

N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center

2024 REPORT TO THE PEOPLE

Executive Summary

**A Year of
Revitalization**

**We Grow NC
through Education
and Research**

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Program Impacts

**Agriculture and Natural Resources
Family and Consumer Sciences
4-H Youth Development**

<https://mecklenburg.ces.ncsu.edu>

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2024 Report to the People

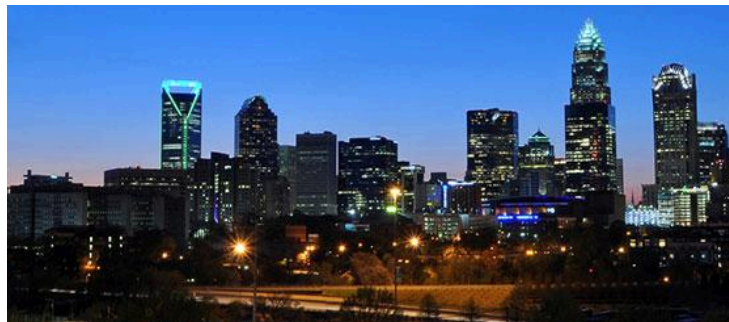
N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center

We Grow North Carolina through Education and Research

Across North Carolina, N.C. Cooperative Extension innovates products and practices that grow our state's \$111B+ ag industry, connecting farmers with the research-based information they need. We help people make healthier decisions, lower the risk of chronic disease, and live better lives through education in nutrition, food safety, local foods and more. Extension's 4-H program welcomes youth of all beliefs and backgrounds, empowering hundreds of thousands of young people with skills and confidence to lead for a lifetime.

Extension serves as a bridge between North Carolinians and our state's preeminent research universities. The Mecklenburg County Center of N.C. Cooperative Extension provides information and opportunities based on scientific research from North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University. Through three core areas - Agriculture and Food, Health and Nutrition, and 4-H Youth Development - field faculty, staff, and trained volunteers deliver community based education on topics including urban agriculture, gardening, consumer and commercial horticulture, local foods, nutrition, food preparation and preservation, youth development, food system entrepreneurship, and community development.

N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center is committed to providing community centered education that illuminates the linkages between food and culture as agriculture is presented in its various forms across our urban county. In doing so, our team is cultivating a multidisciplinary Urban Extension program drawing from an understanding of the importance of building and sustaining trusting, equitable relationships to address the needs of our diverse communities who call Mecklenburg County home.



A Year of Revitalization

The relationship between N.C. Cooperative Extension and Mecklenburg County Government is stronger than ever. After learning of Extension's presence, mission, and impacts in early 2024, the Mecklenburg County Manager's Office (CMO) recognized and supported the need for N.C. Cooperative Extension to be uplifted. The Mecklenburg County Board of County Commissioners voted in June 2024 to increase Extension's FY 25 budget by \$485,000 (210%) to enhance the capabilities of current staff and future staff to support the mission of N.C. Cooperative Extension.

Since 2004, N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center, had been operating under a division of the Mecklenburg County of Park and Recreation department (PRK). In 2024, the Mecklenburg County CMO supported Extension with the signing of a new memorandum of agreement, repositioned Extension from PRK to being a contract organization within the CMO, and provided for advancing Extension's partnership with the CMO's Environmental Leadership Action Plan (ELAP) program initiatives. Through this newly established partnership, ELAP and Extension are collaborating to address local agriculture issues to include farmland preservation, land use, beginning farmer education, and food equity.

On behalf of the Agents and staff of N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center, I want to express my sincere appreciation to our county government, community partners, and volunteers for their steadfast support of our organization. In line with the motto of 4-H, we are excited and committed to *make the best better* in the coming year.

With gratitude,



Barbara Worley, PhD
Extension Director - Mecklenburg County



**AGRICULTURE
& FOOD**



**HEALTH &
NUTRITION**



**4-H YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT**

Agriculture and Natural Resources

The Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR) program in Mecklenburg County focuses on Urban Agriculture. While Urban Agriculture is not federally defined, it is described by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products (food or non-food) in urban and suburban areas.

The ANR program at N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center consists of three departmental focus areas - Community Resource Development (CRD), Local Foods, and Consumer and Commercial Horticulture. During 2024, County Extension Director (CED) Barbara Worley, PhD and Local Foods Agent Samantha (Sam) DeRosa worked together to explore the way in which agriculture and local foods are understood in the urban food system in Mecklenburg County, as well as across North Carolina. In December 2024, N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center welcomed Todd DeZwaan, PhD as the Urban Agriculture/Horticulture Agent, a position that had been vacant since April 2024.

