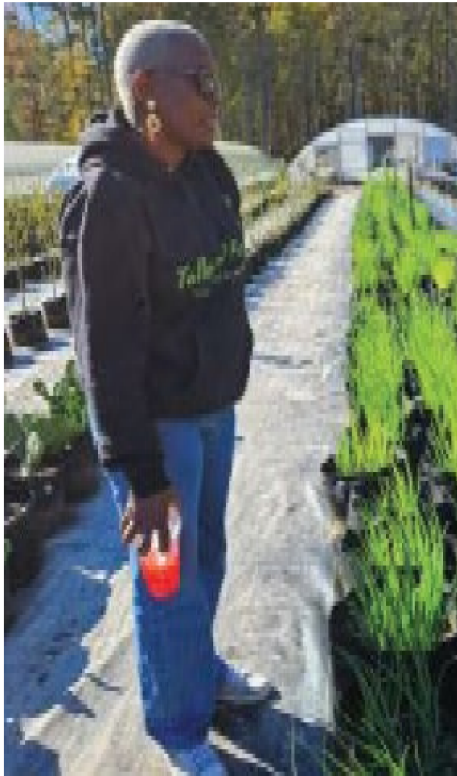


Certified Local Farm and Fish Food Aggregation Grant Program Helps Non-Profit Grow Providing Income Security to Farmers



Dr. Nadine Burton, an Alternative Crop Specialist at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES), Education and Research Farm, and owner of Tallawah Farms, LLC, along with Michael Edwards, (above) owner of Wood Duck Landing Farm, work tirelessly to promote and sustain the Around the Bay Farmers' Alliance (ATBFA).

The non-profit organization based in Somerset County was founded in 2021 by Dr. Burton and today is made up of a diverse group of 52 members with 10 active farmers, agricultural service providers, researchers, extension agents, and stakeholders working together for one cause, "the advancement of food security," says the organization's Farm Talk Magazine. Alliance farmers hail from both sides of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

ATBFA sells specialty foods and produce to local food banks and wholesalers from Maryland, Virginia, Washington D.C., Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware.

In 2023, the ATBFA farmers sold more than 90 tons of produce to clients including Capitol Area Food Bank, Seton Center, Maryland Food Bank, 4P Food Distributors, and others.

When Dr. Burton first heard about MARBIDCO's Certified Local Farm and Fish Food Aggregation Grant Program, she wanted to apply. Still, even as an educator, she was anxious about grant writing.

“This was my first grant,” said Dr. Burton. “I was inspired and went for it. I had great assistance from MARBIDCO. They walked me through the process. It was easier than I thought. If you can read and write, you can apply.”

Dr. Burton has been pleased with her interactions with MARBIDCO, “Grantees are not forgotten after receiving awards,” she added.

MARBIDCO’s Certified Local Farm and Fish Food Aggregation Grant Program funds help to grow and strengthen Maryland’s local food system and create opportunities for small farmers to sell products to wholesale and institutional markets. Grants between \$25,000 and \$100,000 are available through the Small-Scale Farmer Entity Aggregation Grant.

Applicants for this grant must include at least four Certified Local Farm and/or Certified Chesapeake Invasive Species providers sanctioned by the Maryland Department of Agriculture and provide at least a 20% match of funds for the project. When Dr. Burton first heard about MARBIDCO’s Certified Local Farm and Fish Food Aggregation Grant Program, she wanted to apply, but even as an educator, she was anxious about grant writing.

The Alliance used the grant funds to purchase a refrigerated truck, construct a pavilion, and purchase other supplies needed to box up produce for wholesale buyers.

In addition, a refrigerated trailer was donated from Perdue.

Dr. Burton, originally from Jamaica, brings a depth of knowledge about growing specialty crops. On her six-acre parcel, she farms a variety of produce, including callaloo, protein-rich spinach-like leaves used in Caribbean dishes.

Before planting season Dr. Burton and Mr. Edwards learn their client’s food needs and relay this information to Alliance members. The farmers in turn adjust their crops as demand fluctuates.

“We strive to meet the needs of our customers,” said Mr. Edwards. “Seton Center recently requested year-round produce.”

Seton Center in Princess Anne is part of Catholic Charities and delivers direct care human services, including food assistance to over 83,000 individuals and families living in Delaware and Maryland.

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Wood Duck Landing Farm has dedicated two tunnels to meet the Alliances' goal of supplying year-round food, one to vegetables for Seton Center and another housing more than 34,000 seed starts for Alliance farmers to sow throughout the year.

Other ATBFA farms also will be using tunnels to increase their produce output for year-round sales, thus adding new income to their businesses.

Among the certified growers taking part in the Alliance is CP Farms, LLC of Westover. Floyd Pugh has made many trips throughout the summer with his eggplants, zucchini, and squash to sell through the Alliance.

He and Christine Sawyer drive the farms' produce to Wood Duck Landing Farm and stack full cases of their produce in the refrigerated garage that will go out in the next delivery. Mr. Pugh says since joining the ATBFA, their business has dramatically improved.

"We are providing income and security to the farmers," said Mr. Edwards.

Dr. Burton is proud of the output from the small farms on both shores of the Chesapeake Bay.

Near the end of the growing season, Dr. Burton explained "We have 2 tons[of produce] and have projected to sell another 2 tons by the end of this year.

"Most of us in the Alliance are transitioning to hoop house production to ensure a longer growing season. We have much room for expansion. We just delivered 5,000 pounds of produce to the Capitol Area Food Bank."

Opportunity exists to sell to the Somerset County School system, she said, but the Alliance needs further funding for processing and packaging equipment.

They are hoping to build a place to clean, cut, and wrap fresh vegetables to be delivered to area schools.

Additionally, the duo teaches environmental practices and sustainable farming.

Mr. Edwards says organic cover crops can be grown between the rows of fresh produce. These unused rows regain nutrients for future plantings and reduce the need for insect repellants and fertilizers.

“I have used only 25 pounds of fertilizer on six acres,” said Mr. Edwards of his kale crop that ultimately filled 190 boxes netting a ton of product.

In summary, says Dr. Burton, “The Alliance has provided income security to the farmers and has employment for the area. When other farmers see what we are doing, they want to join. It is a new beginning for farmers. The more farms that produce, the stronger the food security in the region,” she added.