



Montgomery Parks
Community Garden Program

2024 Annual Report

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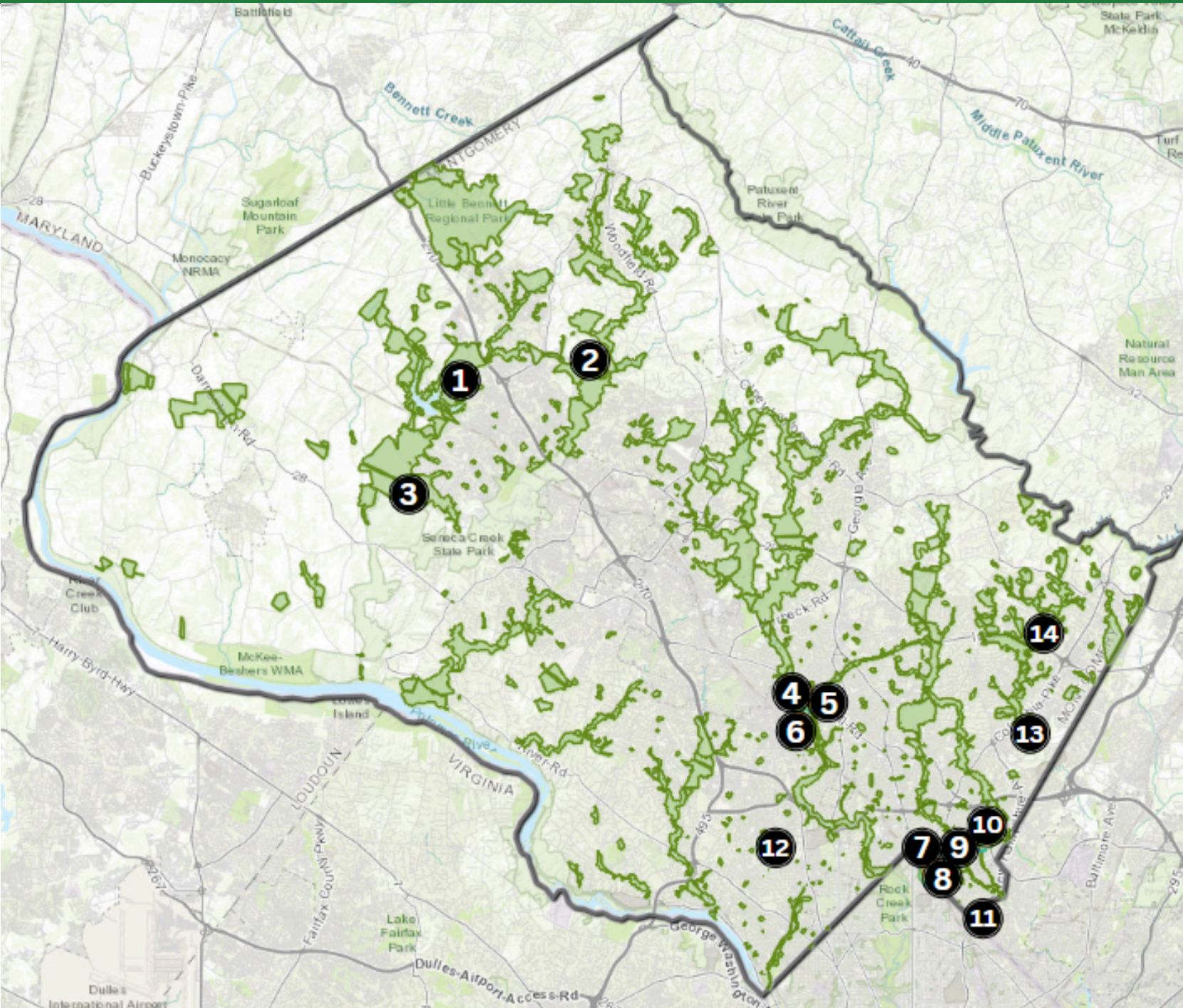
About the Program

14 community gardens, 545 plots

Montgomery Parks Community Garden (CG) Program, part of the Horticulture, Forestry, and Environmental Education (HFEE) Division, celebrated its 15th anniversary in 2024! Montgomery Parks staff were invited to tour several of the program's 14 gardens as part of the anniversary celebrations.

