



Agricultural Program Development for Newcomers in the U.S.

This guide, intended for service providers, offers an introduction to building agricultural programs for newcomers in the United States. Recommendations for strategies and best practices are based on a narrative review of the literature and over a decade of technical expertise with food and agricultural programs for newcomer populations in the U.S., developed through the IRC's New Roots Program.

Benefits of Agricultural Programs for Newcomers

Many newcomer farmers arrive with rich traditions and expertise in farming practices that can aid both new arrivals and their new communities in the United States. [Urban farming and gardening contributes to agricultural diversity and innovation](#) that [plays a vital](#)

[role in strengthening and sustaining local food systems.](#)

Urban gardens and farms contribute to ecological improvements in urban housing neighborhoods that often experience limited access to green spaces and promote environmental and health benefits such as improved air quality and reduced urban heat island effect.^{1,2}

¹ Pinto, D., C. Bueno, and C.M. de Silva. 2022. "[The Effect of Urban Green Spaces on Reduction of Particulate Matter Concentration.](#)" *Bulletin of Environmental Contamination and Toxicology* 108 (6): 1104–10.

² Knight, T., S. Price, D. Bowler, A. Hookway, S. King, K. Konno, and R.L. Richter. 2021. "[How Effective Is 'Greening' of Urban Areas in Reducing Human Exposure to Ground-Level Ozone Concentrations, UV Exposure and the 'Urban Heat Island Effect'? An Updated Systematic Review.](#)" *Environmental Evidence* 10 (1).

Supporting refugee and immigrant farmers promotes social cohesion and economic development, offering opportunities for newcomers to rebuild their lives and contribute meaningfully to their new communities.³

Urban gardens and farms can improve [newcomer wellness](#) and provide access to fresh, culturally appropriate foods. This access can improve [nutritional intake](#) and mental and physical health.^{4,5} Urban gardens further serve as spaces for community building and social integration, helping newcomers establish connections and support networks.^{6,7}

Additionally, urban gardens and farms offer opportunities for transferable [skill development](#) and improved English speaking skills, enabling clients to generate income and become more self-sufficient.⁸

Planning Urban Farming Programs

Conduct a Needs Assessment and Engage the Community

Before launching an urban farming program, research the specific needs, skills, and aspirations of newcomer farmers as well as the broader community where the program may be housed.

[Community needs assessments](#) provide a comprehensive understanding of the community's existing resources, challenges, and priorities. By conducting a needs assessment, organizations can identify specific food security issues, dietary preferences, and cultural and economic considerations to help the garden or farm meet the client needs.

Surveys and focus groups offer information from potential participants about their agricultural

experience, interests, and the types of support they need. See [Switchboard's tip sheet](#) for help organizing productive focus groups.

Engage local stakeholders, including community organizations, local government, and residents, to ensure the program aligns with community goals and secures buy-in, and [use asset mapping](#) to identify available resources such as vacant land, funding opportunities, and existing support networks. This will aid providers in [finding existing farmer stakeholders and networks](#) and building relationships for future networking and peer mentoring opportunities.

Secure Land and Resources

Accessing suitable land and securing funding sources are key to building a successful, sustainable, and responsive farming. To secure land and resources:

- **Identify potential land sites.** Look for vacant lots, underutilized spaces, or public land that can be repurposed for urban farming⁹.
- **Foster partnerships to facilitate land access.** Consider working through existing farmer organizations or initiatives that have already secured land and have available plots.
- **Seek long-term leases or ownership.** Work with local government, land trusts, and private landowners to secure long-term leases or ownership of the land, as these may provide more affordable terms than short-term leases.
- **Identify needed infrastructure and supplies.** Ensure the site has or can be equipped with necessary infrastructure, such as water access or needed equipment.

³ Hightower, L. S., K.L. Niewolny, and M.A. Brennan. 2013. "[Immigrant Farmer Programs and Social Capital: Evaluating Community and Economic Outcomes through Social Capital Theory.](#)" *Community Development* 44 (5): 582–96. doi:10.1080/15575330.2013.838975.

⁴ Ramburn, T.T., Wu, Y.M. and Kronick, R. 2023. "[Community gardens as psychosocial interventions for refugees and migrants: a narrative review](#)," *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 122-141.

⁵ Hartwig, K.A., and M. Mason. 2016. "[Community Gardens for Refugee and Immigrant Communities as a Means of Health Promotion.](#)" *Journal of Community Health* 41 (6): 1153–59.

⁶ Goralnik, L., L. Radonic, V. Garcia Polanco, and A. Hammon. 2023. "[Growing Community: Factors of Inclusion for Refugee and Immigrant Urban Gardeners.](#)" *Land* 12, no. 1: 68.

⁷ Gangamma, R., B. Walia, L.A. Minkoff-Zern, and S. Tor. 2024. "[Role of Gardening in Mental Health, Food Security, and Economic Well-Being in Resettled Refugees: A Mixed Methods Study.](#)" *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 12(1), 3-18.

