

Annual Report 2020



APPALACHIAN
RCD COUNCIL

2020 Annual Report

Susan McKinney, Executive Director: *A Look Back at 2020*



Coronavirus stories were bubbling to the top of newsbreaks across the country as I arrived in New Orleans for a week-long food and agriculture conference on March 8, 2020. It was two days before the full conference began, but I had signed up for a two-day pre-conference session on food, health, and jobs presented by Chicago Botanical Garden's Windy City Harvest team and local agricultural experts, and I was excited to be able to attend the session with practitioners from across the United States.

The next morning over breakfast, I read the various news articles about the virus and I felt the anxiety of what was about to happen creep up my spine and settle into my mind. How was this going to impact what was happening in food and agriculture and the people and communities that we serve? You wouldn't know it by looking around the Crescent City that week, but across the country, stay-at-home mandates and business closures were beginning to crop up. With a non-refundable, non-transferable return plane ticket for the ending day of the conference, I was stuck there until Friday. But back at home the rest of the ARCD team deftly moved from normal, daily responsibilities to new, emerging priorities.

In the days that followed the news of the outbreak of COVID-19, Lexy and Rosie moved our agricultural training programs to online platforms. Rachel and Kayla did the same with our farmers market managers bootcamp and other market and farmer trainings. Increased purchases at grocers and a supply chain that was unable to keep up with the demand left many people in our communities uncertain about access to food. Just as we began to talk with farmers market managers about opening early to help alleviate food supply issues, states were listing farmers markets as non-essential services which created a defacto moratorium on opening the markets. Undeterred, many of our small and midsize farms began

delivery and/or farm pick-up options. Kayla created a page on our website where farms could list these services and went to work to get the information out across the region. As Tennessee and surrounding states began to include farmers markets as essential services, we shifted to creating best practices for protection of farmers and customers at markets as well as researching online ordering platforms for the markets that wanted to offer that option. The phone calls and Zoom meetings came at a rapid pace, but we soon had safety guidelines established and provided whatever hand sanitizer and PPE we could get our hands on to the markets. Adding to the challenge was that out of an abundance of caution for the ARCD staff and the other tenants of our office building, we had to move our work to our homes.

As days became weeks and we worked from our kitchen tables or living rooms, staff meetings became Zoom meetings and Google Docs and phone calls became our real-time collaboration methods. ARCD held its first of many-to-come virtual board meetings. Everyone did their part. The staff met and continues to meet the ever-changing demands of carrying out our mission in the face of adversity. The ARCD board has provided unwavering support and encouragement. But the virus did not leave us unscathed at ARCD as we, much like the rest of the world, had to figure out new ways to deliver our programming. Farm Tours 2020 were postponed and eventually cancelled. Appalachian Fusion became a much smaller, safely-delivered version of the fundraiser. We lost some of our funding due to COVID-19 and we gained some new funding opportunities due to our partnerships with other amazing organizations that share our values.

Nine months after this rollercoaster was set in motion, we're pleased to say we're all still here, still working to serve our friends—the ones we know and the ones we haven't yet met—in our communities. And while we are grateful that we are all working and healthy so far, we recognize and acknowledge the continued uncertainty and loss caused by the pandemic. Our thoughts are with you all as we close 2020 and look toward 2021 with the hope of a better year for everyone and with the promise that we'll soon see you in person once again.

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At the Appalachian Resource Conservation & Development Council, our mission is to conserve natural resources and improve rural economies through community leadership and enhanced educational opportunities.

We work to preserve our heritage, promote local growers and producers, and to protect the lands of past generation so that future generations may be able to enjoy the natural wonders of Appalachia.

The ARCD is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization chartered in 1994. Our Board of Directors includes representation from six counties in Northeast Tennessee, but our programs reach across the state and beyond.

Our programming includes the following: Build It Up, a backyard gardening program with the goal of teaching families how to grow their own food; Field School, a beginning farmer training program that teaches farmers the ins and outs of running an agricultural business; Farm Fresh Appalachia, a cohort of local organizations lead by ARCD and funded by the USDA which promotes local agriculture and supports local farmers; AppalCorps, a brand new AmeriCorps program which places Service Members across the state into service positions related to food insecurity.

We also have a number of programs focused on conservation including wildfire prevention and risk mitigation, and Envirothon, which encourages local students to learn about a number of subjects relating to environmentalism. The following pages will illustrate these programs and more in greater detail.

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Lexy Close, Program Director: Build It Up and Field School



Build it Up – There's been a huge explosion in interest in home gardening during the pandemic. With the massive disruptions to our nation's food system in the spring and so many folks losing their jobs, many have decided to try growing their own food. There were runs on seeds and many seed companies had to shut down for weeks to deal with the backlog of orders. Other supplies were in short supply and in the fall it was next to impossible to find canning supplies! We hope folks were able to grow and eat good food for their families!

