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**Future Generations University
Sprout School Program
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TOOLKIT & BEST PRACTICES GUIDE (2023 - 2026)



*For Educators, Community Leaders, and Program Coordinators
Supporting Farm to School Work in West Virginia*

SPROUT SCHOOL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SPROUT SCHOOL TOOLKIT & BEST PRACTICES GUIDE BOOK

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND



→ What is the Farm to School Movement?

The Farm to School (F2S) movement connects schools and youth-serving institutions with local food producers, educators, and community members to integrate agriculture into educational, nutritional, and economic systems. Originating in the early 1990s, Farm to School programming now exists in all 50 U.S. states and territories and is supported by the USDA, state departments of education and agriculture, and a wide network of nonprofits, farmers, and school leaders.

Farm to School typically includes three core components and the enabling policies.

- **Procurement:** Schools purchasing and serving locally grown foods in cafeterias and classrooms.
- **Education:** Nutrition, agriculture, and environmental lessons using gardens, farms, and real-world learning.
- **School Gardens:** Students engaging directly with food production, gardening, and food systems on-site.

The goals of Farm to School are to increase access to fresh, healthy food for youth and educators, provide hands-on learning opportunities, support local agriculture, and build stronger school-community partnerships.

WHY IS FARM TO SCHOOL IMPORTANT IN WEST VIRGINIA?

West Virginia faces significant public health and economic challenges, particularly in rural and under-resourced communities. Many counties experience high rates of food insecurity, limited access to fresh produce, and declining participation in small-scale agriculture. Farm to School addresses these challenges through integrated programming that offers multiple benefits to the community.

Farm to School is not just about what children eat, it's a strategy for community resilience, youth leadership development, and long-term systems change.

Food Access Outcomes

- Increases student access to nutritious, fresh foods.
- Builds familiarity with local and seasonal produce through school meals and taste tests.
- Strengthens school nutrition programs through direct partnerships with farmers.

Health Outcomes

- Encourages lifelong healthy eating habits among children.
- Increases fruit and vegetable consumption through exposure and education.
- Supports mental health through garden-based learning and outdoor activity.

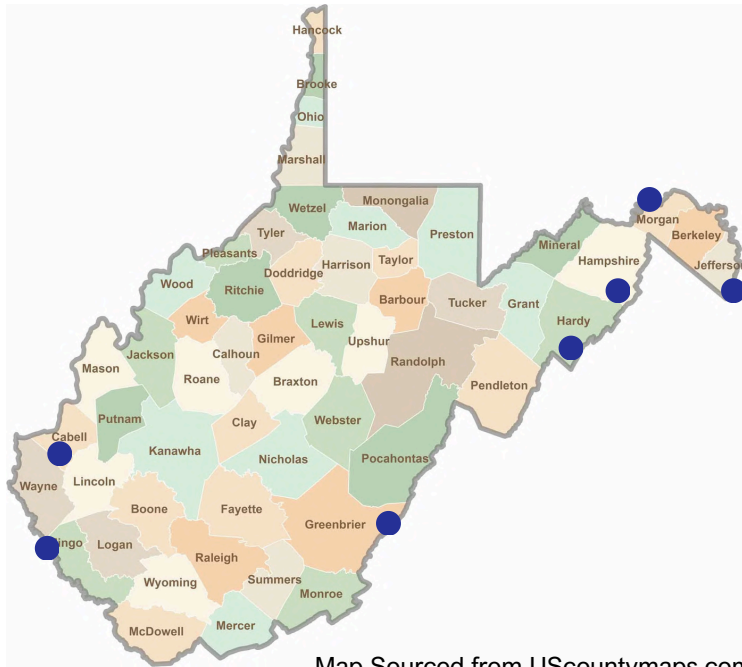
Economic Development Outcomes

- Provides reliable markets for local farmers and producers.
- Keeps food dollars within the local economy.
- Opens pathways for youth entrepreneurship and job skills development.

Community Development Outcomes

- Builds cross-sector relationships between schools, families, nonprofits, and local businesses.
- Revitalizes rural spaces through school gardens, greenhouses, and food-based programming.
- Engages students in community problem-solving through project-based learning.

HISTORY OF FARM TO SCHOOL IN WEST VIRGINIA



Map Sourced from USCountymaps.com

7 COUNTIES IN SPROUT SCHOOL PROGRAM

- Charles Town (Jefferson County)
- Snowshoe (Pocahontas County)
- Romney (Hampshire County)
- Berkeley Springs (Morgan County)
- Dunlow (Wayne County)
- Huntington (Cabell County)
- Wardensville (Hardy County)

West Virginia's Farm to School efforts have grown steadily over the past decade. What began as isolated projects led by teachers, nonprofits, and nutrition educators has expanded into a state-supported ecosystem with momentum at the local, regional, and state levels.

