

CULTIVATING  COMMUNITY

**Growing
Food Justice**

Together

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From the Executive Director

Food is a universal language, connecting people across cultures, traditions, and borders. In Maine, farming has long sustained our communities, but too many have been excluded from our agricultural economy and fresh food access.

At Cultivating Community, we work alongside immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking farmers and their families to create a more equitable food system—one that fosters community, preserves cultural traditions and provides access to business development, land access, support, and opportunities.

Over the past year, we engaged in a planning and community engagement process to better understand the current needs of the farming communities we serve and to shape the future of our work. Over the last 20+ years, our farm programs have gone through many chapters and we are learning from what we have done well, and also where we have struggled.

With new leadership, a diverse team, and a commitment to being community-led, Cultivating Community is transforming how we approach food justice. We are committing to providing clear and stable programming that focuses on quality over quantity. To do this we are deepening our partnerships that make fresh culturally familiar foods available to more families, rolling some program elements into other statewide organizations, and sunsetting others. We are shifting from simply providing access to shared land to also advocating for land justice—where farmers from immigrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking backgrounds can secure the best land Maine has to offer and build pathways toward ownership and generational wealth.

This bold vision requires partnership. With your support, we can expand the Community Farms Project, formerly the New American Sustainable Agriculture Project (NASAP), strengthen training, and empower farmers to lead Maine's agricultural future. Together, we can build a thriving, just, and inclusive food system for all.

Thank you for being part of this journey.

Sincerely,
Silvan Shawe
Executive Director

Board of Directors

Marcques Houston
Board President

Roberto Rodriguez
Board Vice President

Gillian Cridler
Board Secretary

Jimmy DeBiasi
Board Treasurer

Jeannie Verrando
Board Member

Khadija Ahmed
Board Member

Amanda Scarpone
Board Member

Yusuf Escobedo
Board Member

Our Vision

Maine's diverse communities are connected and nourished by fresh, culturally familiar food and growing space is accessible to all.

Our Mission

Our mission is to cultivate food justice in Greater Portland by providing education, resources, and opportunities to grow and share culturally familiar food.

Founded in 2001, Cultivating Community's place-based programs prioritize people most likely to experience hunger and be excluded from access to fresh food and land – including children, immigrants, people of color, older adults, and those with limited resources.

Our Values

We Value Justice.

Current systems benefit the privileged while oppressing others. We work to address inequities in food systems by fostering a community where everyone has opportunities to access land, markets, and fresh, culturally familiar food.

We Value Community.

Collaboration is vital to our work. We show up for our partners and participants. We strive to make our programs accessible and welcoming. We build community-based food solutions that are immediately impactful, honor diverse cultural traditions, and contribute to lasting change.

We Value Equity.

Our communities are stronger and more resilient when everyone has the resources and the nourishment they need. We leverage our organizational power to meet varied needs and dismantle systems that cause hunger and exploit people and nature.

We Value Digging In.

Addressing the root causes of injustice and inequity requires self-awareness, humility, difficult conversations, hard work, and compassion for ourselves and others. We face these challenges head-on, embrace creative solutions, and hold ourselves accountable to keep digging deeper.

We Value Learning.

We all have a lot to learn and a lot to share – we cultivate opportunities for individuals and communities to discover and share their wisdom. We support self-reflection, listening, and growing from our missteps. We value the curiosity that is sparked by connecting with nature and new experiences.

We Value Land Sovereignty.

Land ensures self-determination for people to grow their own food, connect with the earth, and share cultural traditions. We focus on reliable access to land, especially for those who have been historically and are currently dispossessed of land, prioritizing Indigenous people, Black People, and people of color.



Introduction

At Cultivating Community, we believe that food justice and equitable land access should not just be aspirations—they should be lived realities for all. Since 2001, we have partnered with Maine’s immigrant and refugee farmers to address deep-rooted systemic inequities, working together to grow fresh, culturally familiar food while creating stronger, more connected communities.

