriculture

Food insecurity is complex, and one challenge is consistent across neighborhoods: community gardens often collapse when leadership changes or funding ends. Garden District's model addresses this gap by building leadership pathways, shared infrastructure, and revenue-generating farms that support community gardens long term.



## Community Farms: Cultivate Local Abundance

**G**arden District is building and operating community farms as a practical way to strengthen food access and neighborhood resilience across Columbus. Our farms bring people together from diverse backgrounds, skills, and lived experiences, creating spaces where growing food also grows belonging, shared purpose, and connection to the land. The community benefits through fresh produce, education opportunities, neighborhood improvement, and pathways to job skills and self-sufficiency. In contrast, the farms benefit from the energy, knowledge, and care of the people who show up.

We treat food insecurity as a complex challenge that cannot be solved with a single approach, but we believe community farms are a meaningful step toward stability. By growing food close to home and moving it quickly into the community through pantries, free farmstands, and local markets, we increase access to nutrient-dense produce and reduce barriers for families. Our model is built on three pillars that make community farms effective: deep community involvement, a plan for financial sustainability through earned revenue and partnership support, and productive growing methods that increase yield.

Across our community farm network, this looks like food grown, harvested, and shared in ways that meet real needs. At LSS, produce moves from the field directly onto pantry shelves for customers to enjoy that day. At LIFE, an abandoned space has been restored into full production, pairing monthly free farmstands with farmers market sales and surplus donations to service partners. At Garden District Community Farm, we combine high-yield production with leadership development through the Become a Farmer program, community garden space, and a growing hub that can expand into value-added output in the future.



Our Free Farmstand at Berwick Alternative K-8 School





Early-morning volunteers harvesting carrots



Berwick Alternative third-grade scholars in the garden

**8 Production Sites**  
within the city of Columbus

**305 Total Volunteers**  
Approx. 3,840 hours

**\$133,593.60\***  
valued volunteer hours support

**12,855 people**  
directly impacted

These gardens and farms serve as welcoming third spaces that bring neighbors together across socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds through daily practices of growing, sharing, and giving back. The **12,855 individuals** directly impacted include youth in garden-based education programs, community members receiving fresh produce through farm stands and pantry partnerships, volunteers and community gardeners contributing labor and leadership, and residents participating in workshops, markets, and community events.

\* The value of volunteer hours is calculated using the Independent Sector's nationally recognized annual value of a volunteer hour at \$34.79.



# Food Access

## 2025 Highlights

- Free farmstands at Berwick Alternative K-8 School and LIFE Vineyard Church together served students, families, staff, neighbors, the congregation, and the broader community, distributing a combined **970 lbs** of produce and averaging 26 participating families.
- **11,310 lbs** donated to service partner agencies and pantries, supporting hundreds of households across the city through trusted service agency partners.
- **137 visits** delivering produce to partner agencies, with produce valued at **\$51,522.33**.
- Farmers market sales totaled **\$7,357.28**, with **68%** of purchases made using SNAP, WIC, or Produce Perks, showing that local food can stay accessible while also supporting our community in need.

### Community Partner Moment: Rosemary's Cupboard Food Pantry

Food pantries are carrying more pressure than ever as food prices rise and the need for assistance continues to grow. Everyone deserves access to fresh, locally grown food because it is often more nutrient-dense, better-tasting, and harvested closer to peak ripeness than food moving through large-scale distribution. Our new partnership this year with Rosemary's Cupboard reflects what community-based agriculture can do: show up consistently, strengthen the local safety net, and remind partners that they are not doing this work alone...

Cynthia harvesting greens from the Lutheran Social Service Community Farm





# Educational Programming

Through the Columbus City Schools Farm to School Program, we partnered with Berwick Alternative K-8 and South High School to deliver weekly hands-on agriculture education. Marti's programming brought weekly learning in the garden and hydroponic systems, supported free farmstands for families, and helped celebrate the garden's 10th anniversary. At South High School, the middle school and high school garden clubs were given space at our Southside community farm so students could grow food and build ownership through real practice.



Berwick scholars planting the hydroponic system



**1,480** students impacted



## New Hydroponic Systems

In partnership with Mid-Ohio Food Collective and the Farm on the Hilltop, we added a Flex Acre farm system in the multipurpose building for their field trip experience and give more students access to hands-on learning. We would like to thank Mid-Ohio Food Collective, Fork Farms, The Beck Foundation, Columbus City Schools, and the Steitz Family for their generous investment in this partnership.



Youth from 8 Midwest states harvested 32 lbs of lettuce from the new Flex Acre system.





# THE GARDEN DISTRICT

ESTABLISHED 2020

## Leadership Development

Leadership is grown through showing up, dedication, practice, and support. The Garden District builds leaders by giving people real responsibility in community spaces, then surrounding them with mentorship and a network that learns together. Leadership at Garden District includes space to try, make mistakes, learn, and improve while staying accountable to the work and to one another.

## 2025 Highlights

- Supported 6 Garden Cultivators leading key garden sites and coordinating volunteer workdays
- Strengthened our leadership pipeline through training, mentorship, and program improvements
- Completed entrepreneurial capacity building that supports long-term sustainability MORTAR Academy through ECDI Women's Business Center, 2nd place pitch competition, \$2,500 award  
SEA Change Cohort, Crowd Favorite, \$3,000+ award
- Sean McKay accepted the 2025 Everyday Kindness Heroes Award, including a \$3,000 prize supporting Garden District's work

These experiences strengthened our social enterprise strategy so that community gardens can be supported by earned revenue from urban farms.



## 2025 SEA CHANGE COHORT GRADUATION



# Kindness In The Community



Sean McKay was honored to be named a Columbus Monthly Everyday Kindness Heroes Champion, a recognition that reflects the heart of the Garden District's work. He believes kindness is lived through everyday actions, showing up, listening, and growing alongside neighbors. This award is a reminder that community care matters and that local food and local connection can be powerful tools for resilience.

# columbus<sup>MONTHLY</sup>

# EVERYDAY KINDNESS



# HEROES





# Eastside

## 1. Potager Fresh Market Garden

Our headquarters site and market garden, supplying produce for farmers markets and pantry contracts.

## 2. Berwick Alternative Community Garden

An outdoor classroom and neighborhood gathering space that supports weekly youth learning and free produce access for families.

## 3. Wexner Heritage Rooftop Garden

A rooftop growing space that expands production and visibility for urban agriculture while creating a unique place for stewardship and learning.

## 4. South Bexley Community Giving Gardens

A community centered giving garden led by dedicated site stewards that grows food while creating a welcoming third space for neighbors.

## 5. LIFE Community Farm

A restored neighborhood growing site that pairs monthly free farmstands with farmers market sales and surplus donations to service partners.

# A network of community gardens and farms



# Southside

## 6. LSS Community Farm

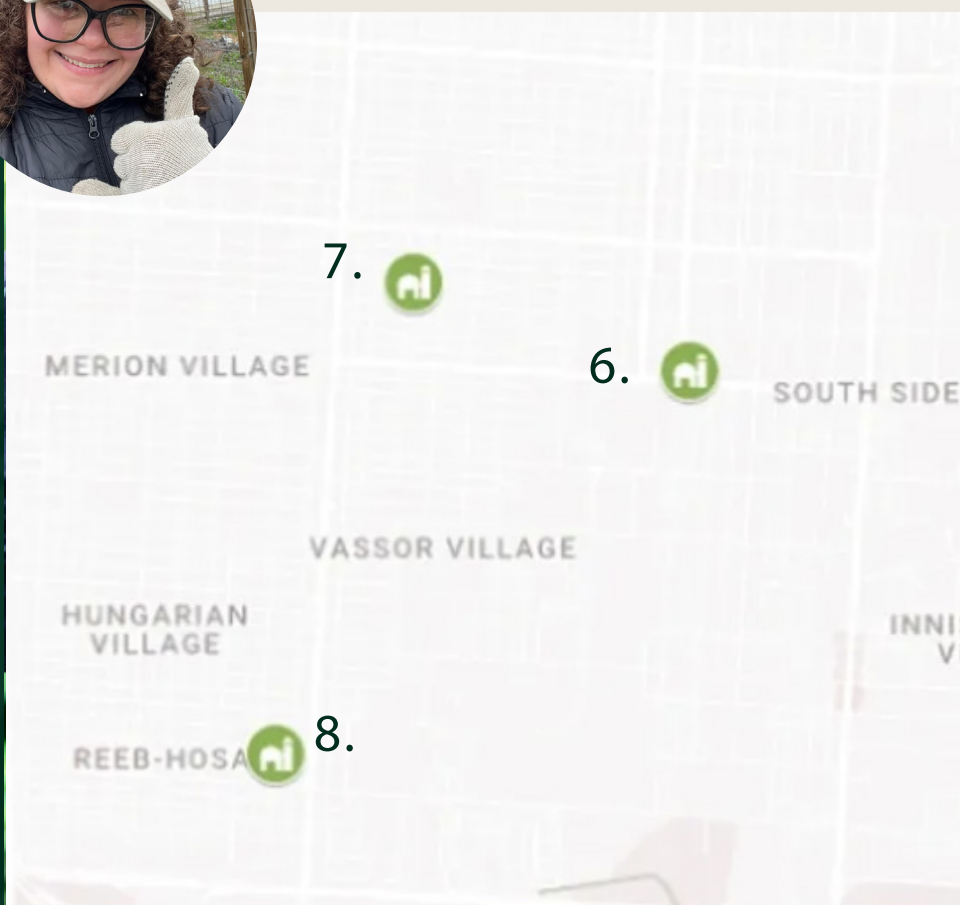
A direct to pantry growing and distribution model where produce moves quickly from the soil to shelves for customers to take home the same day.