The 2020 BIU program worked with 41 families, including 78 kids under age 16. Together we grew 13,250 lbs of fresh produce, including a whopping 1,960 lbs of tomatoes! That's a lot of sauce and a lot of tomato sandwiches!

Our 2021 Build It Up program will begin accepting applications in January. While we have expanded our capacity to serve up to 50 families, I suspect we will get many more applications than we have the ability to include. We will do our best to meet the need in our community with our programming! Please donate if you can, to support more gardening education in East Tennessee!

We are planning on making a lot more educational videos for the BIU YouTube Channel (tinyurl.com/biuyoutube). Subscribe so you can follow along and learn to grow healthy food for your family and community!

**In 2020, Build It Up
families grew**

13,250 LBS

of fresh produce!

Reflections from Rebecca D., a Build It Up Gardener

"I have been very excited to go out to the garden every day, to show my children what is growing in the garden and to help them to fall in love with growing something with their own hands and hard work. Since starting this program, I am amazed at the wealth of information, the time and effort put in by the organizers to ensure that we all have access to support and knowledge to help us to be successful. I have had small gardens in the past, but this is my first "large" garden. This is only our second year in Tennessee, having moved our family with three small children to this new state.



My children come out to the garden with me daily. They check on the plants, like old friends, as I do every day. They help me to pick the great big green beans that they find, and have learned which sugar snap peas are big enough to pick, and I enjoy watching them munch on the beans and the peas as they tell me about their day or what is on their minds standing in the garden with me. "



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Lexy Close Reflects on Field School

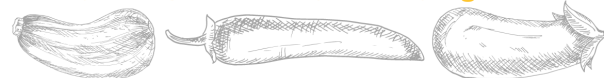


COVID—19 disrupted many of our plans for Field School this year, but we were able to successfully pivot to online education. The pandemic began impacting us locally at the very end of the 2019-2020 Winter Business Intensive in March, and we did our last workshop and the graduation presentation of business plans online. We had 22 beginning farmers complete the Field School and submit business plans!

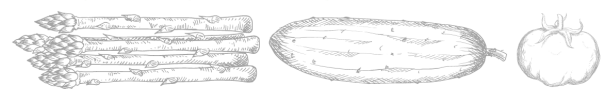
We debated about holding our Summer workshops at all, given that they've traditionally been in-person visits to some of our region's successful small farms. We ultimately decided to hold webinars with a mixture of live presentations and recorded farm tours. The first few workshops had typical attendance numbers between 15 and 25 folks, mostly from East Tennessee. Then, somehow, our Facebook event exploded and we got tens of thousands of views and hundreds of workshop registrations. Our Beekeeping and Soil Health workshops we watched by over 300 folks each from all across the country! You can view recordings of the webinars and farm tours on the Field School YouTube Channel (youtube.com/c/FieldSchool).

The Field School: Enrollment

Winter Business Intensive **2019-2020** **22** graduates



Winter Business Intensive **2020-2021** **22** students



Field School 800+
Summer 2020 attendees

Be Outstanding in Your Field!

As the pandemic continues, we've just started our Winter Business Intensive classes in November with a new crop of farmers. Most of them are Tennesseans, though we have one from West Virginia and one from Georgia. A good number of them are in the Knoxville area, which I am glad we can serve with our webinars. We gave out five veteran scholarships this year, thanks to funding from UT Extension's AgrAbility program. Folks will go



Field School facilitator, Dana York (left), and Field School alumna, Camille Cody (right), tend the crops at Grand Oak Farm.

through eight workshops on business planning, marketing, and farm finances and end with presentations of their business plans in early April.

With the vaccine just rolling out, it's hard to say what the summer will look like. We are looking forward to doing in-person workshops again and getting back out on farms in our region. However, it's easy to imagine that at least some of our workshops will be offered online from now on!

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Rosie McVeigh, Sustainable Agriculture Program Assistant



This year has been one of the most challenging but best years. I am so honored to be able to work for an amazing organization such as ARCD during these tumultuous times. My first day as an AmeriCorps was in January. I was able to enjoy some normalcy with going to conferences and having Build It Up meetings in person up until March when COVID-19 began to impact the region.

In a lot of ways I think it's more important than ever to have AmeriCorps Service Members working in food security and sustainable agriculture. Families across the country — especially in Appalachia — have lost sources of income and the need for food on the table is greater than ever. As an AmeriCorps member, I've been able to take my interests and turn them into a way to solve problems and directly serve my community. One of my responsibilities this year included helping with the Build It Up backyard gardening program which grew close to 14,000lbs of food this year. Talk about directly serving my community! It is programs like that that inspire me to make a difference in my community.