Community Resource Development (CRD)

N.C. Cooperative Extension leverages, connects, and strengthens the research and education in Extension Programs to transform communities and promote economic prosperity. Community Resource Development (CRD) is an integral aspect of Extension in urban areas. CRD transforms communities and promotes economic prosperity by leveraging and connecting the capacity of county based Agents and staff to build engaged leadership, inclusive partnerships, and innovative solutions. During the past year, Dr. Worley engaged with more than 30 community partners to provide support respective to their organizational missions, connecting them with educational resources from our two land grant universities and federal partners. Throughout 2024, NC State and NC A&T specialists worked with the Mecklenburg County Center to present various topics including farm law, food communications, and urban agriculture. In 2025, the Mecklenburg County Center CRD program will host an inaugural Land Use and Retention Summit with NCSU and NC A&T in Charlotte. CRD programs in the coming year will continue to focus on increasing awareness of food systems, agriculture law, science communications, and farmland preservation through community engaged research and outreach.

Local Foods

The Local Foods program team at NCSU with NC State Extension describe local food as being grown and transported within the state of North Carolina. At its core, local foods is about connecting growers and consumers within a designated geographic area. Throughout 2024, Local Foods Agent Sam DeRosa engaged with farmers in on site visits to provide support of their mission and to connect them with resources and education, participated in regional community food strategy planning, and worked collaboratively with partners to support local food access for all. During Q4, NC State Extension agricultural economics specialists worked with the Mecklenburg County Center to present topics including soil health and resource planning, supporting more than 15 local growers in developing skills in agricultural marketing and crop production. Looking ahead to 2025, the Local Foods program will expand its focus on increasing awareness of local foods across the county for producers, vendors, and consumers.

In 2024, the ANR program:

Had **5,639** public contacts

Received in-kind grants/donations for an NCSU endowment totaling **\$50,000**

Increased urban agriculture program engagement by **46.9%** between Q1 and Q4

Partnered with **30+** community based organizations

Presented **5** Urban Agriculture educational/discourse sessions at National and in-state conferences and symposia

Conducted and facilitated **284** CRD and Local Foods programs/engagements in which:

251 local food value chain businesses were supported by Extension programming or technical assistance

5,468 participants increased their knowledge of local food and agricultural systems

250+ Mecklenburg County employees were provided education on how to eat local and support regional growers; **11%** of these government participants increased their knowledge of local foods

416 participants increased their knowledge or skills in cultural competence, equity or inclusion





NC State faculty and staff train Extension Master GardenerSM (EMG) volunteers to be highly effective community educators providing unbiased, research-based, environmentally sound information about growing lawns, fruits, vegetables, trees, and ornamentals. They focus specifically on issues of importance in their local communities related to residential gardening and landscaping, including environmental stewardship, water conservation, water quality preservation, energy conservation, green waste reduction, home food production, wildlife management, sustainable communities, and health and wellness for children and adults.

EMG volunteers expand Extension's capacity to meet the needs of the gardening public. Our volunteers are motivated by the opportunity to participate in a quality horticultural course, receive answers to their own gardening questions, interact with people who have common interests, help others expand their gardening knowledge, and make a difference in their community.



EMG volunteers are organized into teams to more effectively deliver consumer horticulture programs and information. Throughout the year, EMG volunteers could be found at local libraries, farmers markets, festivals, schools, and community gardens across Mecklenburg County.

- The Ask a Master Gardener team answered over **630** questions presented to them via email or telephone about topics including army worms, pests, best lawn care practices and more.
- The Demonstration Garden team, collaborating with Freedom Park, enhanced the space with **3** handmade bee hotels and a little library that houses books on horticulture. The garden also hosted tours for the gardening class from the Tom Sykes Recreation Center.
- The School Gardens team worked to build and deliver experiential horticulture education at **10** schools.
- The Community Gardens Team collaborated with Mecklenburg County Public Health's Edible Landscape program
 - increased the number of community gardens by **167%**, from **9** new to **24**
 - provided ongoing support for **13** gardens
- Lowe's Home Improvement enlisted the EMG volunteers in Spring 2024 to provide live assistance at their retail locations; this weekend series reached **2,145** individuals. Lowe's requested the program expand to libraries resulting in a series of **5** presentations, enabling the team to reach an additional **618** individuals.
- The Speakers Bureau team were invited to give **51** presentations on horticulture topics including native plants, planting the right plants in the right place, and container garden, providing research-based information to **1000+** individuals.