Key developments include:

- Early pilot programs in school gardens and local sourcing through WVU Extension and community-based organizations.
- Development of Harvest of the Month campaigns that highlight local produce in schools.
- Support from the WV Department of Education's Office of Child Nutrition, which integrates local sourcing into school meal standards.
- Partnerships with organizations like Try This WV, Future Generations University, and the WVU Family Nutrition Program, which provide training, technical assistance, and mini-grants.
- Participation in USDA-funded programs like Farm to School grants and Northeast SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education) initiatives.
-

Despite this growth, many local educators, nonprofit leaders, and community health workers still face barriers such as limited time, funding, and access to technical knowledge. Sprout School was created in response to those needs.

ABOUT SPROUT SCHOOL

Summary

Sprout School is a practitioner-driven professional development program designed by Future Generations University to support Farm to School project leaders across West Virginia. It offers a structured yet flexible space for educators, community leaders, and nonprofit staff to build skills, implement projects, and collaborate with peers.

Sprout School is not for academic credit but is treated as an intensive, project-based training program, grounded in real-world community application. Participants leave with not only knowledge, but also a fully implemented youth agriculture or nutrition project in their local context.

Who Participates

Sprout School is designed for individuals who are actively involved in or launching Farm to School projects.

This includes:

- Public school educators and school garden coordinators.
- WVU Family Nutrition Program (FNP) health educators.
- Nonprofit and public health professionals.
- Extension agents and AmeriCorps service members.
- Community volunteers and food system advocates.

Participants often come from diverse geographic areas and bring varied levels of experience, but all are motivated by the same goal: to increase youth engagement with healthy food, farming, and local food systems.

Program Goals

- Equip participants with the tools and frameworks to implement community-based agriculture and nutrition education projects.
- Support effective project planning, team building, and evaluation processes.
- Strengthen and grow local networks by connecting practitioners across West Virginia.
- Generate lasting educational and community health outcomes.

UNDERSTANDING THE SPROUT SCHOOL MODEL



Program Overview

Sprout School is a professional development program led by Future Generations University. It trains cohorts of agricultural service providers, educators, and nonprofit professionals to lead youth-focused agriculture and nutrition projects in schools and communities. The model blends virtual instruction, hands-on learning labs, individualized coaching, and a supportive peer network.

Key Program Components

Virtual Education Sessions

Bi-weekly Zoom sessions explore topics ranging from food justice to school procurement to youth entrepreneurship.

1:1 Coaching

Participants are matched with experienced coaches to guide project development and troubleshooting.

Youth Agriculture or Nutrition Project

Each participant designs and implements a real-world project with students, using mini-grant funds when available.

Learning Labs

Participants complete four learning labs that translate theory into action, including asset mapping, project planning, and implementation reporting.

Ongoing Peer Network

Quarterly meetings offer continued connection, troubleshooting, and learning across cohorts.



2024–2025 SYLLABUS SNAPSHOT



Sprout School met virtually every other Tuesday evening from February 2023 to September 2024, and then from October 2024 to May 2025.

TOPICS INCLUDE:

- Introduction to Farm to School and local food systems
- Community asset mapping
- Building effective project teams
- Grant writing and program funding
- Nutrition and agricultural curriculum tools
- Project design, implementation, and evaluation
- Managing school gardens and engaging volunteers
- Youth entrepreneurship and sustainability planning

Sessions include guest speakers from WV-based programs, real-time Q&A, and group reflection. The full syllabus and Learning Lab instructions are provided in the Appendices section of this guide.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Understanding of Farm to School principles and practices
- Ability to build community-based project teams
- Skills to design, fund, implement, and sustain impactful school-based projects
- School Farm curriculum and communication tools
- Mapping assets and resources to your school
- Building programs and reporting to continue growth and program tracking
- The implementation of feedback and data tracking to maintain a sustainable program.

PLANNING & IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

“Learning Labs”

Sprout School’s structure centers around four core “Learning Labs” that guide each participant through the planning, execution, and evaluation of a small-scale Farm to School project. This section outlines the practical tools, examples, and instructions used in each lab. These tools are designed to be used directly by current and future practitioners who want to replicate or adapt Sprout School’s methods in their own communities.

This section outlines the step-by-step project planning process used in Sprout School. These tools help participants move from initial community observations to a fully implemented and evaluated youth agriculture or nutrition project.

The Sprout School planning framework is based on four core Learning Labs, delivered across the school year. Each Lab builds on the last, and is structured to be accessible to educators, volunteers, and community leaders at any stage of experience.

EACH LAB INCLUDES:

- A goal-setting prompt
- A set of planning or implementation tasks
- Clear deliverable to move your project forward
- Optional templates and tools
- Staff coaching and review



LAB LEARNING & PLANNING STRUCTURE

→ Community Asset Mapping

[\(Learning Lab #1\)](#)

Objective: Understand your local context and identify the people, spaces, organizations, and existing efforts that can support youth agriculture or nutrition work.

This foundational Lab ensures projects are rooted in the strengths and realities of the local community.