⁸ Uldall S.W., Varning Poulsen, D., Christensen, S.I., Wilson, L., and Carlsson, J. 2022. "[Mixing Job Training with Nature-Based Therapy Shows Promise for Increasing Labor Market Affiliation among Newly Arrived Refugees: Results from a Danish Case Series Study.](#)" *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health/International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19 (8): 4850–50.

⁹ Denver Urban Gardens, 2012, "[Growing Community Gardens: A Denver Urban Gardens' Best Practices Handbook for Creating and Sustaining Community Gardens.](#)" <https://dug.org/growing-community-gardens/>

Key Challenges for Newcomer Farmers

Many newcomers possess both a wealth of agricultural expertise and a strong desire to own and operate farm businesses in the U.S. But despite their enormous potential to contribute to their local food economy, [newcomer farmers face critical challenges](#):

- **Access to land:** High land costs, competition for affordable land, and limited availability of long-term leases make it difficult for newcomers to establish farms.
- **Language differences** that can impede communication and understanding of regulations, market requirements, and agricultural best practices and **cultural differences** that may affect how newcomers navigate the U.S. agricultural landscape.
- **Access to capital or financial resources:** Newcomers may lack credit history or face difficulties in understanding and navigating the financial systems in the United States. Grants and loans specifically aimed at new farmers are available but can be competitive and complex to obtain.
- **Access to markets:** Newcomers may lack the networks and connections that established farmers have, making it harder to reach consumers and secure stable market outlets.
- **Pandemic-related difficulties:** The COVID-19 pandemic caused severe economic distress for all farmers. Newcomers' high rates of participation in off-farm jobs to diversify their income (such as in hotel and service industries, and gig economies) led them to experience additional pandemic-related economic difficulties. Established sales channels to restaurants and schools were also likely disrupted, resulting in loss of income.

These challenges, combined with existing structural inequalities in the urban and rural communities where newcomers frequently settle, mean that many newcomer farmers are classified by the USDA as Socially Disadvantaged Beginner Farmers, which may make them eligible for support through specifically targeted Farm Act programs. Newcomer farmers can significantly benefit from local farming communities, mentors, and organizations that can provide guidance and resources to overcome these difficulties.

- **Conduct soil testing**¹⁰. This confirms soil quality is high and free of chemicals and heavy metals, which may be disproportionately present in urban areas.
- **Plan for and execute any necessary and allowed improvements.** These may include building fencing and storage facilities.

See the [National Young Farmer's Coalition on Land Access](#) resource for further information.

Securing financial resources through grants, donations, or crowdfunding campaigns can defray startup costs and ongoing operational expenses. Note that many funding streams that support urban agriculture require proof of land lease prior to awarding funding. Possible funding streams include:

- **[Office of Refugee Resettlement Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program \(RAPP\)](#)**
The RAPP program provides funding to agencies that support beginning farmers that meet ORR

eligibility requirements. Grants are typically \$100,000 per year for three years with no match requirement.

- **[U.S. Department of Agriculture Urban Agriculture and Innovation Grants \(UAIP\)](#)**
UAIP grants typically range from \$75,000-350,000 for a period of three years. Project categories include planning and implementation. This grant does not have a match funding requirement.
- **[Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education grants \(SARE\)](#)**
SARE offers competitive grants to fund research and education projects that advance sustainable agricultural practices in the United States. SARE offers regional grants in the Northeast, North Central, South and West U.S. regions. Grant amount and topics vary.
- **[The 2501 Program](#):** The 2501 Program supports underserved farmers, ranchers, and foresters who

¹⁰ NRCS, 2009, [Soil Testing. Small Scale Solutions for your farm.](#)

have historically faced difficulties accessing USDA programs and services or are veterans. Grants from the 2501 Program are available to community-based and non-profit organizations, higher education institutions, and eligible tribal entities that have at least three years of experience working with socially disadvantaged or veteran farmers and ranchers. Individual farmers and ranchers are not eligible to apply.

For further federal funding sources, consult the [USDA Library of funding sources by topic](#). Explore private donors and foundations that have national, regional, state, or local reach to diversify program funding.

Provide Training and Technical Assistance

Newcomer farmers often need support to adapt to local agricultural practices and regulations. Providing comprehensive training and ongoing technical assistance is essential. Train program staff in [plain language and popular education approaches](#) to best teach adult populations from mixed literacy and education backgrounds. Apply concepts of [cultural humility](#), [cultural responsiveness](#), and [trauma informed care](#) to all client-facing training and assistance.

If you are planning to work with school-aged youth, adjust content to be age-appropriate. Working through schools to support their existing academic and extra-curricular goals can lead to strong partnerships and outcomes.

Facilitate workshops and training programs that focus on key topics in production and food safety. Offer practical training on [urban farming](#), [crop planning](#), [regenerative farming techniques](#), [business planning](#), [marketing](#), and compliance with local regulations around [food safety](#) and other topics.

Provide financial literacy education on business and sales practices for farming. Support newcomers in building a positive credit history, navigating tax forms and creating a business plan to [create strong foundations for a successful agribusiness](#).