Number of individuals who gained knowledge or acquire skills related to vegetable/fruit gardening = **60,001**



Number of adult participants who acquired skills needed to serve as a volunteer = **137**



7,752 hours logged by volunteers providing research-based education, valued at **\$232,172.40**

NC STATE

EXTENSION

Master Gardener | Mecklenburg County

Family and Consumer Sciences - Demetria Cox-Thomas MS, RDN, LDN

Nutrition Education Programs

One of the goals of the N.C. Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program in Mecklenburg County is to help community members increase their fruit & vegetable intake in order to mitigate and reduce the risks associated with chronic diseases.

The FCS program in Mecklenburg County collaborates with local organizations such as food hubs to provide research based education on topics including nutrition, food preservation, and food preparation to increase community member's knowledge and skill levels.

Moreover, because of the strong partnerships that have been formed between N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Government, and local private and non-profit organizations, community members engage in educational programs and are recipients of food items necessary to meet this goal. At each program site, the FCS Agent with N.C. Cooperative Extension provides healthy recipes along with a food demonstration to show how attendees can use these skills at home to create healthy meals.

A list of program partnerships currently include:

- Uptown Farmers Market
- Rosa Parks Farmers Market
- North Meck Community Farmers Market
- The Bulb Mobile Markets



Extension Master Food Volunteer Program

The Extension Master Food Volunteer program re-launched in Mecklenburg County this year.

The Extension Master Food (EMFV) program is designed to enhance public education in nutrition, local foods, and food safety. It provides educational assistance to residents concerning nutrition through the utilization of trained and supervised volunteers.

We will have 4 volunteers fully trained and in our communities teaching programming in Spring 2025.

Our volunteers will be able to lead Extension Programming in Mecklenburg County such as:

- Food Demos at our Farmers Markets
- CMS Classroom visits to teach Nutrition lessons
- Mobile Market & Food Pantry Volunteers
- Social Media posts
- Newsletter writers
- Nutrition Hotline Volunteers

Quick Highlights



In 2024, the FCS program:

Served **2,200+** individuals at the local farmer's markets

Had **4,260** public contacts

Received in-kind grants/donations totaling **\$7,700**

Conducted and facilitated **305** programs/engagements in which:

30 participants increased their knowledge of safe home food handling, preservation, or preparation practices

2,115 individuals demonstrated an intent to use local foods when cooking, preparing, or preserving foods

25 food handlers increased their knowledge and skills in safe food handling practices

FCS Fun Fact:

The products that are featured in the FCS farmer's market demos repeatedly sold out.

These demos helped support our farmers financially & allowed customers to connect with local foods!

Workforce Development

This year we hosted interns to support our future leaders.

- CMS Full Futures
 - The Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) CTE Internship Program provides enhancement to classroom instruction. This experience will provide students with hands-on experiences in areas of academic and professional interests. These relevant experiences help coordinate future college and career plans.
 - In Summer 2024, we hosted 2 CMS Full Futures interns that had the opportunity to fully experience Extension work.
- Dietetic Interns
 - Accreditation Council for Education in Nutrition and Dietetics (ACEND®) requires students to complete a supervised practice program that helps prepare individuals to become registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs).
 - Our office hosted the Community Nutrition rotation for 2 university graduates to complete their required hours in order to become Registered Dietitians.

Working With Local Youth

FCS teamed up with the 4-H team to support Harding High School's Cooking Club. The 4-H and FCS Agents visited them on three of their meeting days, taught them cooking skills with food donated from a local food pantry, and shared information about the Dinah Gore 4-H Cooking Contest.



Looking forward to 2025

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Positively Charlotte with Fox46 and Queen City News

In 2024, the Mecklenburg County FCS Agent forged a collaborative effort with Fox46's "Positively Charlotte" program, which airs wellness segments on Wednesdays.

As a partner to Queen City News' "Home Grown" series, which features the Mecklenburg County 4-H team focusing on how to grow food at home, the FCS Agent was invited to be a recurring featured guest on "Positively Charlotte". During these segments, viewers are educated on topics such as healthy food preparation.

On-air segments during National Fruits & Vegetables Month (September) & National Vegan Month (November) were presented. This partnership will continue in 2025 with an expanded program linking "Home Grown" and "Positively Charlotte". Viewers will take away an understanding of how food gets from their home gardens to their table.