Since 2009, the CG Program has provided parkland to Montgomery County residents for local food production. In 2020, Grown@Pope, a project dedicated to increasing the availability of fresh local produce for food insecure households, was created under the CG Program. Through both community gardens and Grown@Pope, the CG Program strives to make positive environmental, economic, social, and aesthetic impacts throughout the County.

The CG Program is supported by 3 staff (2 career and 1 seasonal) and hundreds of volunteers. Staff are responsible for managing the gardens (i.e., performing inspections every 2 weeks, communicating with over 500 gardeners, overseeing volunteers, facilitating educational events, etc.). Staff are also involved in long-term planning to support the longevity of the program and to ensure that public interests and needs are being met.



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Program Priorities

The Community Garden Program aims to create positive **environmental, economic, social, and aesthetic impacts in the community by providing residents with **parkland for local food production**.**



Program Expansion & Offerings

This priority includes strategically planning new garden locations and typologies, strengthening existing offerings, and leveraging technology for program improvements.

Food Recovery & Reducing Waste

The CG Program encourages gardeners to donate excess produce and manages Grown@Pope, a grow-to-donate project.

Stakeholder Relationships

The program partners with nearly every division within Montgomery Parks. Staff are also involved in partnerships locally and nationally.

Education

Events, volunteer coordination, and outreach are all components of the CG Program's efforts to teach and share resources with the public.

Accessibility

The CG Program aims to improve accessibility by creating innovative garden designs, providing physically accessible gardening options, and by welcoming and engaging diverse populations.

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Digging Deeper

**In 2024 we focused on digging deeper:
analyzing data, improving efficiency, and
strengthening existing offerings.**



Grown@Pope

This grow-to-donate project continues to contribute thousands of pounds of fresh produce to food assistance providers every year. Since the project's creation, volunteer support has grown exponentially with over 250 volunteers helping in 2024. Grown@Pope creates a unique opportunity for volunteers to help others and build community while learning about farming through hands-on-activities.

Waitlist Analysis

Interest in community gardening continues to outpace the availability of garden plots. The 2024 waitlist received submissions from 357 people, while only 62 plots were available to new gardeners. By analyzing waitlist submissions, we are able to identify high demand areas as well as preferred plot sizes. These findings will help us continue to expand the program in a way that meets community needs.

Gardener Survey

In December 2023, gardeners were asked to complete a survey about gardening, food security, demographics, and program feedback. Through conversations with gardeners, CG staff know that community gardens have positive impacts. The survey was developed to formally collect this data, providing us with a more detailed understanding of who the program serves and how to better serve them.

GIS in the Gardens

In 2023, the CG Program and GIS Team modernized community garden maps and created a streamlined inspection process using Survey123. 2024 was the first full year of using the online inspection survey and automated inspection reports. Staff saw a significant reduction in time spent on inspections and saw an increase in gardener activity and engagement in the gardens.

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Grown@Pope in 2024

About Grown@Pope

Grown@Pope is focused on cultivating fresh culturally relevant produce for donation to local food assistance providers. The project also provides opportunities for community members to build connections to the outdoors and one another while utilizing best farming practices for good land stewardship.

According to [Hunger Report 2024](#), **approximately 34% of Montgomery County residents faced food insecurity in 2024**. While food assistance providers are working to increase access to food, they are typically only able to provide shelf stable foods like canned goods and rice, and do not often receive herbs or fresh produce. Grown@Pope works to address this gap by using parkland to increase the availability of fresh local produce for county residents facing food insecurity.

2,324

Pounds Donated

\$6,698

Worth of Produce

20

Harvest Days

Grown@Pope's production amounts for 2024 were similar to 2023 when 2,489 pounds of produce were donated, valued at \$7,716.

In 2024, donated produce included over 400 pounds of leafy greens (collards, kale, lettuce, spinach, sweet potato leaves, etc.), 390lbs of tomatoes, and 305 pounds of celery. 60 pounds of fruit (muskmelons, watermelon) and 30 pounds of herbs (basil, garlic) were also donated.

In coordination with [HarvestShare](#) and volunteers, produce was harvested and donated to 4 food assistance providers, including the [Gaithersburg Cares Hub](#) and [Rainbow Community Development Center](#).



