

Pandemic Adjustment Equipment Grant Fund Recipient: Amaranth Acres



The COVID-19 Pandemic has led many consumers to seek local farm products. For Indhu Balasubramaniam, this meant a spike in interest in her Montgomery County farm Amaranth Acres and an increase in demand for her produce and her community-supported agriculture (CSA) membership program. When she heard about MARBIDCO's Pandemic Adjustment Equipment Grant Fund (PAEGF) in June 2020, she knew it would help her adjust her operations to meet the influx of new

customers and help her remain economically sustainable now and in the future.

"This year, with the number of new people asking for vegetables and asking to be members, I thought okay, now is the time. And this grant came at the right time," said Balasubramaniam. "It has been very easy working with MARBIDCO."

Balasubramaniam started her farm enterprise in 2015. When she could not find any locally grown or organic ethnic vegetables in the Germantown area, she decided to search for land where she could grow her own produce and animals.

Since then, her farm has expanded from selling only retail vegetables to include selling goat meat and having its own CSA program comprised of vegetables and eggs. Produce grown on her farm includes bitter melon, tomatoes, okra, bell peppers, ridge melon or luffa, purple-eyed peas, and dragon tongue beans, among other varieties.

With the PAEGF grant, Balasubramaniam acquired funds that enabled her to purchase a freezer, refrigerator, a building structure, and the infrastructure to facilitate a drip irrigation system. The new building will house the refrigeration and freezer units, serve as a space for her to create CSA members' weekly bags of produce and eggs, and store the produce she sells through a retail market. The grant also allowed them to significantly improve their irrigation system.

Currently, Amaranth Acres has 28 members in its CSA program. With the additional equipment purchased using the PAEGF grant, Balasubramaniam believes she can significantly expand her vegetable production, increase the CSA membership to between 50 and 60 members, and sell more produce at retail.

"I think even with it [the pandemic] gone, this will have a positive impact that continues. Even the retail customers, despite it being a little more expensive than for CSA members, to keep coming back. I think we need to improve local food systems," said Balasubramaniam.

During the week, Balasubramaniam works full-time as a software engineer, but in the spring and summer, she works from 6:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. on the land. After her workday, she resumes her farm work from about 5:30 p.m. to dusk. Her husband and children also help on the farm, and she has several volunteers who come on the weekends to help with the harvest.

"Initially I thought it would be a community farm, so more people would benefit and get to enjoy it the same way I do. The pandemic accelerated this, with new volunteers coming in," said Balasubramaniam. "Working the land gives me a satisfaction that I never found in my software job, and I'd like to expand that feeling to more people."