My year as an AmeriCorps has largely impacted my future goals and life. When I first started my tenure with ARCD, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. Now I know that I want to work in sustainable agriculture. I am excited to pursue a graduate degree in food sustainability in 2022. Until then, I will be joining ARCD's AmeriCorps program for another year. 2021 will bring more responsibilities with the Build It Up gardening program and the beginning farmers Field School, but I am very excited to delve deeper into the East Tennessee community as well as continue to work with some truly fabulous people. I can't wait to see what the new year brings!

Tennessee Wildfire Prevention



This year ARCD continued its work in partnership with the Tennessee Division of Forestry to administer grant funds to communities across Tennessee for wildfire risk planning, hazard mitigation, to support wildfire prevention, and education.

For the year 2019-2020, the TN Division of Forestry and ARCD awarded funding to seventeen communities who, despite the challenges that COVID-19 presented, worked to make their homes safer, provide greater access for emergency personnel and equipment, remediate existing hazards, and provide education to residents of and visitors to their communities. In October, ARCD awarded a new round of grants to seventeen communities for the 2020-2021 year.

ARCD wants to remind you that as Smokey Bear says,
"Only YOU can prevent wildfires!"

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Kayla Nichols, Marketing & Communications Director



When we look back on 2020 in the future, one thing we will all be able to say is that we learned a lot. We learned a lot about science, public health, and socio-politics. We learned way too much about viral droplets and their spread. But, we also learned a lot about ourselves. Thrown in the fire, we learned how strong we are when faced with the unthinkable. We learned a lot about our communities' infrastructure as well—including where things breakdown first and where they hold steady.

At ARCD, we got to see firsthand the anxiety that a broken mass food production system causes, along with the ingenuity that it sparked. One thing I will never forget about this year is how quickly our farmers and markets were able to shift gears in order to get their goods onto the tables in our communities. It was also heartwarming and exciting to see farmers selling out of ground beef, eggs, and veggies week after week.

The very week we learned that some of our biggest farmers markets weren't going to be able to open on schedule, we saw farmers set up online ordering and offer free no-contact delivery or pickup. That kind of thing doesn't come out of nowhere—it may have happened quickly in response to a disaster, but it was only successful for so many farmers because there was already a foundation of trust and a loyal customer base already present.

I say all this to say: the local food system in Northeast Tennessee is alive and well—in fact, I believe it is stronger than ever. We have to remember that when fire is unable to destroy, it strengthens. The people of Northeast Tennessee are stronger than ever, and now that we have faced the worst season in our lifetimes we know we can't be broken.

Farmers Market Promotion Program

The FMPP grant we received from USDA-AMS in 2017 was intended to be a three-year grant, but due to COVID—19 we were able to extend this program into 2021. This extension will allow us to hold activities like the Farm Tours and National Farmers Market Week that were cancelled in 2020, so we are very grateful for the opportunity to finish strong.

Like everything else, FMPP weathered a large pivot in 2020. We shifted our promotion efforts from printed materials to digital campaigns and from in-person events to virtual gatherings. In some ways this made promotion challenging, but in others it allowed us to reach more folks. Ultimately, 2020 forced us to reconsider the ways in which we connect with people, and while we can't wait to hold in-person events again, there are some changes we believe will stick and allow us to expand our promotion footprint.

Early in the spring, we launched the Farms to Folks page which provided an outlet for farmers who needed to promote the fact that they were offering direct sales in place of market sales. At the same time we collaborated with our market managers to help publicize the many schedule and rule changes from around the region.



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In years past, ARCD had provided printed marketing materials individual to each market to assist with market promotion. In 2020 we shifted gears to help markets print COVID—19 guideline posters and large directional signage for their markets.