Most Donated Crops by Weight

Leafy Greens
Tomatoes
Celery

“[The produce] we get from Pope - the pepper varieties, the extra things - are what help people create a meal with dignity.”
- Volunteer from HarvestShare

“Being in the garden has given me hands on experience to learn more about gardening from doing. I believe that it’s good for young people to see where their food is coming from and to learn about different plants.”
- Student Volunteer from Magruder High School (MHS)





“I didn’t realize how much I liked helping people. Being outside in the sun, doing something that will benefit lots of people makes me happy.”

- Student Volunteer from MHS

“Working with the plants is calming and it feels good to watch something grow. After gardening I feel more relaxed and not as angry.”

- Student Volunteer from MHS

265
Volunteers

2,063
Hours

\$72,195
Value

There was an increase of 27% (or 433 hours) in volunteer time from 2023 to 2024. Similarly, the monetary value of volunteer support increased by \$15,000.

36
Individuals

15
Groups

Individual volunteers included a volunteer coordinator, an intern from LAYC, and 34 crop production aides. Several volunteers were Master Gardeners and also volunteered with HarvestShare.

More than half (9) of the groups had previously volunteered at Grown@Pope and were returning for the second or third year.

4 organizations volunteered weekly as part of a job skills program for their clients. This included Makom, Community Support Services, and Community Options which all help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities build the skills and knowledge to help them find jobs and live independently.

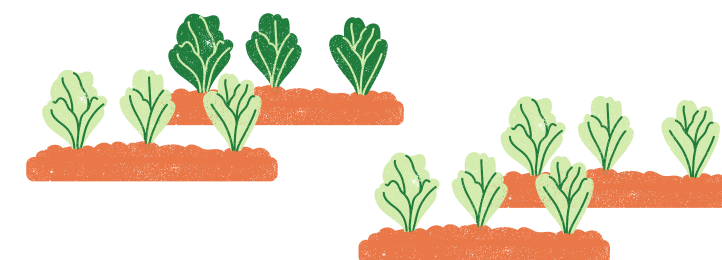
Other groups included teams from several local organizations and businesses, students from Magruder High School and St. Andrew’s Episcopal School, and Montgomery Parks staff.

“Gardening and being in nature has helped the students with their mental health. A lot of the students will come to school on Fridays because they know we are going to Pope Farm.”

- Licensed Clinical Social Worker
from MHS

“I am learning new skills and knowledge about cultivating plants while at the garden. The food being grown is not for demonstration purposes only and has the potential to be a place to also teach volunteers about nutrition, the environment, and food systems.”

- Volunteer from HarvestShare



2024 Waitlist Analysis

553
Submissions

A total of 553 responses were submitted to the 2024 waitlist, from 357 people. This was a slight increase from 2023 when there were 467 submissions from 348 people. Participants had to submit a response for each garden location leading to a higher number of submissions than participants.

357
Participants

Only 62 plots out of 545 (11%) were assigned to gardeners on the waitlist. 74% of people on the waitlist were not contacted.

62
Plots Assigned



Most Requested Garden Locations

South Germantown
Fenton Street
Parklawn
Brink Road
Bradley

Participants from zip codes in Silver Spring, the Wheaton area, and Germantown accounted for 50% of all responses. Responses from participants in Aspen Hill, Colesville, Wheaton, Germantown, and Gaithersburg increased from 2023 to 2024.

There are currently 14 gardens in the program, including 4 in Silver Spring, 2 in Colesville, 1 in Germantown and 1 in Boyds, but none in Gaithersburg.

Most Common Regions

Silver Spring
Wheaton Area*
Germantown

*Wheaton Area includes zip codes from Aspen Hill, Colesville, and Wheaton.

Most Requested Plot Size

200 square feet

37% of participants requested a 200 sqft plot. 26% requested 400 sqft, 21% requested a gardening table or under 200 sqft, and 16% requested 625 sqft. These values are similar to the distribution of plot sizes in the program.

Gardening Ability

Intermediate

Participants were asked to rank their gardening ability from 1 (novice) to 5 (expert). 79% responded 3 or higher, indicating that many people are intermediate or expert gardeners.

