

# Sharing Our Roots Community Connectors: Advancing Food Sovereignty and Land Access for BIPOC and Immigrant Families

Located in Rice County, Minnesota, Sharing Our Roots is a 163-acre farm working with Northfield-Faribault immigrants to improve access to organic foods and create pathways out of poverty for immigrants working low-wage farm jobs. A central part of Sharing Our Roots' work is accomplished through hiring Community Connectors, respected community members representing the diversity of the local community who are working to lead their neighborhoods toward food security and sovereignty in the region. These Community Connectors focus on food production, supporting community members in learning how to farm, and collaborating with other community organizations to distribute essential items. Community Connectors support over 142 local families across seven neighborhood gardens, and families that grow food in their own yard in two neighborhoods in Northfield-Faribault, including the organic Sharing Our Roots main farm, which allows immigrant community members to grow, consume, and sell organic, culturally specific food near their homes.

## Who are the Community Connectors?

The Community Connector Program was started in 2019 as a strategy to engage the community to improve food security and sovereignty for immigrant families in the area. Community Connectors are trusted community members who represent the diversity of local families and work directly with their neighbors to grow produce by using organic methodologies in gardens throughout Rice County. Connectors liaise with their local communities to connect farmers seeking land with the Sharing Our Roots farm or to established neighborhood gardens near where they live. Connectors provide technical assistance, training, and resource support families to increase food access and food sovereignty.

## Conversations with Community Connectors and gardeners

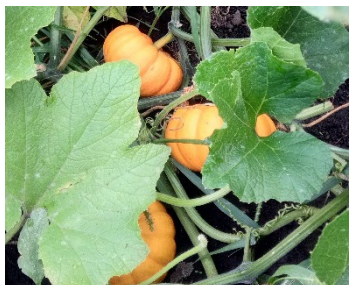
The findings in this summary come from a focus group with 16 gardeners and interviews with each of the 4 Community Connectors conducted by Wilder Research staff. Questions focused on understanding the experiences of gardeners and Connectors, learning what motivated them to become involved in the garden, and what challenges or feedback they had about the program. Participating gardeners received a \$30.00 gift card for their time. Wilder analyzed transcriptions and notes from these conversations to develop overall themes that speak to the impact of the Sharing Our Roots Community Connector Program.



## Impacts of the Community Connector Program

**Sharing Our Roots and the Community Connector Program promote food sovereignty through providing communities the opportunity to develop gardening skills and knowledge, and grow organic produce for themselves.**

A central benefit to the Sharing Our Roots supported gardens is the community's access to land to grow food for themselves or for sale. Multiple participants in the focus group and Community Connectors shared that their ability to access healthy produce has increased because of the gardens and that this is a great financial and health benefit for them and their families. One gardener commented, "I also like that we save money since we can just go and get them off of our gardens, everything is more expensive in the stores." For those participating in the gardens and local families, there seems to now be a new affordable and organic food source for the community. A Connector also shared that when there is excess produce in the gardens, some families are able to sell their food or they donate the food to others who need it.



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When [the gardeners] have harvested more, sometimes they take to the store, not selling, but they give it for free. And the farm also sells some produces that they get from the farm, like beans. They sell this and they get something small...[They] were given seedlings free. You have planted and then now, when you have it, you can share with the community. You can share. You can sell it. So this benefits all.

– Community Connector

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Gardeners also shared that they like the taste of their produce better than the stores and they like that they "cultivate it with their own hands." There is a sense of ownership of the gardens and what they produce.

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They are organic and better and my son likes to go eat the strawberries, he doesn't even wash them, he just goes for it.

- Gardener

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Both gardeners and Community Connectors said they have gained skills and knowledge related to gardening practices and can now grow their own food. Some of them came in to the gardens with previous knowledge and others have just started to learn. Several gardeners shared that they have learned a lot about how to grow and maintain their gardens from Connectors and Sharing Our Roots staff, including opportunities to visit other farms and places like the University of Minnesota to learn more. When asked if they feel like they belong in Sharing Our Roots, all participants in the focus group shared that they feel a sense of belonging in the program and get multiple types of farming support from Connectors. One gardener shared, "They give us tips with how to maintain the crops and the maintenance there they give education and plant knowledge." Gardeners said that Connectors help them deal with plagues and insects, teach them how to use new tools like small suction vacuums, and general garden plot maintenance. Organic practices are also taught. Connectors keep the families updated with what is happening in the gardens, which also helps them feel a part of the program. Additionally, Connectors share ways to preserve produce (such as pickling, canning, and freezing) so that there is no waste and food can be enjoyed even during non-growing seasons.