In 2025, N.C. Cooperative Extension, Mecklenburg County Center plans to expand support for local farmers through an Agribusiness program. The FCS team will also offer more on-site cultural cooking classes as well as home food preservation classes. We look forward to continuing our partnership with the local farmer's markets, local CMS Culinary Programs, and Fox 46. We also plan to once again host high school and university nutrition interns. Additional community partners such as Hearts and Hands Food Pantry, Angels and Sparrows Food Pantry, and NourishUp will collaborate with the FCS Agent to implement on site NC A&T and NC State Extension nutrition education programs.

Mecklenburg County 4-H Annual Report

NC State 4-H Agent Garrett Gourley & NC A&T Agent Isaiah Barco



Empowering Youth, Shaping Leaders: 2024 Summary Impacts



Public Contacts - 16,715



Programs Conducted - 217



Youth Involved - 12,500+



Leaders Trained - 150+



In 2024, Mecklenburg County 4-H grew from one new agent (who joined the team in January 2023), to two 4-H agents. By the end of 2024, the organization blossomed with impactful programs, strengthened community partnerships, and built an expanding network of 4-H youth and volunteers.

Under the leadership of 4-H Agent Garrett Gourley and 4-H Agent Isaiah Barco, 4-H has made a positive impact on many youth in Mecklenburg County, reaching over 16,000 individuals this year alone. Through county-specific initiatives in agriculture, STEM, leadership, and civic engagement, 4-H is empowering a new generation of leaders.



"4-H has taught me to sow seeds of curiosity. It's not just an organization, it's a community."

- Bhoomishree, former 4-H member, current NC State Undergrad student

"4-H helped me realize what it truly means to be a leader."

- Ainsley, former 4-H club president, current Nursing Student at UNCC

"Thanks to you, kids like me who might not have been able to afford camp otherwise get to experience all the fun and learning it has to offer. You're helping us grow into responsible, curious, and nature-loving future adults!"

- 9 y/o 4-H summer camper from Mecklenburg County

"She has [had through 4-H] a flair in talking and I really appreciate your efforts and coaching for her."

- Father of high school 4-H Club member

"This [Embryology] is an A+ program. Every single person has enjoyed it."

- Ms. Haller, Endhaven Elementary Science Teacher

Building Future Leaders Through Community Impact

4-H youth achievements and collaboration for positive change.

Youth leadership Highlights:

- 11 District level awards
- 9 State level awards won at NC 4-H Congress
- Current 4-H club president attended Youth Voice at annual North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC); member of the NC 4-H Team for the 4-H YOUTH (Yielding Opportunities to Utilize Technology to address Hunger) in conjunction with the National 4-H Geospatial Leadership Team; serves as a spokesperson on the national 4-H website
- Two 4-H members went on to attend college in Fall 2024 (UNCC Nursing Program and NC State Food Science) due to engagement with 4-H

Innovative, Hands-On Education

Ongoing youth development programs in STEM, Agriculture, and Life Skills

Enhanced learning for over 20 schools and 4,000 participants.

- *Embryology in the Schools*: Impacted 17 schools with hands-on learning science programs reaching **4,012** students
- *Agricultural Education*: From mushroom cultivation to vermicomposting, youth learned sustainable practices and lead community demos.
- *4-H Power of Produce*: Launched as a farmer's market program to promote local food and 4-H initiatives
- *4-H Stem Challenge*: Launched an inaugural STEM Program through Park and Rec and YWCA
- *4-H Summer Camp Scholarships*: Secured **\$8,790** to provide 15 youth from underrepresented communities with full scholarships to 4-H summer camps.



Fostering Relationships Through Community Service and Outreach

Strengthening community networks with impactful programs and collaborations.

- Community Engagement
 - Partnered with local schools, farmers markets, and organizations to host and attend **50+** events, reaching over **10,000** individuals
 - Collaborative partners included Master Gardeners, Farm Bureau, CMS teachers, and Park and Rec
 - Launched local news series "QC Homegrown" with WJZY Charlotte Fox 46 to educate public on growing food at home.
- Service Projects
 - Club-led efforts enhanced local recreation centers and supported school gardens by delivering hands-on workshops for diverse audiences



4-H PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Over 16,000 public contacts in 2024 through hands-on programs, training opportunities, and community outreach.

Mecklenburg County 4-H grew with community club development by engaging over 2,700 students through immersive agricultural and STEM education events.