82%

of participants are interested in learning more about the program's additional offerings (Grown@Pope, Foodie Fridays).



Gardener Survey

About the Survey

The 43-question online survey included four sections (Gardening, Food Security, Demographics, and Program Feedback) and was available in six languages (English, Spanish, French, Korean, Chinese, and Amharic).

228
Responses

A total of 228 gardeners (out of 510) responded to the survey. Each garden had a participation rate of at least 20%.

45%
Participation



82%
Retention Rate

A majority of gardeners have been in the program for over a year. This indicates satisfaction but means there are limited plots for new gardeners.

Gardening Ability Intermediate

Gardeners rated their gardening ability: 6% chose Beginner, while 64% chose Intermediate, 26% chose Expert, and 4% chose Master Gardener.

90%
of gardeners are interested in more educational resources and/or events.

The most common topics of interest were garden design and planning as well as pest and disease management.

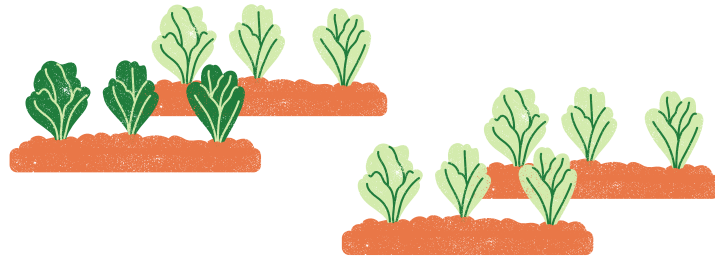


Top Reasons for Gardening
Hobby or Fun
Food Production
Physical Activity

“[The garden] has given me a place to be outdoors, getting exercise, learning something new, meeting other gardeners, while growing food for myself, family, and friends.” - Briggs Chaney Gardener

Over 70% of gardeners said they were interested in gardening as a hobby or for fun, for food production, and for physical activity. Other popular reasons included health benefits, organic produce, and community. Many of the reasons gardeners join the CG Program intersect with the Montgomery County PROS Plan, which identifies “the key purposes of parks as encouraging physical activity, facilitating social interaction, and protecting the environment.”





All ages

participate in gardening.

32% of gardeners are between 25 and 44 years old, 44% are between 45 and 64, and 24% are over 65. No gardeners are under 25, but 29% of gardeners bring their children to the garden.

3 people

eat the produce grown in each plot, on average.

88% of gardeners share their produce with at least one person each week. While permits are assigned to a single person, the program is potentially making produce available to over 1,500 people.

67% of gardeners identify as white.

Only 41% of County residents identified as white in the 2022 Census. However, the racial and ethnic diversity of each garden varies with Briggs Chaney, Gaynor, and Nolte being the most diverse gardens.

“We grow seeds given to us by my spouse’s tribal nation and are able to connect to their heritage in that way.” – Sligo Mill Gardener

Most Common Languages

English
Spanish
French

Gardeners speak a total of 22 languages. 69% of gardeners speak only English at home while 17% speak English and another language and 3% do not speak English at home. 11% of gardeners preferred not to answer.

Gardeners are from 28 countries

20% of gardeners were not born in the United States, though 93% of these gardeners have lived in the US for over 10 years. The most common countries were Canada, China, India, and Turkey.



70%

of gardeners cannot garden at their home.

This was due to a variety of factors including lack of growing space, shade, pest pressure, HOA restrictions, and/or not owning the property.

15%

of gardeners face some level of food insecurity.

This includes gardeners who said they experience very low, low, or marginal food security. 85% of gardeners said they have high food security.