Our mission is clear and unwavering: to center the voices, needs, and aspirations of immigrant and refugee farmers and growers, dismantling the barriers that have long excluded them from equitable access to land, resources, and opportunities.

Together, we are cultivating not just food, but a movement rooted in justice, resilience, and hope for a more equitable future.

2024: A Year of Listening and Learning

The work we are undertaking today is informed by the voices of the farmers, growers, and community members we serve. In 2024, Cultivating Community embarked on a year-long community engagement and planning process to better align our work with the needs and aspirations of Maine's immigrant and refugee farmers. This process was born out of a critical moment of reflection. Following a period of organizational transitions and external disruptions—including the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened awareness of systemic inequities—the need for intentional realignment became clear.

Over the course of the year, we heard from:

33

Farmers + Growers

Through in-person interviews, online surveys, and facilitated listening sessions, we gathered insights from farmers and growers participating in our programs.

25

Funders + Partners

We held consultations with funders, community partners, and other stakeholders to identify gaps, opportunities, and collaborative strategies to enhance impact.

12

Staff + Board

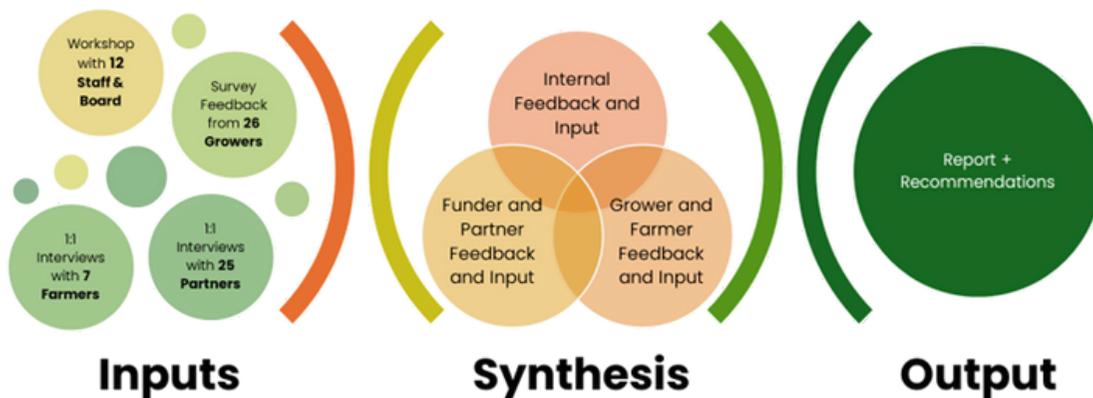
Staff and board participated in workshops and discussions to assess organizational priorities, strengthen cultural competency, and chart a path toward greater equity and inclusivity.

2024, Cont'd.

This process surfaced critical themes, including the need for clearer communication, greater investment in land access, improved cultural competency, and deeper collaboration with immigrant-led organizations. We also heard a consistent message of gratitude: community members overwhelmingly affirmed the importance and relevance of Cultivating Community's mission and expressed optimism about our future.

The insights gained from this process have directly informed our programs, priorities, and strategies moving forward. It has been a humbling and illuminating experience, and it solidified our belief that community-led solutions are the key to lasting change.

NASAP Planning + Community Engagement



From the NASAP Report:

“Cultivating Community stands at a pivotal moment in its journey toward sustaining a lasting positive impact on food security, community resilience, and the empowerment of immigrant farmers in Maine. By addressing the existing challenges through a strategic focus on cultural competency, staff development, robust partnerships, and sustainable financial practices, Cultivating Community is poised to enhance its mission and deliver meaningful support to the communities that rely on its resources.”

The NASAP Planning Report & Recommendations is available on our website.

Our Why: The Challenges Ahead

The immigrant and refugee farmers at the center of our work bring extraordinary agricultural knowledge, cultural traditions, practices, and value to Maine's food system. Yet, they face profound challenges that inhibit their ability to thrive.

Maine is Losing Farms



"Maine has lost 564 farms within five years, according to the latest data..."¹

Mainers of immigrant backgrounds are part of the solution. The latest USDA agriculture census found that Maine lost 564 farms over a period of five years and saw the average age of Maine farmers increase from 56.5 to 57.5.

Systemic and Cultural Barriers



"In 2022... a decrease in the number of farmers who are Black or African American."²

Language barriers, lack of access to culturally responsive training, and systemic inequities create obstacles to navigating markets, understanding regulations, and accessing essential resources.

¹ [Ogrysko, N. \(2024, April 25\). Maine farmland is shrinking, according to new Census data. Maine Public.](#)

² [Maine Farmland Trust. \(n.d.\). How Are Maine Farms Faring? Highlights from the 2022 Census of Agriculture.](#)

Impacts of Climate Change

Portland Press Herald

“Extreme weather brought on by climate change will [force] farmers to prepare for the increased likelihood of drought and heavy rains....”³

Extreme weather patterns and soil degradation exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. At our own farms and gardens, staff and community members faced reduced crop yields and harsh growing conditions due to heavy rains and storms.

Federal Funding Uncertainty

CIVIL EATS

“[F]ear and confusion has been spreading among groups that have received federal grants to pay and support farmers....”⁴

Federal funding has been essential for the growth of our community farmer training, land access, and market support program. Given the current federal funding landscape, the availability of resources from USDA and other federal sources remains uncertain.

³ Nitschke, E. (2024, May 30). Climate change likely to bring rewards – and risks – for Maine farmers. *Press Herald*.

⁴ Held, L. (2025, January 28). Trump Freezes Federal Grant and Loan Payments, Creating Confusion Among Food and Farm Groups. *Civil Eats*.

The implications of these challenges extend beyond individual farmers—they affect families, communities, and the broader food system in Maine. Addressing these systemic barriers is not just about justice; it’s about ensuring a thriving and sustainable food future for everyone. For more than two decades, Cultivating Community has stood alongside immigrant and refugee farmers.

**But there is still much
more work to be done.**



Our Approach: Equity in Action

At Cultivating Community, equity isn't just a principle—it's the foundation of everything we do. Our work is guided by a commitment to creating participatory, inclusive, and culturally responsive programs that prioritize the voices and leadership of immigrant and refugee farmers.

Diversifying Maine's Agricultural Sector

Cultivating Community envisions a future where immigrant farmers can contribute to a thriving Maine agricultural sector as owners - not just workers - through culturally responsive and community-led training, marketing, and land access initiatives.

Centering Farmers in Decision-Making

We believe that those most impacted by systemic challenges should lead the solutions. Through participatory decision-making processes, we envision a future where farmers actively shape our programs, policies, and initiatives, ensuring their needs and aspirations drive our work.

Providing Culturally Responsive Support

From climate-resilient farming techniques to market integration strategies, we meet farmers where they are—providing multilingual resources, culturally relevant training, and hands-on support that honors the expertise and traditions of our farmers and growers.

Advancing Equity in Leadership

We are committed to ensuring our staff and board reflect the communities we serve. By creating leadership pathways for immigrant and refugee farmers, we aim to shift power dynamics and ensure inclusive representation across all levels of our organization.

Fostering Trust and Accountability

Through transparent communication, listening sessions, and community engagement, we build trust with the farmers and growers we work with. Accountability is not a one-time effort—it's an ongoing commitment to meaningful, collaborative relationships.

Our Vision: Rooted in Food Justice

We envision a Maine where every farmer has the resources, support, and opportunities to thrive, and every family has access to fresh, nutritious, and culturally meaningful food.



A Just Food System

A system where farmers—regardless of race, ethnicity, or background—can access the land, tools, and infrastructure they need to succeed, and where fresh food is accessible to all communities.



Equitable Land Access

Reliable, affordable land access is a cornerstone of food justice. By prioritizing land security for those historically dispossessed, we aim to empower immigrant and refugee farmers to build sustainable businesses and preserve cultural traditions.



Community Centered & Led

Immigrant and refugee farmers bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise that should be at the forefront of shaping Maine's food future. Our vision is one where they are not only participants but leaders and decision-makers.

Our Community Farm Programs

Through innovative programs and initiatives, Cultivating Community creates pathways for immigrant and refugee farmers, their families, and communities to collectively grow, lead, and thrive.

Land Access Initiatives

Managing two community farms—Packard Littlefield Farm and Hurricane Valley Farm—we provide immigrant and refugee farmers long-term access to secure, affordable farmland at these two locations. CC also supports farmers with lease agreements and in pursuing ownership opportunities as their farm enterprises grow.

Community Food Distribution

Farmers in our programs distribute significant amounts of culturally familiar produce to schools, food pantries, and community markets, making these important staple vegetables available within the Greater Portland and Lewiston Auburn communities.

Training and Leadership Development

Our hands-on training programs equip farmers with the skills they need to navigate Maine's agricultural landscape, from sustainable farming techniques to marketing and business ownership.

Farm Stands and Markets

Immigrant and refugee farmers manage farm stands in the Greater Portland and Lewiston-Auburn regions, providing fresh, culturally familiar food to local communities. In 2024, farmers grew over \$170,000 worth of vegetables, with 97% of sales supporting families using SNAP/EBT and WIC benefits.

Our Progress: Foundations for the Future

By increasing diversity and representation among our board and staff, we are taking action on our commitment and values to become more community-centered and led. In addition, grounding ourselves in trust and accountability and cultivating our partnerships and collaborations lays the groundwork for our next phase of growth.



50%

Half of Board Members Identify as BIPOC

Cultivating Community strategically engaged with community members with direct lived experience with food insecurity, food justice, farming, growing, and immigration and onboarded new board members.



60%

Over Half of Staff Represent Communities We Serve

Cultivating Community is making strides to increase representation of communities it serves among its staff, with over half of staff in 2024 having cultural or linguistic connections to our immigrant and refugee farmers and growers.



**\$1.2
Million**

Building Financial Sustainability

Cultivating Community in 2024 paused to reflect on its vision, mission, values, and the scope of its programming. As part of its efforts to stabilize finances and operations, the organization's projected revenues will reach \$1.2 million for the first time since 2019.



Our Impact: Empowering Change

To create change, Cultivating Community itself is changing. We are deepening our commitment to equity by centering the voices of immigrant staff, farmers and growers, and board members — shifting decision-making power, and transforming how we support our communities.

“Our markets are more than just a place to provide food—they are where people find crops like roselle, African spinach, and sweet potatoes that they can’t get anywhere else. **It's also about connection—people bring friends, build relationships, and share their stories. We hear 'thank you' every day from community members who keep coming back... to build community.**”

MARIAN IBRAHIM | Farmer

Marian and her family started farming in 2013 and have been with Cultivating Community for over 11 years. Their dream is to one day own a family farm in Maine.



“Serving on the board of Cultivating Community has been an incredibly rewarding experience, especially during this transformative time. The organization’s commitment to equity and community-led solutions has been inspiring to be a part of... ***I’ve seen how these efforts are already fostering trust and stronger relationships that have a meaningful impact on access to land and culturally familiar foods.*** It’s clear that we’re not just talking about change—we’re living it—and I’m proud to be part of an organization that is truly building a more just and inclusive food system.”

KHADIJA AHMED | Board Member

Khadija works for the Good Shepherd Food Bank as an Equity and Impact Manager. She’s also a founder of a non-profit organization, that serves immigrant and asylum seekers by removing barriers including but not limited to transportation, language, and culturally relevancy.

“It makes me very happy to lead this farm program working with new immigrants and helping them grow and sell so many different African vegetables. They are always sharing with me how lucky they feel to have access to this land and how growing all these vegetables helps with their cost of living, and their family's health, and they have learned new skills.”