PARTICIPANTS MAP OUT

- Natural, cultural, human, and built assets
- Community partnerships and potential collaborators
- Gaps or opportunities in programming
- Financial and economic resources
- Beginning to build possible projects and partnerships

→ Building a Project Team

[\(Learning Lab #2\)](#)

Objective: Identify and engage the people who will support your project, from school staff and volunteers to local farmers or businesses.

The focus is on collaboration, relationship-building, and clarity of responsibilities.

PARTICIPANTS

- Create a “dream team” list with roles and motivations
- Partnership development planning and skill sharing
- Build a committed team and define each person’s role
- Action work with community building and sustainable partnership development

LAB LEARNING & PLANNING STRUCTURE

→ Designing a Project

Learning Lab #3

Create a comprehensive plan for your project that encompasses goals, milestones, a budget, and an evaluation strategy.

During this cohort, participants hone their skills in developing project plans and will outline and craft unique projects that can relate to agriculture education, nutrition education, environmental science, or local sourcing.

This Lab turns your idea into a feasible, fundable, and measurable plan.

Suggestions:

- For young students, use smiley face scales
- For gardens, take before/after photos
- Keep it short, simple, and relevant

PARTICIPANTS DEFINE:

- Learning how to form SMART goals
- Develop A timeline of tasks and roles
- Create a detailed project budget (up to \$375 from Sprout School)
- A plan to measure success and creation project evolutions

→ Project Evaluation & Reporting

(Learning Lab #4)

Reflect on what actually happened during project implementation and share outcomes, lessons learned, and next steps.

Final reports help strengthen future programming across the state.

All labs can be found [here](#).

PARTICIPANTS REPORT ON:

- What worked and what didn't / Reflective learning and adaptation
- Final budget, review and organization
- Measurable impact (youth reached, materials created, etc.)
- Advice for future participants

BEST PRACTICES FROM THE FIELD

● Insights from Sprout School Projects

This section highlights successful and creative projects completed by Sprout School participants. Each example aligns with the four core stages of Sprout School project development:

1. Community Asset Mapping
2. Team Building
3. Project Design & Planning
4. Evaluation & Reporting

By showcasing how real educators and community leaders navigated these stages, this section serves as a resource for inspiration, troubleshooting, and effective planning.

Whether you're designing your first Sprout project or refining a returning effort, these examples offer tested ideas and replicable strategies.

● Tips for Creating Your Own Project

Each Sprout School project reflects the strengths and context of its community. When creating your own:

- Refer to the Learning Lab prompts to guide each phase of your work
- Use the planning templates (see Appendix) for steps, budget, and roles
- Start small and focus on what you can realistically accomplish
- Track your learning, not just your outcomes, even "failures" offer insights
- Connect with past participants if you are trying something similar



SPROUT SCHOOL CASE STUDIES 2024 - 2025

CASE STUDY: Sprouting Change Across West Virginia

Program 2025 overview: How Sprout School is Cultivating Community-Led Youth Agriculture Projects Across the State

Across West Virginia, in small towns, libraries, schools, and parks, something is growing, and it's not just vegetables. It's a new generation of leaders, educators, and volunteers who are planting seeds of change in their communities through Sprout School, an applied learning and funding program launched by Future Generations University and partners.

Sprout School equips West Virginians with the knowledge, mentorship, and microgrants needed to launch small-scale, high-impact projects that connect youth to food, farming, nutrition, and community. In a state where food insecurity remains a pressing concern and access to fresh, local food is uneven, the program empowers everyday leaders, from librarians to health educators, to make local food and learning part of the daily experience for kids.

Growing from the Ground Up

Each cohort of Sprout School participants joins a year-long learning experience built around four "Learning Labs," designed to guide them from idea to implementation:

- **Asset Mapping:** identifying local resources and opportunities
- **Team Building:** gathering the right partners and collaborators
- **Project Planning:** designing a project, timeline, budget, and evaluation plan
- **Implementation & Evaluation:** putting it all into action and learning from it

Participants also receive personalized coaching, peer support, and up to \$375 in funding, making even the most grassroots ideas possible.

SPROUT SCHOOL CASE STUDIES 2024 - 2025

CASE STUDY: Sprouting Change Across West Virginia (Continued)

Local Projects, Statewide Impact

No two Sprout School projects are alike, and they all reflect the creativity and commitment of local leaders.

A Model for Rural Innovation

What makes Sprout School stand out isn't just its projects; it's the way it centers local knowledge and starts with what communities already have. The model acknowledges the real constraints rural leaders face: limited staff, tight budgets, and high turnover, and provides scaffolding that's simple, flexible, and replicable.

And while the funding is modest, the outcomes are not. Many participants report a renewed sense of agency, new connections to state and local organizations, and the confidence to take on bigger initiatives in the future.