Average Satisfaction with the Program

4.5 out of 5, with 1 being very unsatisfied and 5 being very satisfied

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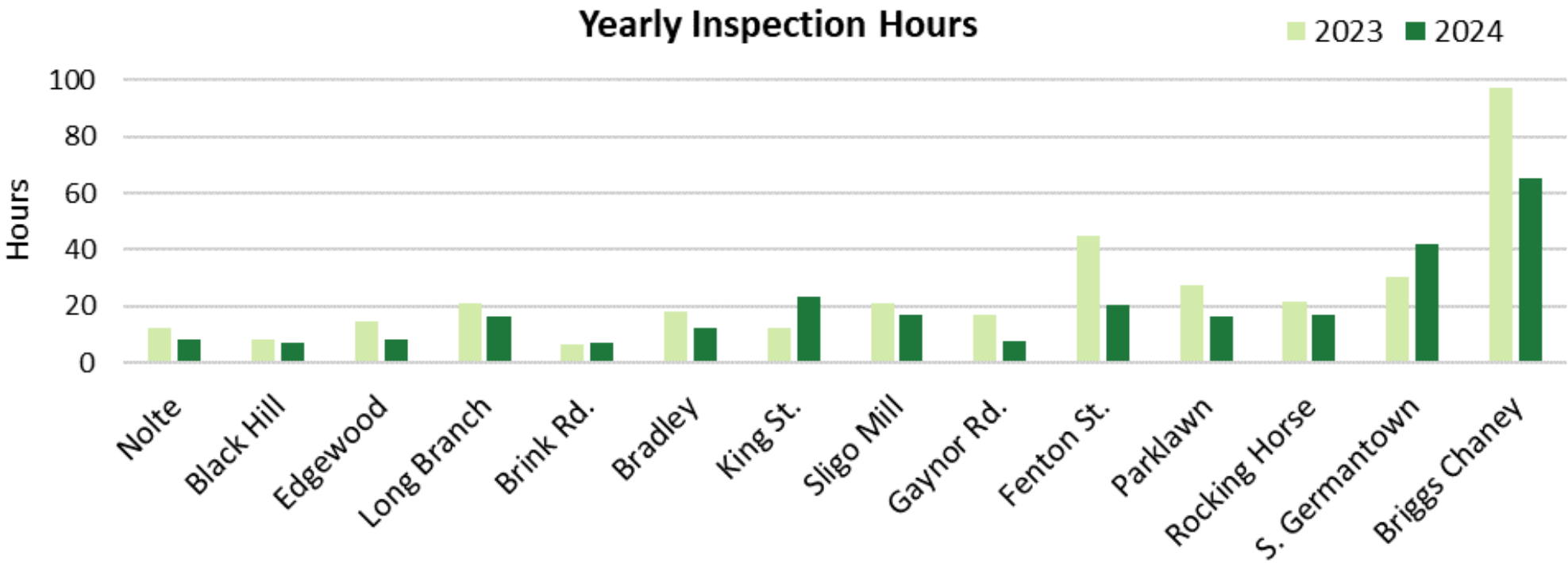
GIS in the Gardens

Using GIS for Inspections

Staff conduct inspections at each garden every two weeks to ensure gardeners are properly stewarding parkland. In 2023, staff began utilizing ArcGIS to link gardener information (name, email, phone number) to a specific plot. Staff also created an inspection survey in Survey123 based on the Conditions of Use so that inspections can be performed in the gardens in real time.

GIS has helped to standardize and streamline staff processes, allowing for more regular inspections and clearer communication with gardeners. As a result, staff have noticed that gardeners are more active and engaged in their plots.

A higher percentage (90%) of gardeners are returning to the program in 2025 compared to previous years.



24%

reduction in hours spent on inspections.

With the use of GIS, staff went from spending 354 hours on inspections in 2023 to 270 hours in 2024. Survey123 allowed staff to conduct inspections and send automated notices to gardeners in the field, rather than sending emails manually from the office.

400

fewer inspection notices sent to gardeners.

In 2023 we sent over 1,400 notices to gardeners; in 2024 we sent less than 1,000. We believe the inspection reports make it clearer for gardeners to understand what the problem is and thus easier to address it.



Additional Accomplishments

Produce Donations

Collectively, the CG Program donated 5,308 pounds of produce to food assistance providers. Grown@Pope grew and donated 2,324 pounds; two gardens (Briggs Chaney and Rocking Horse) each donated over 1,000 pounds. Gardeners at Fenton St, King St, Long Branch, Parklawn, and South Germantown also donated to local food assistance providers.

5,308 pounds
of donated produce.

Volunteer Contributions

The CG Program and Grown@Pope hosted hundreds of volunteers that logged a total of 3,088 hours, valued at \$108,049. Volunteers at Grown@Pope logged 2,063 hours; CG volunteer liaisons recorded 1,025 hours.

3,088 hours
of volunteer support.

