NO-TILL ORGANIC MARKET GARDEN

Producer Case Study

Growing Community Through Healthy Soil

The Story of Maidi McCray and the KCS Community Center Garden

DeSoto Parish, Louisiana



USDA United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

NO-TILL OMG! Organically Managed Gardening

CAMPI Field of DREAMS

Planting Seeds of Connection

For Maidi McCray, gardening was never just about growing vegetables.

As a community leader in Mansfield, Louisiana, Maidi saw the No-Till Organic Market Garden project as an opportunity to bring people together while teaching practical skills that could strengthen families and neighborhoods. Through her involvement with the KCS Community Center and the Foster Grandparent Program, she believed gardening could become a powerful tool for education, service, and community engagement.

When she joined the project, Maidi was looking for an opportunity to learn. Like many participants, she had limited experience with regenerative agriculture but was eager to explore new approaches to food production. Through workshops, technical assistance, soil testing, demonstrations, and peer learning, she began discovering how healthy soil could support healthy food while creating opportunities for community involvement.

The garden started modestly, but the impact extended beyond the growing beds almost immediately.

Volunteers, foster grandparents, children, neighbors, and community members all found ways to participate. What began as a gardening project became a gathering place where people worked together toward a shared goal.

Perhaps most importantly, the project reinforced Maidi's belief that agriculture can help strengthen communities.

> *"I thought it was a good idea to get the volunteers and the community center involved in sustainable agriculture."*
> *— Maidi McCray*

Learning Through Innovation

Discovering the Power of No-Till

Participation in the No-Till Organic Market Garden project introduced Maidi to a new way of thinking about food production.

Rather than relying on intensive tillage and synthetic inputs, she learned how mulch, compost, soil biology, and continuous soil cover could create productive growing spaces while supporting long-term soil health.

The project provided opportunities to explore:

- No-till production methods
- Composting
- Mulching
- Soil health monitoring
- Pollinator-friendly plantings
- Community gardening
- Youth engagement through agriculture

As the garden developed, Maidi gained confidence in her ability to grow food while observing how regenerative practices improved the growing environment. The project demonstrated that healthy soil could support productive gardens while requiring fewer external inputs.

Equally important were the educational opportunities. Workshops, field days, and monthly meetings connected her with other growers across Louisiana who were experimenting with similar practices and sharing their experiences.



Maidi traveled across the state to attend the 2nd Annual Field Day at Cicada Calling Farm to learn more about cut-flower production.

Key Findings

- Adopted no-till gardening practices
- Increased knowledge of soil health principles
- Created opportunities for community involvement
- Introduced youth to food production
- Expanded local interest in gardening
- Improved pollinator habitat
- Observed increased earthworm activity
- Strengthened neighborhood relationships

Building Healthy Soil

Letting Nature Lead

One of the most memorable discoveries for Maidi was seeing the biological life that developed in the soil.

As no-till practices were implemented, she began noticing larger earthworm populations, increased pollinator activity, and greater wildlife presence around the garden. These observations provided visible evidence that healthy soil was supporting a healthier ecosystem.

The garden relied on simple but effective soil-building practices:

- Mulching
- Compost additions
- Reduced soil disturbance
- Continuous ground cover
- Pollinator plantings
- Natural fertility management

Over time, these practices helped improve moisture retention and reduce weed pressure while supporting beneficial organisms.

The changes were not limited to the garden beds. Flowers planted around her mother's porch attracted butterflies and birds while creating opportunities for social interaction and outdoor activity. What began as a small gardening project became a source of joy and engagement for an elderly family member experiencing social isolation.



Maidi was surprised by the results of her “Soil Your Undies” challenge.

"The earthworms were huge—humongous. We also noticed more birds, butterflies, and pollinators than we'd ever seen before."
— Maidi McCray

Growing a Farm and a Community

Bringing People Together

The most significant impact of the project may have occurred outside the garden itself.

Maidi observed how gardening created opportunities for people who might not otherwise interact to work together toward a common goal. One example involved coordinating with a neighbor to access water for the garden when the community center lacked outdoor water service. That simple challenge became an opportunity to build a new relationship.

Children participating in summer programs learned how to plant seeds, care for crops, and watch their efforts grow into harvestable food. Many experienced food production firsthand for the first time.

The garden also demonstrated how agriculture can help address broader community needs.

Participants learned:

- Where food comes from
- How healthy food is produced
- The value of local food systems
- Basic gardening skills
- Environmental stewardship
- Community cooperation

For Maidi, gardening became a practical tool for community development and food security.

She hopes the success of the project will inspire additional neighborhood gardens throughout Mansfield and surrounding communities.

> *"Just the small things we were able to do brought our community closer and brought us together."*
> *— Maidi McCray*

Looking Forward

Expanding the Vision

Today, Maidi continues sharing the knowledge gained through the No-Till Organic Market Garden project.

Her vision extends beyond a single garden. She hopes to help other residents establish gardens on their own properties while expanding community interest in local food production and regenerative agriculture.

She believes gardening can improve food security, strengthen neighborhoods, and create opportunities for people of all ages to learn practical skills while reconnecting with the land.

The project reinforced an important lesson:

Healthy soil helps grow healthy communities.



Maidi watches while the soil sample is being collected.

Key Themes from Maidi McCray's Journey

- Community Gardening
- Soil Health
- Food Self-Reliance
- Youth Education
- Senior Engagement
- Community Building
- Pollinator Habitat
- Regenerative Agriculture
- Historically Underserved Communities

Key Lessons Learned

- Gardening can strengthen community relationships.
- Healthy soil supports healthy food production.
- Youth learn best through hands-on experiences.
- Small projects can create lasting impacts.
- Local food production builds community resilience.

Closing Reflection

Maidi McCray's experience demonstrates that the impact of regenerative agriculture extends far beyond crop production. Through curiosity, community engagement, and a willingness to learn, she transformed a small garden into a catalyst for connection, education, and neighborhood resilience. Her story reminds us that healthy soil can grow more than food—it can help grow stronger communities, stronger relationships, and new opportunities for future generations.