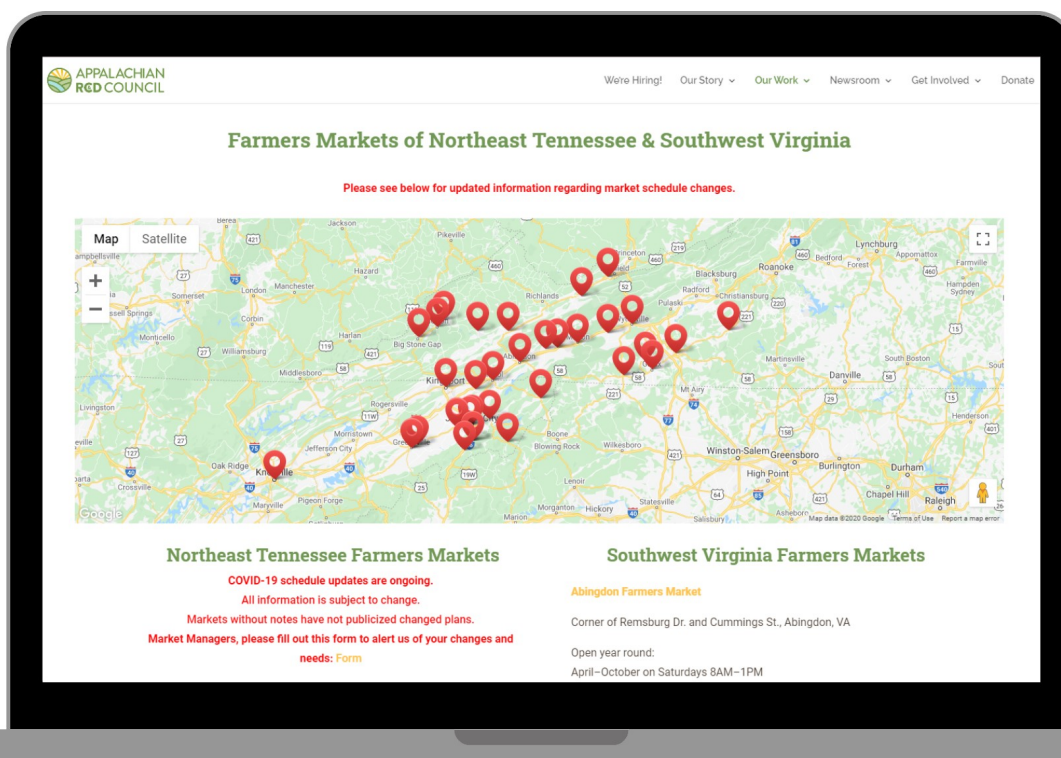
The poster to the right is one of the many that we printed. We offered a couple of designs, and we worked with a few markets to meet individual needs.

In addition to printed signage, we also rolled out an expansive paid digital campaign that targeted the immediate communities for every operational market that we serve with market-specific information.

This approach allowed us to provide the same level of community-specific promotion our markets need while still helping to stop the spread of the virus by eliminating flyers, postcards, and other potential vectors of transmission.



Some things remained, though; including our Find Your Market Map. Our map of farmers markets in Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia is updated regularly to reflect markets' schedule and location changes. This interactive map allows folks to find the market that is most convenient for them, and get all the details they need to plan their next visit.



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Rachel Wheeler, Program Director: AppalCorps



Y'all, this year has been one of those adventures you would rather not have had. Like all difficult adventures, it has also been revealing and gratifying in turn. We have always been a resilient and creative folk. We have chosen this moment to shine.

We started our spring growing season in panic. It seemed we were about to face a major food crisis as industrialized agriculture systems began to crack. Locally, small farmers lost revenue streams almost overnight. Localized wholesale opportunities disappeared with the closing of restaurants.

Our farmers markets could not open on schedule. People were losing their jobs as we watched large farming operations dump unsold food on national news.

Then something wonderful happened: we lived up to our reputation of resiliency. Farmers shifted gears to online sales. Community members began to invest in local foods. We saw a huge rise in CSA programs. Farmers began offering no-contact deliveries and set up farm stands. Farmers markets helped promote vendors by running updates through social media. Farmers worked together to support each other, including combining offerings to provide more robust and more favorable CSAs.

Luckily, the state of Tennessee deemed farmers markets essential, and most of our markets were back up and running. While market visitation was lower this year than average, sales have been up for many markets. In response to all of the hurdles our farmers and markets faced, we too shifted gears. While our local food system was pivoting in response to the pandemic, we were receiving calls from community members asking how to access farm goods.

Guided by our farmers and markets, we used our website as a directory. Our Farms to Folks page supports farmers offering CSAs, on-farm sales, and more.

Our farmers and farmers markets stepped up to meet our needs this year. I invite you to join me in continuing to support them with just as much vigor in the year to come. We can come out of this with a stronger, more secure local food system.

Introducing AppalCorps

We are happy to announce our newest program, AppalCorps. The first of its kind in the state, AppalCorps is part of the AmeriCorps Healthy Futures initiative, in partnership with Volunteer Tennessee. Our vision is to build healthy futures through education and training opportunities, while supporting local food systems, food sovereignty, and food access.

AppalCorps members will have the ability to serve in organizations across Tennessee helping to implement backyard gardening programs, support farmers and farmers markets, teach youth about healthy eating habits, expand food distribution programs serving our most at-risk populations, and much more. Service members dedicate one full year of their time to host organizations in exchange for a living allowance, education award, and the experience of a lifetime.

We are welcoming 9 members this year in the following organizations: Jonesborough Locally Grown, One Acre Cafe, Rural Resources Farm & Food Education Center, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Mooresburg Community Association, and Crabtree Farms. If you find yourself visiting one of these places, be sure to thank our AmeriCorps Service Members for their service.



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Thank you to our program funders and organizational partners.



2020 Annual Report

Thanks to these wonderful supporting organizations.



Upper East Tennessee
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SOUTHWEST
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