Sprout School is more than a grant; it's a movement rooted in care, creativity, and community. As West Virginia looks to grow a healthier, more connected future, it's the local seeds nurtured by programs like Sprout School that may offer the most lasting change, connections and long-term sustainable and impactful programming for their communities.

QUOTES FROM SPROUT SCHOOL COHORTS

Lydia A. Cyrus

Farm to Institution Coordinator at Refresh Appalachia
Wayne County, WV

"Sprout School gave me new tools and a sense of possibility. I realized we didn't need a massive program to make an impact — just the right question, the right partner, and a bucket of blue dye."

Shelly Keeney

Regional Food Coordinator at Refresh Appalachia (now Market Manager at Wild Ramp)
Huntington, WV

"Programs like this give kids a deeper connection to the environment and community. I didn't expect it to change me too — but it did."

CASE STUDY: FAYETTE COUNTY

**COMBINING GARDENING AND NUTRITION FOR COUNTYWIDE IMPACT
 LEAD: NOEL MITCHELL, WVU FAMILY NUTRITION PROGRAM**

Noel Mitchell and her team worked to combine the long-standing Harvest of the Month nutrition education initiative with school gardening programs to create a fully integrated, year-long curriculum. The result? A scalable, written toolkit that can guide AmeriCorps and school staff to deliver consistent, food-focused learning experiences across the county.

For years, Fayette County had been offering school gardens and taste tests, but they operated in parallel and with little communication between the programs. Noel Mitchell, a health educator with the WVU Family Nutrition Program, saw an opportunity for the gardens to work together and share resources, to work smarter, not harder. So she asked herself: what if the team built a curriculum that aligned gardening activities with monthly nutrition themes?

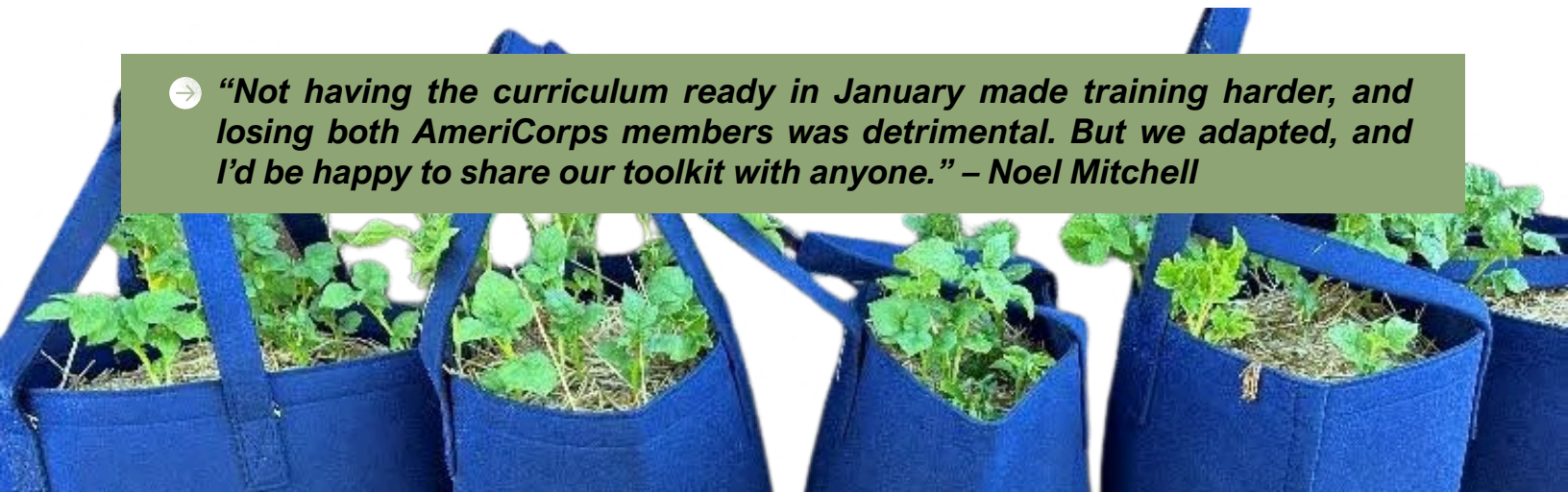
The goal was ambitious but clear: develop a written curriculum that could be used by rotating AmeriCorps members and ensure the longevity, consistency, support, and sustainability of the program. With Sprout School's support, Mitchell and collaborators from Fayette County Schools and local organizations like New Roots Community Farm created a month-by-month guide linking garden activities to seasonal foods. They also developed best practices standards by creating survey tools, budgeting for tastings, and working with partners like the New River Master Gardeners to streamline implementation.

In total, the project reached over 780 youth with taste tests and hands-on activities in just a few months. Despite losing two AmeriCorps members during implementation, the team delivered a completed curriculum by spring 2025 and now has a toolkit in place for future years.

