

Earth Team Volunteer Sprouts New People's Gardens on Coast

By Justin Fritscher, NRCS Mississippi

When horticulturist Christine Coker first learned of the People's Garden Initiative, she searched for a registered garden in her coastal Mississippi community.

Coker, a Mississippi State University urban horticulture professor, found that none of the state's coastal counties were host to a People's Garden, and decided to change that. As an Earth Team volunteer with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Coker has already nurtured five gardens in Harrison and Jackson counties, and she promises more will sprout in the future.

Secretary Vilsack began the People's Garden Initiative—the name references President Lincoln's description of USDA as the "People's Department"—in 2009 as an effort to challenge employees to create gardens at USDA facilities. It has since grown into a collaborative effort of over 700 local and national organizations all working together to establish community and school gardens across the country.



LEFT: Christine Coker (right) teaches Leigh Anne Leech and Deb Veeder about irrigation in raised beds.

Coker's day job is managing the Beaumont Horticultural Unit, which is part of the MSU Coastal Research and Extension Center, but in her spare time, she networks with communities and schools to find more locations to sow the seeds of new People's Gardens. Places where she can

educate people about gardening are a priority.

-More-

Helping People Help the Land

An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer

Schools are a great place for community gardens, Coker says. So far she has two schools gardening and hopes to enlist more. Woolmarket Elementary School affectionately calls its People's Garden "Toad Hollow" because of the shady location sandwiched between classrooms.

A rain barrel provides water for the garden, which boasts vegetables and ornamental plants, and the Harrison County Soil and Water Conservation District purchased the school a greenhouse in which the children germinate seeds. Throughout the year, food from the garden was sent home on the weekends with students of low-income families as part of the "food backpack" program.

While most of Coker's People's Gardens consist of fruits and veggies, the one at the Armed Forces Retirement Home is a bit unique. When Coker discovered that the green roof on top of the retirement home was not getting the best attention, she established a People's Garden on the roof. The garden provides the perfect habitat for pollinators, boasting a carpet of sedums, bulbines and other green roof species. She is also using the garden as a research site.

Luckily, Coker happens to be one of two Certified Green Roof Professionals in Mississippi. (The other is Dr. Gary Bachman, also based at the MSU Coastal Research and Extension Center.) Coker says the People's Garden Initiative provides a educational and fun framework to introduce people—from youngsters to retirees—to gardening. With Coker's energy, it won't be long until Mississippi's Gulf Coast is home to more gardens.

For more information on the People's Garden Initiative, visit www.ms.nrcs.usda.gov.

###

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer and lender. To file a complaint of discrimination, write: USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD).