NO-TILL ORGANIC MARKET GARDEN

Community Impact Study

Growing Food, Growing Communities

The Story of Cenerica Smith, Deeply Rooted Farm, and the Louisiana Urban Gardening Initiative

Caddo Parish, Louisiana



USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

NO-TILL OMG! Organically Managed Gardening

CAMPTI Field of DREAMS

Community Leaders Profile

Growing Opportunity

For Cenerica Smith, gardening has never been simply about growing vegetables.

As founder of Deeply Rooted Farm and Executive Director of the Louisiana Urban Gardening Initiative (LUGI), she sees agriculture as a powerful tool for strengthening communities, improving food access, and creating opportunities for people who have often been overlooked by traditional food systems.

When Cenerica joined the No-Till Organic Market Garden project, she was already working to address food insecurity in underserved neighborhoods throughout Shreveport. Many of the communities she served were classified as food deserts, with limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables and few opportunities for residents to learn how to grow their own food.

The project provided technical assistance, soil testing, training, and access to a statewide network of growers committed to soil health and regenerative agriculture. More importantly, it provided tools that could be shared with the communities she served.

Through Deeply Rooted Farm and LUGI, Cenerica began applying regenerative practices in community gardens designed not only to produce food but also to build knowledge, confidence, and neighborhood leadership. What emerged was something much larger than a gardening project.

It became a movement rooted in healthy soil, community ownership, and the belief that everyone deserves access to fresh, nutritious food.



"Growing food is about more than feeding people. It's about creating opportunities, building community, and helping people reconnect with the land."— Cenerica Smith

Learning Through Community Gardens

The Louisiana Urban Gardening Initiative was founded in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when many communities became acutely aware of vulnerabilities within the food system.

As community gardens expanded across Shreveport, Cenerica recognized an opportunity to strengthen production while improving long-term sustainability. Through Deeply Rooted Farm, she began testing regenerative practices that could later be adapted and shared across LUGI's growing network of community gardens.

Before joining the project, many garden beds relied heavily on purchased inputs and traditional gardening methods. Through participation in the No-Till Organic Market Garden project, Cenerica and her team learned how regenerative practices could reduce costs while improving productivity.

New practices included:

- No-till production
- Composting
- Vermicomposting
- Mulching
- Biochar production
- Soil health monitoring
- Continuous soil cover

These practices helped transform garden spaces into productive growing environments while reducing dependence on commercial fertilizers and soil amendments.

Just as importantly, the gardens became outdoor classrooms where residents could learn practical skills and gain confidence in their ability to grow food.



Cenerica Smith works with a group of garden volunteers.

Key Findings

- Three community garden sites established throughout Shreveport
- Thirty raised beds developed at the Morning Star Community Garden
- Community orchard restoration efforts initiated
- Reduced dependence on purchased fertilizers through compost production
- Community workshops expanded knowledge of composting and soil health
- Increased food production through improved soil management practices
- Volunteer engagement became a cornerstone of project success

Building Healthy Soil at Deeply Rooted Farm



While community gardens became an important part of Cenerica Smith's work, much of her hands-on experimentation with regenerative agriculture took place at Deeply Rooted Farm, her personal backyard garden.

Because funding for the community gardens depended on annual support, Deeply Rooted Farm served as the primary demonstration site for soil testing and long-term implementation of conservation practices throughout the No-Till Organic Market Garden project.

The garden became a living laboratory where Cenerica could evaluate new techniques, observe changes in soil health, and determine which practices could later be shared with community members through the Louisiana Urban Gardening Initiative.

Before joining the project, maintaining fertility often required purchasing commercial organic fertilizers and soil amendments. Through participation in the program, Cenerica learned how regenerative practices could reduce costs while improving productivity.

At Deeply Rooted Farm, she began implementing practices such as:

- Composting
- Vermicomposting
- Biochar production
- Heavy mulching
- Reduced tillage
- Continuous soil cover
- Organic matter recycling

> *"One of the most valuable lessons I learned is that it doesn't cost a lot of money to grow your own food. Many of the resources you need can be found right outside your front door."*

Rather than viewing leaves, branches, grass clippings, and other organic materials as waste, they became valuable resources for building healthy soil. Materials generated on-site were returned to the garden through composting and biochar production, helping improve soil structure, biological activity, and nutrient cycling.

One of the most important lessons Cenerica learned through the project was that healthy soil does not have to be expensive. By producing compost, vermicompost, and biochar at home, she significantly reduced dependence on purchased inputs while improving the productivity of the garden. The experience demonstrated that regenerative agriculture can be both environmentally sustainable and economically practical for families and communities alike.

The knowledge gained at Deeply Rooted Farm became the foundation for workshops, demonstrations, and educational programs offered through LUGI. Practices that proved successful in her own garden were shared with residents across Shreveport, helping others learn how to build healthy soil using resources they already had available.

Growing Communities Through Agriculture

The greatest impact of the project may not be measured in pounds of food harvested.

It can be measured in people.

Throughout the project, hundreds of community members participated in garden activities, volunteer workdays, educational programs, and food production efforts across Shreveport.

The Louisiana Urban Gardening Initiative developed partnerships with neighborhood organizations, volunteers, and the Caddo Parish District Attorney's diversion program, creating opportunities for individuals to complete community service while learning practical skills and contributing to neighborhood improvement.

Volunteers planted gardens.

Built beds.

Spread compost.

Harvested produce.

Maintained community spaces.

And helped create environments where residents could reconnect with food and one another.

Perhaps the most remarkable contribution came through community volunteerism. During the grant period, community members contributed more than $217,000 in documented in-kind cost share through volunteer labor and participation.

That extraordinary investment demonstrates the level of local ownership and support generated by the project.

"Food insecurity is very prevalent in the Shreveport area. My desire is to see community gardens in every neighborhood and leaders who can teach others how to grow food."



Community Impact Highlights

- More than **$217,000** in local in-kind cost share
- Three active community garden sites
- Partnership with the District Attorney's diversion program
- Community composting and vermicomposting workshops
- Increased neighborhood access to fresh food
- Volunteer leadership development
- Expanded community engagement around food and health

Looking Forward



Growing the Next Generation of Garden Leaders

As the project progressed, Cenerica's vision continued to expand.

While the gardens themselves remain important, her long-term goal is to develop neighborhood leaders who can sustain and expand the work within their own communities.

Rather than relying solely on outside organizations, Cenerica envisions a network of trained community coordinators who can teach gardening skills, mentor residents, and help create lasting food-producing spaces throughout the city.

The project demonstrated that regenerative agriculture can do more than improve soil.

It can build leadership.

It can strengthen neighborhoods.

And it can create pathways toward greater food security and community resilience.

Key Themes

- Food Access
- Community Development
- Urban Agriculture
- Soil Health
- Environmental Education
- Volunteer Engagement
- Leadership Development
- Historically Underserved Communities
- Community Empowerment
- Regenerative Agriculture
- Local Food Systems

Key Lessons Learned

- Healthy soil can be built using locally available resources.
- Community gardens are powerful tools for education and engagement.
- Volunteer participation creates lasting community ownership.
- Regenerative practices can reduce costs while improving production.
- Neighborhood leadership is essential for long-term success.

Closing Reflection

Cenerica Smith's work demonstrates that healthy soil can be the foundation for much more than food production. Through Deeply Rooted Farm and the Louisiana Urban Gardening Initiative, regenerative agriculture became a catalyst for education, leadership development, volunteer engagement, and community empowerment. The gardens established through this project continue to provide fresh food, practical skills, and opportunities for residents to invest in the future of their neighborhoods. In doing so, they offer a powerful example of how conservation practices can strengthen both communities and the people who call them home.