## 7. Garden District Community Farm

A high yield production and leadership hub that combines market growing with community garden space and pathways like Become a Farmer.

## 8. Southside Fruit Park

An open neighborhood green space with established fruit production, serving as a platform for future stewardship, education, and shared harvest.

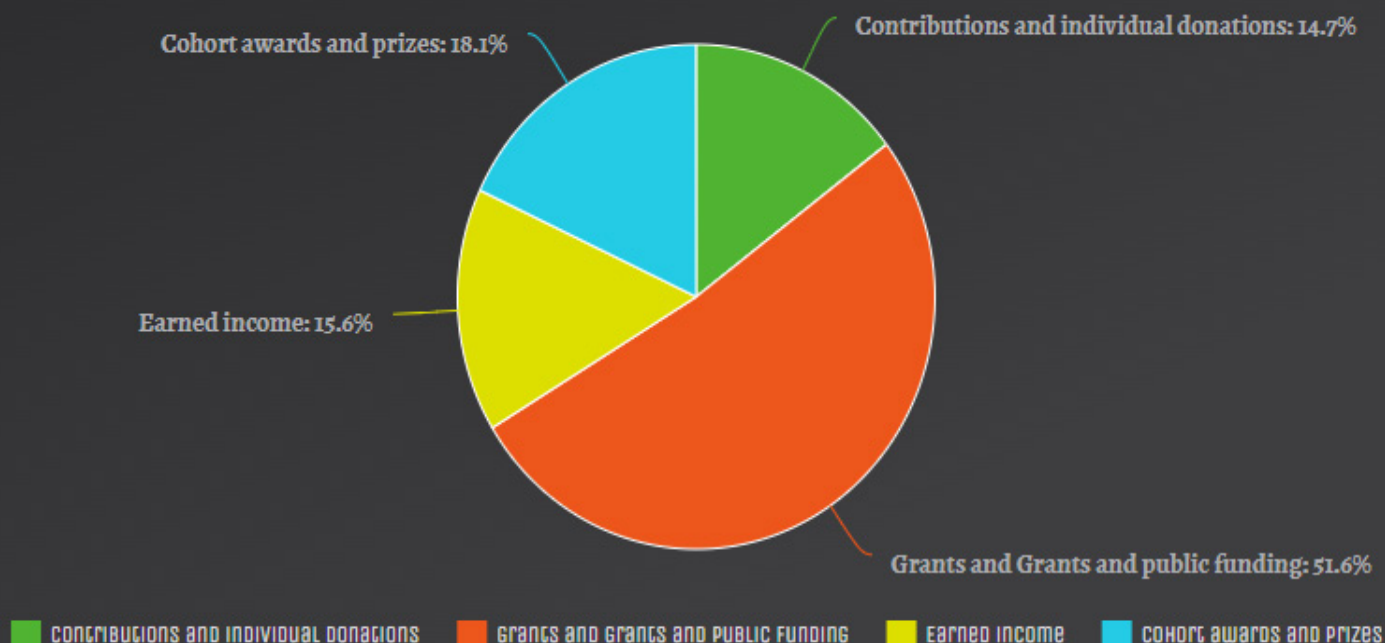




# Financial Overview

The Garden District Corporation is a 100% volunteer-led organization. Every dollar raised supports our mission through programming expenses, infrastructure improvements, water access, and the basic administrative tools that keep the work running, including software and website costs. We do not pay salaries, which means community support goes directly toward growing food, maintaining sites, expanding access, and strengthening leadership across our network. **The Problem We Address:** Community gardens are essential to food access, but many fail without stable leadership, revenue, and infrastructure. Garden District was built to change that.

## 2025 REVENUE SUMMARY



**Individual Donors:**  
**\$6,913.87**

**Grants:**  
**\$24,314.05**

**Awards & Prizes:**  
**\$8,500**

**Total Funds Raised: \$47,085.20**

**Total Expenses: \$44,425.47**

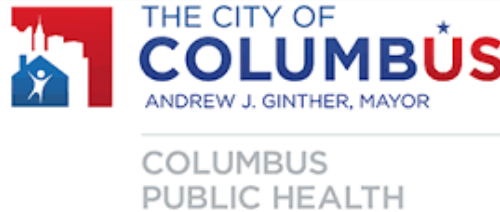
**Net Income for 2026: \$2,659.73**

**Earned Income:**  
**\$7,357.28**



# Private, Public, and Foundational Support

We are grateful to our partners who invested in our work through donations, grants, cohort awards, and in-kind contributions. Your support helped turn neglected spaces into highly productive farms and gardens, expand food access across Columbus, and strengthen youth education and community leadership. Thank you for believing in community care and helping our neighbors grow and share fresh, locally grown food close to home.





# Honoring Our Partnerships

The strength of a community lies in the connections we nurture and the shared purpose that we cultivate. We are deeply grateful for the partners who have walked alongside us — contributing time, resources, and care to this place that we all cherish. These relationships are the threads that weave together a future rooted in abundance, resilience, and community.





# Get Involved

The Garden District is built by neighbors showing up for their community. Whether you have one afternoon to volunteer or want a deeper role, there is a place for you in this work. You can join a community garden, lend a hand at a workday, support youth learning, or help harvest and distribute fresh produce. Every action, time, giving, or shopping local helps keep our green spaces thriving and strengthens food access across Columbus.



## Grow with us

Grow with us in whatever way fits your season of life. Come to a single workday, show up weekly, join a community garden, or step into leadership as a Garden Cultivator and help keep a site thriving through consistent care and coordination. If you want hands-on experience in production, our Become a Farmer pathway offers a supported way to learn urban growing while helping strengthen neighborhood food access.



## Donate

Donate to keep our green spaces producing and food moving into neighborhoods. We are 100 percent volunteer led, so every gift goes to operating costs, water access, infrastructure, and the tools that keep sites thriving. In 2025, \$44,425.47 in expenses supported \$67,356.61 in produce value, about **\$1.52 of food for every \$1 invested, and every dollar generated approx. \$4.50 in community value\*** through fresh food production and volunteer leadership.



## Eat local

Shop to sustain local food close to home. Buying from our farmers markets, pop ups, and future Fresh Share CSA keeps food miles low and helps deliver fresher, more nutrient dense produce while supporting the revenue that maintains our gardens and farms. And join us at our free farmstands, they are for everyone, a simple way to connect with neighbors and keep local food part of everyday life.

## 2025 Highlights

Garden District remains committed to delivering fresh, local food and welcoming green spaces with consistency and dignity. In 2025, community participation was strong across every area of our work:

12,855 individuals directly impacted

\$67,356.61+ pounds of food produced

14,802 pounds of food produced

\$4.50 of value for every \$1 invested\*

## Stay connected

Visit [gardendistrictcorp.org](https://gardendistrictcorp.org) to sign up for email updates, explore ways to get involved, and learn where fresh food is growing near you.

\* Community value reflects the combined value of fresh food produced and distributed plus the estimated value of volunteer labor supporting Garden District's programs. Volunteer labor is calculated using the Independent Sector's nationally recognized value of a volunteer hour.







# THE GARDEN DISTRICT