Educational Events

Staff supported learning by hosting events and sharing quarterly newsletters containing gardening tips, events, and resources. We held 5 Foodie Friday events, featuring 6 speakers, with a total of 189 attendees. Staff also led several workshops throughout the year including a senior gardening class and tabled at numerous festivals.

15+ events
including a speaker series,
workshops, and festivals.

Accessible Gardening

We are continuing to increase the gardens' physical accessibility. This year, 8 accessible gardening tables were added to the program. Additionally, several plots were split in half at to make the plots more accessible and easier to maintain for a wider range of gardeners. Four organizations volunteered weekly at Grown@Pope to help clients with intellectual and developmental disabilities build job skills and live independently.

Staff Achievements

Michelle Nelson presented on the CG Program's incorporation of GIS at the 2024 ESRI User Conference, the largest GIS conference in the world. Staff gave a similar presentation during Montgomery Parks' annual Geography Awareness Week. Emma Morel completed Certificate 1 of NRPA's Equity in Practice Program, an action-oriented course focused on equity specifically within parks and recreation.



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Growing Forward: Plans for the Future

After celebrating 15 years of the Community Garden Program, it's time to strategically look ahead to the next 15 years.



We hope the CG Program will continue to be a constant for the community by providing safe public space for food production, social connection, and outdoor recreation as well as a peaceful sanctuary for experiencing nature.

Increased Staffing

The CG Program and its signature offerings (community gardens, Foodie Fridays, and Grown@Pope) are currently supported by 2 full-time career staff and 1 seasonal staff member. Since 2016, staffing has fluctuated between 1 to 4 people, including career and seasonal positions. The ratio of staff to gardeners has historically been unbalanced with 1 staff member to 262 gardeners or more. In 2023, the ratio was 1 to 175 which provided the best coverage to date. **A third full-time career position would ensure the sustainability of the program and its offerings**, while meeting the community's growing interest for additional gardens and educational programming.

Expanded Partnerships

The CG Program receives amazing support from multiple departments, divisions, and sections within Parks. Leveraging skillsets across the department helps to fulfill our mission and serve county residents. We hope to continue using partnerships (internally and externally) to increase our capacity in the Montgomery County Food System. For example:

- Collaborating on the **creation and implementation of new models** that benefit Parks, external organizations, and community members who may not typically be able to engage with the program.
- Examining our lease agreements and designing a template or more **streamlined process for new community garden sites** outside of M-NCPPC owned land.

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Additional Gardens

Demand for community gardens continues to outpace the number of available plots. We hope to increase the program's capacity and meet this need by opening **4 additional gardens by 2028**. The location and development of new gardens will be informed by Site Suitability methodology. Potential sites include: Stonehedge Local Park (anticipated opening in May 2026); Kensington Heights Neighborhood Park, and Opal A. Daniels Neighborhood Park. Although we have received multiple inquiries regarding term limits, this policy will not be implemented at this time. We will continue to focus on new garden sites and modifications to current sites to get residents off of the waitlist and into a garden.

More Educational Programming

Foodie Fridays has been incredibly successful since its inception in 2018. With the return to in-person programming in 2023, there is a fresh appetite for more educational programming highlighting **regional food systems work**. Gardeners have also expressed interest in additional programming that focuses on **gardening and horticultural knowledge**, including topics like ergonomics in the garden, growing practices, pest management, soil health, food preservation, and what really happens from soil and seeds all the way to consumption and composting.

Digging Deeper: Vision and Strategies

As we look ahead to the next 15 years, we hope the CG Program will continue to serve as a **bridge between divisions** and a **leader for innovations within Parks**. The program is often an early adopter; for example, being a strong advocate for GIS and implementing the first UMD PALS project. It will continue to be a pillar in experimentation while serving the gardener customer base. This includes:

- Working with Management Services to improve the tracking of assets such as fences in EAM and GIS.
- Using new developments in the data analysis sector, particularly the **development of a Power BI dashboard**, to continue digging deeper into understanding our current gardener base while also capturing the interests of potential gardeners and residents.



We are very proud of what the CG Program has accomplished in 15 years and are excited for the future.

Thank you for joining us on the journey and we hope you will continue growing with us in the gardens and in parks!

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