Manchester Food Forest

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Project Overview:

My Climate Action Project creates a food forest at a medical center in Manchester, Tennessee, to address food insecurity and restore soil health through regenerative agriculture. Early harvests will provide fresh, organic produce to residents in need. As the forest matures, I aim to replace Unity Medical Center's cafeteria offerings and support the Daily Bread food distribution program. Success will be measured not only by food output but also by soil improvement and community engagement. Ultimately, I hope to replicate this model in rural hospital cafeterias across America.

Short Term Goals:

Research and Planning: The first six weeks focused on soil testing and site analysis. I found the soil slightly acidic but nutrient-rich for plants suited to USDA Zone 7b. I met with local experts to assess cafeteria produce needs, researched companion planting, and developed a plan for five garden beds designed to reflect a forest's layered ecosystem.

Team Development: I assembled a team of personal advisors and volunteers early in the process. Advisors include Harpeth Harvest, Rebecca French, Amanda Fuller, and my grandmother, Suchitra Mukherji. Weekly consultations with Harpeth Harvest (my brother and his business partner) guided decisions on soil balance, spacing, and labor.

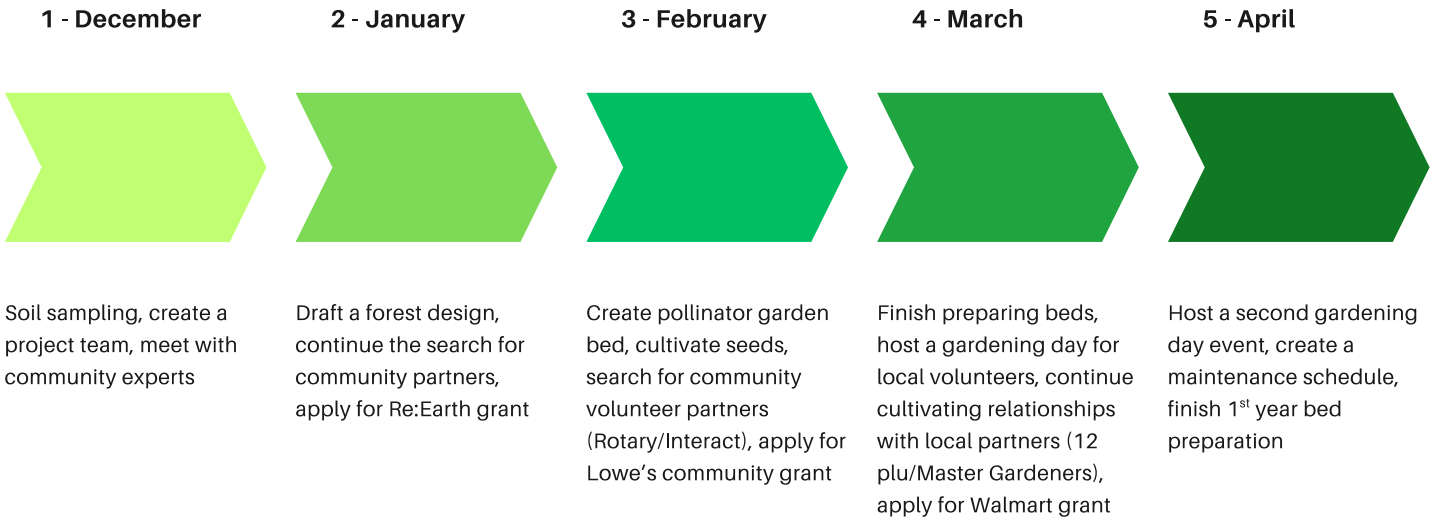
Resource Collection: Gathering resources proved time-intensive. I applied for grants from Lowe's, Walmart, and Re-Earth, secured a $100 donation from Home Depot, compost from Starbucks, and 32 bags of soil, a 300 dollar value from Tractor Supply Co. A Facebook page I launched raised an additional $150 and helped attract community support.

Prep Work/ Planting: The prep work for the food forest included clearing grass from the garden bed areas, filling beds with organic soil, laying walking paths so volunteers can safely reach the gardening area, and lining garden beds with stones. This was accomplished through 54.5 volunteer hours provided by community members and me. The planting consisted of indoor seed cultivation and the creation of a pollinator garden. The majority of crops will be planted in May to prevent frost.

Challenges:

I faced and overcome several challenges over the past few months in every phase of the food forest process. The first challenge I faced was a fear of committing to a specific forest layout. After speaking with community experts, I discovered that the need for produce is both high and versatile. It was difficult to decide which crops to plant this year knowing that so many benefit the community. With the help of my mentor and ambassador I was able to overcome this challenge by picking a single recipe and incorporating those crops into my design. This has allowed me to scale my project and make it accomplishable given the time and resource constraints. A second problem I faced was a much larger need funding need than first anticipated. I overcame this challenge by applying for multiple grants, reaching out to local corporations, setting up a Facebook page to seek funding and physical resource donations from community members, and breaking project goals into smaller sections. The other significant challenge I faced was a lot of bad weather. Immediately after planting the pollinator garden a rain storm lasting 3 days rolled through the city. This was followed by a week of freezing temperatures. I overcame this by waiting to add more seeds to the bed once the water in it evaporated. Since then several more severe storms have passed through the area, but the garden beds have remained resilient.

SHORT-TERM TIMELINE (ENACTED)



Key learnings

• Know your grow zone and plant native. Turning a grassy field into a food forest takes significant time and resources, but choosing climate-adapted plants helps save both.

• Involve the community early. I planned for community engagement, but I was surprised by the creativity and insight many members brought to the table.

• Start small for big results. Asking for large, open-ended donations raised little. But when I invited people to "sponsor" a $5 strawberry plant, I raised $125 in just a few days—proof that small asks can lead to meaningful impact.

Impact/Outcomes

At the end of the five period I expected to have a fully planned forest layout, a list of a few community partners, a list of potential donors and two cultivated garden beds. I am ending month five with support from several local service-oriented clubs, several corporate sponsors, a list of community donors, 1 cultivated garden bed, and 3 beds that will be fully cultivated by the end of May. The amount of community support that I have received for this project far exceeded my expectations. The potential for ongoing impact is enormous as the forest is only in the beginning stages of life and has yet to live through a harvest season. As the forest continues to hit milestones community members become more invested. More business are donating, more community members are volunteering, more clubs are committing to partnerships. The price of fresh food is consistently rising making this initiative more vital and exciting to my community.

What I am Most Proud to have Accomplished

My greatest accomplishment has been fully committing to seeing this project come to fruition. Every week I have taken steps towards creating the Manchester Food Forest. Whether it be sampling soil, meeting with local leaders, soliciting donors, joining new organizations, or digging up grass, I have pushed myself to work towards bringing this project to life. I am proud of how I have evolved to more confidently explain why I am so passionate about the food forest. I am proud of how many hours of manual labor I have put into creating the garden beds. I am proud that I reached out to organizations even though I was afraid they would decline to help. Finally, I am proud that I have been able to bring excitement about environmental sustainability to my community.