**Community Connectors strengthen community relationships by bringing families together in the gardens and promoting cross-cultural and intergenerational learning opportunities.**

When asked if they feel connected to their fellow gardeners, all participants in the focus group said yes. Connectors bring people in the garden together through shared meals and recipes, trading produce grown in the gardens, sharing ideas or troubleshooting solutions to gardening problems, and sharing plants and farming tools. One gardener commented, “I also like it because we are connected to nature and exchanging dialogues and interchanging communication and ideas.” Gardeners come from different countries and regions, so there is more cross-cultural learning and sharing in the gardens.

Participation in the gardening has also increased some families’ connection to their own culture as they can now grow plants to be used in their own cultural recipes. Connectors teach gardeners traditional farming practices from their cultures along with produce from those countries. One Connector said that they started to grow different African plants like managu and chinsaga, and families were asking them lots of questions about it. Another Connector share that being able to grow produce from their own country and talk with others about feels therapeutic.

Multiple gardeners also shared that they spend time with family members in the gardens and it is important for their children to learn about farming and have access to organic produce. Being in the gardens is an opportunity for intergenerational learning and connection. One gardener said, “I came with my kids and husband and they like to grow...I like that my kids can learn and that way they can see the hard work that goes into getting fruits and vegetables.” Some gardeners said that farming was a family practice when they lived in their previous countries, so this is something they want to continue here in Minnesota.

### **Both Community Connectors and families find peace and stress relief through working in the gardens.**

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**I want to learn to cultivate my own foods at work but also for my kids so they can learn... I also have my grandson which I take so that all generations can know to leave a legacy like that.**  
- Gardener

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Gardeners and Connectors commented that being in the gardens and in nature has helped relieve stress and they enjoy being outside. One gardener said, “...it helps with stress when we garden, the stress goes away.” Participants also feel good about being able to provide their own food. A few said it is hard to find ways to be outside so the gardens provide that option to be in nature instead of being “bored” indoors. Connectors said that they feel joy and pride in being able to support their community in learning how to provide food for themselves. Teaching their neighbors about farming and spending time in the garden with others makes them happy.



## Connectors support the community in multiple ways

Around half of the gardeners participating the focus group said they learned about Sharing Our Roots from a Community Connector.

Some of the gardeners shared that they wanted to learn more about gardening or they wanted more access to fresh produce. They either knew a Connector already and were able to ask questions about joining the program or they visited the garden and a Connector started to talk with them about joining. Connectors were also willing to meet participants out in the community to share more about the program. Others in the focus group learned about Sharing Our Roots through HealthFinders.

Community Connectors are dedicated to supporting their neighbors and came into their roles already equipped with many skills needed in working with the community.

All Community Connectors interviewed came in with some knowledge about gardening practices, different types of produce, and cooking and preservation. Some of them started their own gardens and previous Community Connectors referred them to Sharing Our Roots to either work in the garden or become a Connector. They were all motivated on their own to grow healthy foods for themselves and their families, and Sharing Our Roots provided them with the opportunity to both garden and support their neighbors in gardening. Other skills the Connectors said they had were the ability to build relationships with different people, be “outgoing” and able to do outreach, and in general treat all people with respect. Community Connectors are representative of the community and have the ability to communicate in their communities’ preferred languages. Connectors shared that they want to help others, and that this was a big part of their motivation to join the program.

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**I love being with people. I love helping people. I love serving people. That's my passion...Whether you call me at night, I'd respond to you because I don't know what problem you have got. And these are people from my own country. We speak the same language. – Community Connector**

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In addition to supporting gardeners, Connectors help community members learn about or access resources, provide transportation, act as interpreters, and provide answers or information to many questions that come up.

Some of the Connectors shared that sometimes there are interpersonal challenges in working with community and that they need to help moderate disagreements among gardeners or between gardeners and Connectors. They shared that there are many different personalities in the gardens, so managing all of these relationships and expectations can be difficult. One Connector also said that prejudice against immigrants or BIPOC farmers is something they had experienced, but it has made them more motivated to help others like them access resources like Sharing Our Roots supported gardens.