

## Addressing food security through cooperative urban farming

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## **Abstract**

Ohio ranks well above the national average in the prevalence of food insecurity. According to the USDA-ERS, 1 in 7 households are considered food insecure. In Franklin County alone (Columbus and metro area), 1 in 5 children are food insecure. Urban agriculture is positioned to potentially address this issue by increasing availability of fresh produce and economic opportunities in disadvantaged areas, but challenges for urban growers abound - high cost of entry, land tenure, lack of skills and knowledge, access to and consistency of markets, to name a few. The Ohio State University (OSU) is investing in a systems approach to addressing neighborhood food insecurity and the challenges faced by urban growers through the Initiative for Food and AgriCultural Transformation's (InFACT) Institution-Supported Agriculture (Buckeye ISA). The Buckeye ISA is embedded in the five Franklin County neighborhoods identified by the joint City-County Local Food Action Plan as critically economically challenged. Too many of these neighborhood residents are classified as food insecure with poor access to fresh nutritious food and must rely on the emergency food system. The project engages households with children 8 years and under in these neighborhoods and leverages local resources from government agencies, business, non-profit and institutional partners. By providing education, materials support and mentorship around local food production, the Buckeye ISA increases families' ability to provide for their personal and family food security. Growing food in urban areas and connecting urban consumers with agriculture requires systemic solutions to challenges such as knowledge gaps, materials support, and lack of access to productive land. By leveraging existing partnerships, innovative programming, and grower network development, we aim to develop an alternative path for urban farmers and communities that is both sustainable and resilient.

## **Keywords**

COVID-19, education, agility, adaptation, food production

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## INTRODUCTION

The above paragraph is the minimally edited original abstract submitted after the request for proposals for the 2020 Urban Food Systems Symposium (UFSS) was received on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The abstract and presentation proposal was finalized and submitted on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019. During this time period COVID-19 and SARS-CoV were not words that anyone had used or heard of as the first case in Wuhan, China had not developed. The earliest date of symptom onset in the first patient was not recognized until exactly one month later, on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 (Huang et al., 2020). Within a month, multiple patients had been hospitalized in China with pneumonia from an unknown viral cause. In month two, January 2020, the virus spread throughout China and into neighboring Asian countries including South Korea, Thailand, and Japan. Five travel-related cases were discovered in the United States during this time period. During the period of proposal review from submission until acceptance on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020 the virus had spread throughout most of the world and was found on every continent excepting only Antarctica (Think Global Health, 2020). On March 9<sup>th</sup>, The Ohio State University (OSU) suspended in person instruction, lectures and classroom meetings moving to virtual instruction only. On March 17<sup>th</sup>, with three hours' notice the decision was relayed to shut down the Extension office, clean out the fridges, take out the garbage, and pull the shades as we were moved to virtual only programming to serve our client-residents starting immediately. On that date the virus was confirmed in all 50 states in the United States. The COVID-

19 pandemic fundamentally changed the ways we work, play, pray, eat, and socialize. It fundamentally changed my UFSS presentation as well. The format for speaking was changed and in person attendance during June of 2020 in Kansas City, MO gave way to virtual programming. The speakers, attendees, organizers, and the conference itself had to adapt from the original presentation guidelines of an in-person conference to an online virtual event.

## **DISCUSSION**

The top reasons attendees indicated why they chose to attend the conference this year were “Learning about what is going on in other areas of the country and world” and “Being exposed to the latest research in urban food systems.” Urban food systems are a multidisciplinary topic, and our goal is that this conference and its subsequent proceedings will serve as a leading resource on the research and work being conducted in this increasingly important discipline.

When we were sent home, we were charged to continue to serve our client-residents by adapting our programming to virtual only while still maintaining the standard of outreach and engagement excellence. The stay at home and maintain social distance orders for Ohio came at the onset of the spring planting and food production timeline that is commonly used by backyard growers, community gardeners, teacher educators and urban farmers. Thankfully, food production was deemed an essential activity that was permitted if social distance was followed and personal protective equipment was utilized. This drove an increase in questions to Extension from client-residents on how they can provide for their personal and family food security. The rapid transition from scheduled in-person events coupled with the immediate outreach needs required an equally rapid development of content that could be easily shared and hosted to meet the increasing need for beginner level food production programming. This is where the educational content of seasonal food production materials designed to engage individuals at the beginner level created through the Buckeye ISA grant project to guide growing over the course of a full year was invaluable. The Buckeye ISA had two years of presentation materials, fact sheet links, and informative articles hosted online on a website, Growing Franklin, that was able to be repurposed rapidly (Growing Franklin, 2020). The digital content would be adapted and utilized to expand into a much more in-depth online support hub that could be used to engage the immediate needs of the client residents. I curated a list of stakeholders, local government partners, urban farmers, community gardens, libraries, public and charter school educators and local non-profit food system supporters and contacted them via phone, email and text a few at a time to reach out to offer educational support for them and their clients in local food production systems. I then used University marketing to reach out to my colleagues at Ohio State to offer every team, department, and organization free unlimited virtual classes on growing food on any topic of their choosing.

Initial response was immediate and overwhelming. In the first 24 hours of the offer in OSU's On Campus newsletter 17 different OSU organizations contacted me about classes. In the first two weeks the total was up to 30. By June 1<sup>st</sup> programming was well underway and I had been contacted by 47 different teams in multiple Colleges including Arts and Sciences, Veterinary Medicine, Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CFAES), Engineering, Public Health, Education and Human Ecology, Optometry, Medicine, more than dozen departments at the OSU Medical Center, Business Finance, OCIO and Advancement. A planned in person class hosted by University Libraries was expanded into the Can You Dig It! Virtual Webinar series that consisted of 6 classes on different seasonal topics from spring through winter with the class topics being driven by attendee poll question responses to different food production and gardening topics. Realizing that this knowledge would be beneficial to the entirety of Buckeye Nation, partnerships were developed to expand this outreach to our OSU alumni through the creation of a three class summer

series in partnership with the OSU Alumni Association and a three class fall series in partnership with the CFAES Alumni Society Board. A large variety of topics were presented including Garden Planning, Spring Planting, Container Gardening, Growing with Herbs, Composting, Integrated Pest Management, Tomatoes 101, Summer Planting, Using Season Extension, What to Plant Now for Fall, and Growing Over Winter. Classes ranged from webinars engaging hundreds of viewers to informal discussions with 5 members of a team and were taught intentionally to colleagues when they wanted it in various time blocks that included lunch and learn, wellness meetings, happy hours or after hours in the evening based on the ask. All sessions intentionally included time for question and answer to facilitate learning in the predominantly beginner gardening cohort. Multiple teams, departments and organizations requested multiple classes seasonally to assist in the development of their gardening skills. This strategy of outreach provided a secondary benefit of introducing my OSU colleagues to Extension, our mission, and our program areas.

For local stakeholder groups the focus of the outreach was similar but presented differently. They had been impacted by the social distance guidelines in different ways. The support needed for many local small business food producers was not only education and technical support but assistance with marketing, volunteer recruitment and retention, and fund-raising. The educational classes for these stakeholders were presented as partnerships with the local small businesses getting both the introductory portion of the program as well as the conclusion to tell their story, provide contact information, and share social media linkages. The online virtual class events were marketed widely and initial verbal feedback from the local stakeholders was this was an effective method for engaging new audiences and potential partners that would not have been utilized had we stayed in our conventional programming schedule. Seasonal food production topics were sourced from the stakeholders to assist with production related concerns as well as be informative to attendees. At least one session of each seasonal topic was recorded and hosted online for viewing to mitigate attendance and time barriers of those client-residents that were unable to attend in person. Follow up questions for non-attendees were encouraged and handled via email to continue the virtual support. No limits were placed on the number of class requests and the OSU Zoom online webinar application was used for digital engagement.

## **CONCLUSION**

Out of challenges come opportunities. This manuscript details one example of an UFSS attendee request for knowledge and information on how others are addressing the challenges they face to continue working on behalf of local food systems access and sustainability by providing an example of digital outreach and engagement to client residents in a large urban environment. The ability to rapidly adapt existing programming into an accessible format that could be leveraged via multiple marketing streams to reach clients provided the ability to serve my client-residents needs during the pandemic year of 2020. The pandemic's effects are ongoing, and it is anticipated that similar programming will be in effect for 2021. This outreach has proven popular for the stakeholder groups and colleagues that have requested it and most of the OSU partners and local stakeholder groups have indicated they wish this to continue even if in-person programming is allowed as the hosting, recording and archiving of digitally streamed content facilitates attendance by removing the effect of distance and time barriers.

Further partnerships are planned for 2021 that developed based on positive feedback from attendees. I will be partnering with the Ohio State University Medical Center's Your Plan 4 Health employee health plan in a quarterly gardening series that will include incorporating wellness benefits associated with gardening. Another project is planned to socially media stream a hybrid experiential small group gardening project with a student learning community to provide food

production education to the OSU student body. This pandemic year, while disruptive to programming, forced changes in outreach and education that have increased engagement to client-residents who requested this knowledge.

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