This project shows the value of documentation, strategic partnerships, and adapting when circumstances change. It also highlights how small investments can lead to tools that scale county-wide and support others to build similar programs in their own communities, which is a lasting impact that is hard to measure.



→ ***“Not having the curriculum ready in January made training harder, and losing both AmeriCorps members was detrimental. But we adapted, and I’d be happy to share our toolkit with anyone.” – Noel Mitchell***



CASE STUDY: GROWING MUSHROOMS AND MINDSETS: A HANDS-ON LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN HARDY COUNTY

HARDY COUNTY, WV

LEAD: MARLANA PENNINGTON, OWNER, BRANCH & ROOT FOREST FARM

When Marlana Pennington and her husband started Branch & Root Forest Farm, their mission was clear: to care for the land and share its lessons. Located in Hardy County, their non-timber forest farm focuses on growing at-risk and medicinal herbs, tapping a few maple trees, and raising their three daughters through homeschooling.

But Marlana's role as an educator doesn't end at home. As an active member of the local homeschool community, she has long believed in teaching children how to connect with the land. From maple syrup tapping events to springtime foraging walks, she has created immersive learning experiences that are as rooted in community as they are in soil.



→ *"I enjoy sharing what we do on the farm," she said. "Sprout School helped me find new ways to do that more intentionally."*

From Curiosity to Curriculum

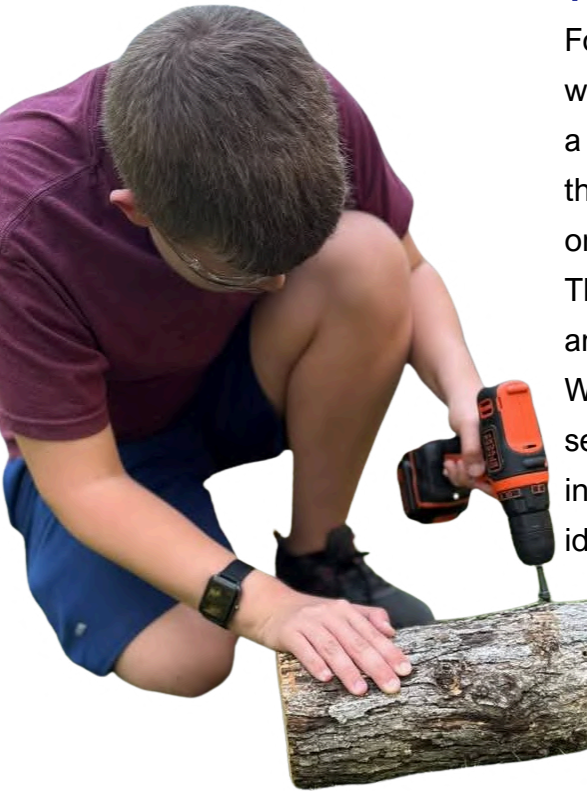
Marlana joined Sprout School from 2023 to 2024, hoping to expand her impact. Although she had no formal experience with Farm to School programs, she wanted to explore how her on-farm knowledge could become more structured and more widely shared. The Sprout School sessions provided practical ideas, peer support, and reassurance that even small projects could make a difference.

"The biggest realization was that it doesn't need to be anything over the top," Marlana said. "Anything is better than nothing."

She found inspiration in the variety of approaches her peers were using across the state, especially when they shared their obstacles and how they overcame them.

"Hearing others' challenges helped me understand what's realistic. It gave me the confidence to keep it simple and still have an impact."





The Mushroom Log Inoculation Workshop

For her project, Marlana decided to lead a mushroom log inoculation workshop for local youth. The event took place at a state park where a nature-focused homeschool group meets weekly. With support from the group facilitator, Marlana planned an interactive lesson focused on mushrooms, tool use, and forest farming.

The workshop began with a brief slideshow introducing mushrooms and how they grow. Then, each student received their own log. Working in small groups, they drilled holes, inserted plug spawn, and sealed them using a rubber mallet and wax. Along the way, Marlana introduced basic safety lessons around tool handling and mushroom identification.

→ ***“For many of the students, it was their first time using hand tools,” Marlana explained. “They were excited, focused, and full of questions.”***

She was also joined by an intern from Eastern WV Community and Technical College, who helped facilitate the event and provided additional support for the hands-on activities.

Lessons from the Forest

The mushroom workshop showed Marlana that even a single, well-planned session could spark interest and engagement in a lasting way.

“Seeing the excitement on the kids’ faces when they made their own mushroom logs was amazing,” she said. “They asked so many thoughtful questions.”

She advises others to start small and build slowly, rather than feeling overwhelmed by trying to do too much.

“It’s better to begin with something manageable and grow from there,” she said.

Marlana’s experience with Sprout School also changed how she saw the potential of her farm. She now hopes to adapt the workshop into an on-farm agritourism activity, creating space for other groups to learn about mushrooms, herbs, and sustainable forest farming directly on-site.

“I’d love to host more groups here,” she said. “Being in the farm environment adds another layer of learning.”