Provide information on financial resources, such as [microloans and grants](#), to help farmers invest in their operations. Build mentorships that pair experienced farmers with newcomers to provide guidance, share knowledge, and build a supportive community.

“The MPA program has taught me how I can [earn] income from what I’m planting. Now I’m excited to start farming again!”

–Micro-Producer Academy participant, IRC New Roots Charlottesville, VA.

Facilitate access to tools, seeds, compost, and other necessary inputs.

Ongoing technical support ensures that farmers can successfully establish and grow their urban farms, adapt to challenges, and continuously improve their practices.

Monitoring and Evaluating Agricultural Programs

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is key to the successful implementation of agricultural programs for newcomers. Effective M&E frameworks enable program managers to track progress, assess the impact of interventions, and ensure that goals are being met in a timely manner.

For agricultural programs for newcomers, robust M&E processes can identify gaps in skills and resources, provide feedback for improving training modules, and determine if farming techniques and market strategies are culturally relevant and effective. By systematically collecting and analyzing data, monitored programs can adapt to changing needs, demonstrate tangible outcomes to stakeholders, and secure ongoing support.

Prioritize M&E practices that include [participatory evaluation approaches that involve newcomer farmers](#) to create agency and make the project more responsive to participant and contextual realities. This enhances the project’s sustainability. Work with interpreters to capture feedback from participants who don’t speak English or may not be able to answer written surveys.

If staff members are unfamiliar with M&E procedures, introduce crucial concepts. Switchboard offers [an Introduction to M&E webinar](#) and [resource guide](#), while UC Santa Cruz offers [a webinar that discusses program evaluation for agricultural programs](#).

To build a successful M&E plan, establish tools and key indicators during the [project design phase](#). Select [S.M.A.R.T. indicators](#) that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timebound. Integrate these indicators into [logic models](#), which are often required by donors.

Include data collection and survey ethics in your M&E plan¹¹ and review key principles around [giving consent](#), [risk of confidentiality](#) and not doing harm. Establish clear, transparent protocols to alleviate or inform participants of sensitive or burdensome elements in your data collection protocols. Aim to provide compensation for lengthy surveys or interviews.

Connect your M&E plan and timetable with your communications efforts. Advocate for your program through blogs, case studies, and reports. Use impact data and client stories to expand program reach, support relevant issues, and elevate your organization's mission.

Conclusion

Building sustainable agricultural programs provides opportunities to learn skills, connect to income generating opportunities and build community that will benefit both newcomer farmers and their local food systems.

By incorporating these specific agricultural training practices and approaches, providers can foster newcomers' agribusiness success and resiliency in the U.S. agricultural landscape.

Resources

- [Agriculture, Food Security, and Nutrition Onboarding Guide \(Switchboard\)](#): This guide aggregates resources to aid service providers in training staff on best practices to establish agriculture, food security, and nutrition programming at their organization.
- [Collecting Client Feedback Data \(Switchboard\)](#): This guide discusses consent and key considerations when gathering client feedback data.
- [Farmer Health and Hygiene \(IRC\)](#): This video discusses best practices for farmer health and hygiene as part of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). Available in English and Arabic.
- [Force, Fraud, and Coercion of Agricultural Workers \(Framework\)](#): This video, intended for service providers, helps service providers identify force, fraud, and coercion methods that traffickers use in the agricultural industry.
- [How to Work With Interpreters eLearning Course and Script \(Switchboard\)](#): This self-paced eLearning course provides an introduction on working with interpreters in resettlement services and offers an adaptable script for interactions with interpreters. For more in-depth investigation into this topic, see Switchboard's [Overcoming Challenges in Interpretation eLearning course](#).
- [Micro-Producer Academy Webinar \(Switchboard\)](#): This webinar highlights the IRC's Micro-Producer Academy program and discusses challenges and resources applicable to newcomer farmers.
- [Most Significant Change \(MSC\) Guide](#): This guide, co-sponsored by aid organizations in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, offers a detailed explanation of the MSC technique in participatory evaluation.
- [Photovoice Facilitator's Guide \(Rutgers University\)](#): This guide discusses the uses and applications of participatory photography as an example of participatory evaluation.
- [Six Key Findings About New Americans and Food Insecurity \(Switchboard Blog\)](#)
- [Three Steps You Can Take to Support Clients' Food Security \(Switchboard Blog\)](#)
- [USDA Rural Housing Services Program](#): USDA's Rural Housing Services Program provides technical assistances, loans, and grants for rural housing, including for farm laborers. See [the program's contact sheet](#) for points of contact and to determine if your organization's clients qualify.

¹¹ Hammer, M.J. 2017. "[Ethical considerations for data collection using surveys](#)." *Number 2/March 2017* 44, no. 2: 157-159.

To learn more about
Switchboard, visit
www.SwitchboardTA.org.



The IRC received competitive funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant #90RB0052. The project is 100% financed by federal funds. The contents of this document are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

