



Natural Resources Conservation Service – Caribbean Area

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# Success Story

## BUILDING COMMUNITY GARDENS THROUGH USDA STRIKEFORCE



Many rural communities in Puerto Rico have become distressed, with rough environments, lack of economic opportunity and lack of healthy, fresh food. Under the **USDA StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity**, which fosters economic growth by investing in rural communities, USDA Food & Nutrition Service (FNS), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Rural Development (RD), and UPR Agricultural Extension Service (SEA) agencies partnered with local Soil Conservation Districts (SCDs) to increase participation rates in the Puerto Rico Summer Food Program and to foment food security, natural resource conservation and agricultural development in underserved, rural communities.

USDA agencies and SCDs began the **StrikeForce Community Garden** project this summer to install 21 community gardens in housing communities throughout Puerto Rico. The project brought a cross-section of USDA services to these underserved, rural communities. StrikeForce community gardens have been or will be built in multi-family housing projects in the municipalities of Aguas Buenas, Aibonito, Cabo Rojo, Camuy, Gurabo, Hatillo, Manatí, Orocovis, Peñuelas, Quebradillas, Rincón, Sabana Grande, San German, and Utuado.

Project partners provide training resources, technical services and plant materials to these communities to successfully install and maintain gardens. The project empowers youth and adults in each selected housing community to work together with a home economist and an agronomist to build their garden. The home economist informs the community about the importance of agriculture and nutrition, and the benefits that gardens bring to the community. The agronomist teaches community members the proper way to create a garden, tips for successful gardening, and helps construct the garden.

Simultaneously, the FNS Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) provided **free** food service to all children 18 and under during the summer break. Housing community administrators brought breakfast and lunch to the youth daily as part of the **StrikeForce Summer Meals for Kids program**. The meals were provided by local school kitchens. SFSP is designed to fill the nutrition gap that occurs when school is not in session, to make sure children get the nutritious meals they need.



**Hormigueros Multi-Family Housing Community Garden**

FNS, NRCS and RD officials worked with local NGO, Agro Juvenil 2.0, to enable the Hormigueros community to develop and maintain their own community garden. The partners held hands-on *“Huerto comunitario como herramienta para transformar la comunidad”* (Community Garden as a tool for community transformation) workshops at the Hormigueros Apartments Multi-Family Housing Community during the first week of June 2015. This multi-family complex houses 112 people, including 40 children under 18 years old. Tenants range from very low- to moderate-income families, the elderly and persons with handicaps or disabilities that are eligible to live in Section 515-financed housing.



*Hormigueros community members plant their first garden.*



*Plant Materials Specialist Edwin Más (back center) answers community member questions about pollinators.*

Agro Juvenil 2.0 agronomist, Felix Jimenez, taught community members how to compost, gardening methods and other ideas to maintain a community garden. He demonstrated how to plant and maintain peppers, cilantro, lettuce, and sweet peppers in the new-box garden, and provided fertilizer instructions. NRCS Plant Material Specialist, Edwin Más, and NRCS Agronomist, Mario Rodríguez, led a hands-on demonstration of gardening best management practices and how to develop, maintain and improve community gardens. They explained how to attract pollinators, organic pest management methods, and how to

manage water infiltration in the garden.

Participating youth enjoyed hot meals sponsored by the PR School Food Authority. Iris Rosa-Declat, FNS Program Specialist, and Wilson Almodóvar, RD Area Specialist Team Leader, brought lunch from a nearby public school participating in the SFSP.

**Alturas de Peñuelas Apartments’ Community Garden**

In the last week of July 2015, NRCS and SEA staff conducted a 5-day Home Garden and Nutrition workshop (*“Huertos Caseros y Nutricion”*) at the Alturas de Peñuelas housing community. Alturas de Peñuelas Apartments house 88 families including 313 people. The tenants are very low- to moderate-income families; elderly persons; and persons with handicaps and disabilities.



*UPR-SEA Agronomist, Dr. Giovannie Soto (left), leads hands-on gardening class at Alturas de Peñuelas Housing Community.*



*Alturas de Peñuelas youth receive nutrition education and participate in art project.*

During the week, UPR-SEA agronomist Dr. Giovannie Soto delivered several presentations to the community about the benefits of community gardens and best ways to garden, compost, and self-irrigate. He showed residents how to build,

plant and maintain the garden. UPR-SEA home economics professors, Dr. Zoraida Figueroa Laracuente and Dr. Lourdes Colón Burgos, also held a series of workshops for residents focused on balanced nutrition, child obesity, and the nutritional rainbow. They encouraged participants to move and shake their bodies through physical activities, and involved the kids in manual art activities.

NRCS agronomist, Mario Rodríguez, presented information about natural resources conservation and human social behavior practices to protect natural resources. He explained the acronym “SWAPA +H +E” – Soil, Water, Air, Plants, Animals + Humans + Energy – to the group and exchanged ideas on how to maintain and improve resource quality, especially water quality and soil health. He also described how to attract pollinators, organic methods of nutrient management, and how to manage water infiltration in the gardens.



*Dr. Soto (left) and NRCS Agronomist, Mario Rodríguez (in hat) help Alturas de Peñuelas youth & adults plant seedlings.*

## Summary

As of October 1, 2015, 14 of the 21 planned community gardens have been completed, and two more are in progress. For more information, visit the [NRCS Caribbean Area People’s Garden webpage](#) or the [PR StrikeForce Initiative webpage](#), or contact [Ismael Matos](#) at 787-766-5206 x128 or [Mario Rodríguez](#) at 787-831-3464 x116. For more information on SFSP, contact [Iris Rosa-Declit](#) at 787-766-5321 or visit [www.fns.usda.gov](http://www.fns.usda.gov).



### For More Information:

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