WHY IT MATTERS

● Reflections

For Marlana, Sprout School has opened new doors not only in programming, but in purpose.

"This program doesn't just teach nutrition. It teaches life skills," she said. "Sprout School helps educators, farmers, and families come together to pass on valuable knowledge to the next generation."

She believes that engaging students with natural systems builds both curiosity and resilience. And she's already thinking about how to deepen those opportunities moving forward.

"Sprout School gave me the motivation and knowledge to implement a program for kids of all ages," she said. "I'm hopeful it can grow into something even bigger."

● Key Takeaways

- **Start small and scale up:** A focused, one-time workshop can have a big impact and lead to future programming.
- **Use existing networks:** Partnering with homeschool groups or nature programs can ease planning and increase engagement.
- **Incorporate life skills:** Tool safety and hands-on work add depth to food and farming education.
- **On-farm learning is powerful:** Marlana plans to bring future programs to her farm to deepen student experiences.
- **Peer support matters:** Learning from other Sprout School participants helped shape Marlana's confidence and creativity.

"Sprout School provided me with the motivation and knowledge to implement a program for kids of all ages. I'm hopeful to offer it again, maybe even on the farm next time." -Marlana Pennington



CASE STUDY (WITH INTERVIEW) GROWING COMMUNITY THROUGH FARM CRAWLS AND AGRICULTURE EDUCATION

MONONGALIA, MARION, AND HARRISON COUNTIES, WV
LEAD: SHERRY MITCHELL, WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

SPROUT SCHOOL YEAR: 2024-2025

When Sherry Mitchell experienced farm education through 4-H as a child, she likely didn't know it would come full circle later in life. Now a first-generation college graduate, she spent over 15 years working in higher education as an academic advisor and coach, helping students find purpose and direction. Today, she works as a planning coordinator for the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, while also operating a one-acre micro flower farm and working as a part-time florist in Morgantown.



"I joined because I wanted to participate in the regional Farm Crawl. I knew I needed structure and support to make it happen. Sprout School gave me both."

Sherry used her project funding to organize a youth education station during the 2024 Regional Farm Crawl. She partnered with the West Virginia Farmers Market Association, her local Rotary Club, educators, and producers to bring the idea to life. The event featured "Babette," a life-sized wooden dairy cow that allowed children to practice milking. Activities also included flower education, pollinator crafts, and a tunnel exhibit that highlighted West Virginia produce.

Despite lower turnout due to extreme weather and limited marketing support, the event reached 22 children and left a lasting impression. "For the kids who came, it was meaningful," she shared. Sprout School's learning labs helped Sherry build confidence in project planning and reminded her of the power of community learning. The peer connections were especially impactful. *"Seeing everyone else figure it out together made it feel doable."*

Since completing the program, Sherry has become more engaged in her community. She joined her local Rotary Club, formed new partnerships with regional producers, and got involved in WVU's agro-tourism advisory group. Her flower farm may also host future educational events. Sherry encourages future participants to keep it simple and trust their instincts. *"Start where you are. You'll be surprised how much it matters."*

Her project reminded her that Farm to School is about more than food. It is about building connections and planting seeds of growth in your community.



WHY IT MATTERS

● Roots of Connection

At the beginning, Sherry wasn't sure how her project would fit into Farm to School programming. By the end, her perspective had shifted.

"It wasn't just about food. It was about doing something in your community, for your community. It was about education, connection, and care."

The variety of projects within her cohort reinforced that Farm to School can take many shapes, from school-based meals to community-based learning.

"We all came from different places, but we shared a passion for helping our communities thrive. That's what Sprout School helped bring out in all of us."

● Key Takeaways

- **Start with what you know:** Sherry used her knowledge of flowers and education to design a community-based project that felt natural and effective.
- **Collaboration is essential:** Local partners like the Farmers Market Association and Rotary Club expanded the reach and creativity of her efforts.
- **Marketing matters:** When communication faltered, turnout suffered. Strong outreach strategies are key to public engagement.
- **One size doesn't fit all:** Farm to School looks different in every community. Success requires flexibility and context.
- **You don't need perfection:** "Progress before perfection" became Sherry's mantra. Start small, and let it grow.

"Don't pass up the opportunity to just do one small thing in your community. Just get involved. It makes a difference."

— Sherry Mitchell

CASE STUDY: BUCKETS OF GROWTH IN MORGAN COUNTY

COHORT MEMBER: DARRYL GLEN AMES, RETIRED PROFESSOR,
MASTER GARDENER

LOCATION: MORGAN COUNTY, WV

SPROUT SCHOOL YEAR: 2023 TO 2024

In Morgan County, retired professor and Master Gardener Darryl Glen Ames remains dedicated to teaching through his enthusiasm for community-based education and food access. As a longtime steward of two library gardens, a community garden, and the 9/11 Memorial Garden, Darryl has cultivated not only produce but also opportunities for youth and enduring community relationships.