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MEET OUR STAFF

MECKLENBURG COUNTY CENTER



Barbara Worley, PhD – County Extension Director
Urban Agriculture/Community Resource Development

Dr. Barbara Worley joined the team in April 2023, bringing over two decades of work as an Extension professional from North Carolina, Florida, and Georgia to Mecklenburg County. Originally from Eastern North Carolina, Dr. Worley graduated with her BA from UNC Chapel Hill in Management and Society, a Masters in Extension Education from NC State University, and a PhD in Agriculture Science Communication from the University of Georgia. As the County Extension Director, Dr. Worley is responsible for the overall leadership of the Mecklenburg County Center including directing Agents and staff in integrative programmatic Urban Extension efforts. Her core areas of programmatic research and educational responsibilities include Urban Agriculture and Community Resource Development as she examines how agriculture is operationalized in urban areas and the intersections between food and culture.



Shane Alston-Daniel - Administrative Assistant
Mecklenburg County Center

Shane is a North Carolina native who has been in Mecklenburg County since 2009. Prior to coming to Charlotte, Shane traveled and lived around the world as a part of a proud military family. Shane graduated with a BA from Wesleyan University. Shane performs a variety of administrative, technical, and executive assistant functions. Shane's responsibilities include assisting Dr. Worley with fiscal management, office management, and is integral to the onboarding and offboarding process for NCSU, NC A&T, and County Agents, staff, and volunteers. Her work is characterized by its variety and complexity, where she always demonstrates considerable tact and courtesy.



Todd DeZwaan, PhD – Extension Agent
Urban Agriculture/Horticulture

Dr. Todd DeZwaan joined the team in December 2024. Todd has a BA in Biology from Rutgers University and a Ph.D. in Cell & Molecular Biology from the University of Pennsylvania. Todd has over two decades of experience in agricultural research, primarily focused on plant-microbial interactions and their impact on plant health. His scientific expertise includes microbiology, plant pathology, plant physiology, and production system innovation. Todd joined Extension to have a more hands-on role in the local food system and to engage with growers to help them address problems they see day-to-day on the farm. His core areas of programmatic research and educational responsibilities include Urban Agriculture, Commercial Horticulture, and Consumer Horticulture.



Sam DeRosa – Extension Agent
Local Foods/Volunteer Coordinator

Born and raised in the North Carolina mountains, Samantha DeRosa has dedicated her professional life to supporting community connectivity through local food. She graduated from Pfeiffer University in 2006 with a BA in Organizational Communication. Sam is currently pursuing a Masters of Public Administration at UNC Charlotte. Prior to joining the Extension team in Mecklenburg County in April 2024, she co-founded a nonprofit that has managed multiple Charlotte farmers markets. Her work with farmers markets and other local food systems was recognized in 2022 as Unpretentious Palate named her Local Food Advocate of the Year. In her current role as Local Foods Agent, she works with the other agents to serve as a lead point of contact and coordinator for Local Foods programs, youth and adult program volunteer coordination and management, and social media marketing and communications.



Demetria Cox-Thomas, MS, RDN, LDN – Extension Agent
Family and Consumer Sciences

Demetria joined the team in September 2023. Originally from Charlotte, NC, she graduated from North Carolina Central University in Durham, NC with a BA in Hospitality & Tourism Administration, and Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC with a Masters in Human Nutrition. Through her family and consumer science educational programs, Demetria works with communities to enhance food safety, nutrition, and health. Demetria's food and nutrition programmatic efforts include the development and implementation of introducing culturally relevant foodways curriculum, and food preservation and preparation demonstrations at farmers markets and mobile markets. Additionally, Demetria partners with various organizations across the county as she utilizes research-based materials such as NCSU Steps to Health/SNAP-Ed *More in My Basket*. Demetria also serves as the Extension Master Food Volunteer Program Coordinator.



Isaiah Barco, MS – Extension Agent
4-H Youth Development

Originally from New Mexico, Isaiah moved to North Carolina in 2005. Isaiah graduated from NC A&T State University with a BA in Environmental Studies and Masters in Agricultural Education; Isaiah joined the Mecklenburg County team in September 2023. Isaiah works with youth across Mecklenburg County in program areas including STEM education (e-Sports and coding), and youth horticulture. Isaiah also works with underserved youth in preparation for district and state leadership events. Isaiah works across the county to build collaborative relationships with stakeholders and partners in the development of community clubs.

This publication was compiled by the staff of Mecklenburg County Center.
The final report was edited by Barbara Worley, PhD.
January 2025