When he became part of Sprout School, Darryl pursued a long-held aspiration: to initiate a gardening project for children in Paw Paw, a small and frequently underserved town across the county.



“I’d been working on this for a while, trying to find donations. The Sprout School grant finally made it possible, even if we had to scale it back to fit within budget.”

With help from Starting Points and Paw Paw School, Darryl launched the Teen Cuisine Garden Project, working with 10 sixth-grade students in an after-school nutrition program. Each student created their own potato and tomato bucket garden to take home — a portable, low-cost, hands-on introduction to food growing.

“The idea was to make it simple and something they could keep nurturing after the program.”

The project built confidence and curiosity in the students, and plans are underway to expand to a larger school garden with a high tunnel in the next year. Sprout School’s peer learning network and virtual labs also helped Darryl connect to the wider Farm to School movement.

“Learning what other counties were doing was eye-opening. I gained so much insight into how different programs operate across the state.”

While navigating the grant process was initially challenging, support from a previous cohort member helped him better understand how to move forward. He now recommends providing future cohorts with a sample grant or in-person orientation to support early-stage planning. Logistics were another challenge. With only two school systems in Morgan County, getting adults to drive 30 miles to Paw Paw was not easy.

“But I was lucky to have three dedicated teachers and a Starting Points representative. That made it possible.”



Darryl believes people are the key to any program’s success.

“The money helps, of course. But it’s the people who carry it forward.”

His advice for others starting Farm to School or gardening programs is simple:

“Know that it will take more than just funding. Start by finding your people. Find the teachers, the volunteers, the community leaders who will help you carry it through.”



WHY IT MATTERS

● Key Takeaways

- **Start with access:** Darryl's bucket garden model made growing food approachable, even for families without land or prior experience. It was simple and accessible for most – it was also a straightforward way to get started with resources most people would not have barriers accessing.
- **Relationships matter:** Committed educators and community partners were essential to making the project work in a remote part of the county. It also led to partnership development and the possibility of the project's continued growth.
- **Grant structure can be a barrier:** Clearer examples and early guidance on the grant process would help future participants plan more confidently. Sometimes you need examples of success in order to know your first steps into getting started. Community classes work well when students share their work and ideas.
- **Small steps grow big things:** Even a single session with a few students can plant seeds for long-term learning and engagement.

“Sprout School enabled a great and diverse program for children who might not otherwise have the opportunity.”

— Darryl Glen Ames



BLOSSOMS & BITES: EXPLORING PLANT DYES, EDIBLE FLOWERS, AND FOOD CURIOSITY IN HUNTINGTON AND WAYNE COUNTY

COHORT MEMBERS: LYDIA A. CYRUS (FARM TO INSTITUTION COORDINATOR, REFRESH APPALACHIA) & SHELLY KEENEY (REGIONAL FOOD COORDINATOR, REFRESH APPALACHIA) 2023- 2024
 HUNTINGTON CHILDREN'S MUSEUM AND DUNLOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, WAYNE COUNTY

SPROUT SCHOOL YEAR: 2023 TO 2024

What do edible flowers and indigo dye have in common? For one Sprout School team, they offered a playful and powerful way to connect young learners with food, farming, and creativity.

Through the Blossoms & Bites project, Lydia Cyrus and Shelly Keeney built a partnership between Refresh Appalachia, a local elementary school, and the newly opened Children's Museum in Huntington. Together, they introduced more than 80 young students to the world of color-rich, flavor-forward learning and growing edible flowers, mixing natural dye vats, and even making their own salad with flowers they helped plant.

From hands-on workshops in a rural elementary classroom to collaborative planning with workforce development interns, this project became more than a one-time lesson. It laid the groundwork for continued place-based education that links food literacy, environmental connection, and youth-led discovery.

Two Paths, One Vision

Lydia Cyrus is a Farm to Institution Coordinator with deep roots in agricultural education and systems change. A longtime advocate for equitable access to healthy, local food, she joined Sprout School to design engaging, hands-on learning rooted in the culture and environment of central Appalachia. Her background includes curriculum development, farm-to-school partnerships, and institutional food service transformation.

Shelly Keeney manages a year-round farmers market in Huntington and has worked with more than 125 food and farm producers across the region. She joined the project while serving as a Regional Food Coordinator at Refresh Appalachia, where she combined her love of cheese-making, herbalism, and community education to support this youth-focused initiative. A former dairy goat farmer and homeschool parent, she brings decades of lived experience in food systems work.

What They Built Together

The project took place in two parts: a natural dye and fabric printing workshop at Dunlow Elementary School in Wayne County, and an edible flower cooking lesson at the Huntington Children's Museum. Both events centered around themes of exploration, color, food, and nature.



BLOSSOMS & BITES: EXPLORING PLANT DYES, EDIBLE FLOWERS, AND FOOD CURIOSITY IN HUNTINGTON AND WAYNE COUNTY

Dunlow Elementary: Indigo and Flower Dyeing

Lydia led a classroom session using flower-smashing techniques and an indigo vat to teach about natural pigments. She prepped students by explaining how natural dyes are made, and on the activity day, kids dove in, creating blue-dyed fabrics and experimenting with flower printing. Though intense sunlight affected the indigo vat temperature, students adapted quickly and remained engaged. The activity also introduced tool safety, with students using mallets and drills for the first time.



The Children's Museum: Edible Flower Exploration

Shelly planned an event to showcase edible flowers and healthy salads using fresh-grown ingredients. While no children attended the initial event due to low foot traffic at the new museum, the team pivoted: Shelly and Lydia taught museum staff the lesson, shared printed booklets, and left resources behind to be used with children during later programs.

Shelly's team also worked with Refresh Appalachia's workforce development crew to grow and harvest indigo plants, giving young adults in training a chance to experience agricultural production from seed to dye vat. This unexpected overlap between Sprout School and workforce education created a ripple effect of engagement.



“Seeing the Refresh crew harvest their own indigo and dye cloth with it was one of my proudest moments. Their hands turned blue, and they loved it.”

— Shelly Keeney



WHY IT MATTERS

● What Worked, What we learned from

What Worked

- **Partnerships:** Working with the Children’s Museum, a trusted local partner, opened new doors for ongoing programming.
- **Curriculum:** Shelly created a booklet for ages 5+, introducing edible flowers in child-friendly language with foraging safety tips.
- **Youth Engagement:** The hands-on format kept students deeply engaged, even with new tools and unfamiliar foods.
- **Workforce crossover:** Involving young adults from Refresh’s training program expanded impact beyond K–12 students.

Challenges

- **Event turnout:** The flower cooking demo had no child attendees, but pivoting to adult staff engagement saved the day.
- **Staffing and logistics:** The project team noted that more hands, more prep time, and clearer roles could improve future events.

● Key Takeaways

- **Start with what excites you:** Whether it’s food, color, or community, lean into your passion to design a project kids will remember.
- **You don’t need a perfect turnout** to make an impact: Materials and ideas can be shared, reused, and built upon even after an event.
- **Farm to School is also Farm to Community:** Don’t overlook how adult learners, workforce teams, and parents benefit from the same tools.
- **Be adaptable:** Plans change. Weather shifts. Buckets leak. Stay open and adjust in real time.

“The realization that it doesn’t need to be anything over the top — really, anything is better than nothing.”
 — Lydia Cyrus



CONCLUSION: GROWING FORWARD

The Sprout School Toolkit is designed to be a practical, living resource for educators, farmers, community leaders, and partners working to strengthen Farm to School efforts across West Virginia. The stories, tools, and lessons included here reflect what participants learned by doing the work in real communities, facing real constraints, and discovering real opportunities.

If you're reading this, you've already done the hardest part: you've started. Taking that first step matters more than having a perfect plan. This toolkit exists to help you keep going.

Across cohorts, one theme is consistent: meaningful Farm to School work does not require perfection, large budgets, or formal classrooms. It requires relationships, intention, and a willingness to begin. From mushroom log workshops and edible flower lessons to farm crawls and community gardens, Sprout School participants showed that even small projects can create lasting impact when rooted in local context and community trust.

This toolkit is meant to be used, adapted, and revisited. We encourage you to explore the planning tools, learn from the case studies, and apply what fits your setting. There is no single model for success. Each community will shape Farm to School efforts differently, and that flexibility is one of the program's greatest strengths.

Your cohort, your creativity, and your commitment will guide how your program grows. This work is not just about food and education. It's about planting seeds of connection, building relationships, and growing resilience across generations.



PERENNIAL GROWTH

Farm to School work is ongoing. Projects evolve, partnerships shift, and communities change. The end of a Sprout School cohort is not the end of the work. It is often the beginning of deeper engagement, new collaborations, and expanded leadership. As you move forward, consider the following:

- **Revisit your goals each season and adjust as needed**
Make sure they are obtainable and accessible for you.
- **Stay connected with fellow cohort members and community partners**
Ask for advice or help when needed. Use the classroom (virtual or in person) as a space for dreaming, collaboration, and sharing ideas. Don't be afraid to ask questions and jump in.
- **Share lessons learned with future Sprout School participants**
Everyone faces challenges and makes mistakes. Share what you are learning and growing from. Someone else might be experiencing something similar. Solidarity in the work is vital to success. It's not about getting it perfect. It's about trying your best and learning from the experience.
- **Advocate for local food systems, food education, and community-based solutions**
That's why we are here. Sharing food, spending time in nature, and connecting with one another is vital to our development as human beings. These are the core values of this work.
- **Beauty takes time, so be patient**
Progress happens one project at a time.



HOW TO STAY CONNECTED

For information about future Sprout School cohorts, resources, or to share your story, please contact sprout@future.edu