BADI CAMARA | Farm Manager

Originally from Gambia, West Africa, Badi and his family moved to Maine in 2017. In his role at Cultivating Community, Badi enjoys working with the land and helping other new Mainers.





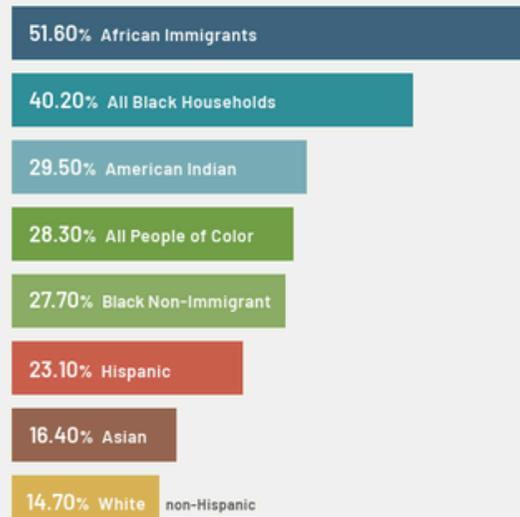
THE EQUITY GAP IN HOUSEHOLD FOOD SECURITY IN MAINE

Food insecurity is a key indicator of both economic well-being and equity in the state.

It shows us how many households are struggling to make ends meet and experiencing inconsistent access to food as a result, and which communities are impacted most severely and most disproportionately.

SOURCE

Food Insecurity Rate by Race & Ethnicity in Maine 2015 - 2017



Maine’s Roadmap to End Hunger by 2030 asserts that ending hunger in our state requires collaboration and a deep commitment to equity. Cultivating Community’s food security initiatives play a critical role in advancing Maine’s ending hunger goals by supporting immigrant communities who are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.”

SYDNEY CASS BROWN

*Senior Anti-Hunger Policy Advisor
Governor’s Office of Policy Innovation
and the Future*

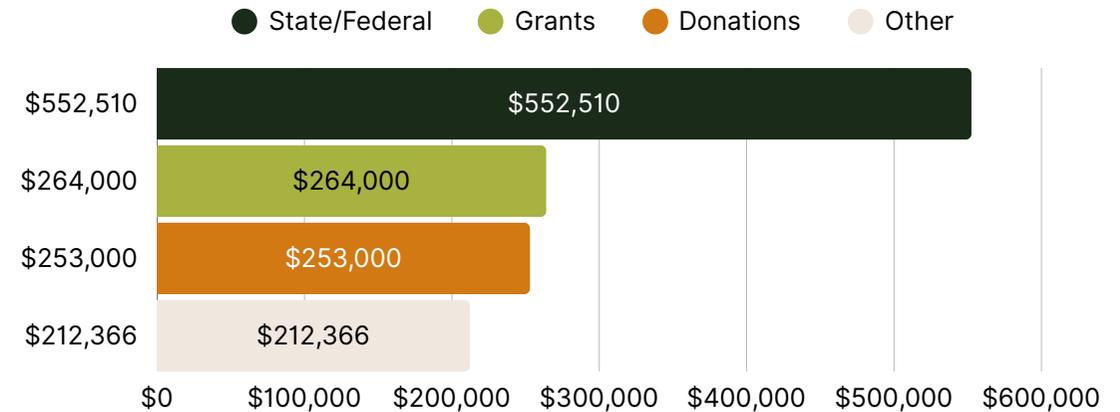
Our Ask: Let's Grow A Food Justice Future Together

Achieving food justice and equity requires the collective action of individuals, organizations, and communities. By supporting Cultivating Community, you are investing in a movement to uplift immigrant and refugee farmers, dismantle barriers, and create pathways for market and land access. Every dollar, hour, and voice — especially with uncertainty around federal funding — contributes to building a Maine where justice, resilience, and opportunity thrive.

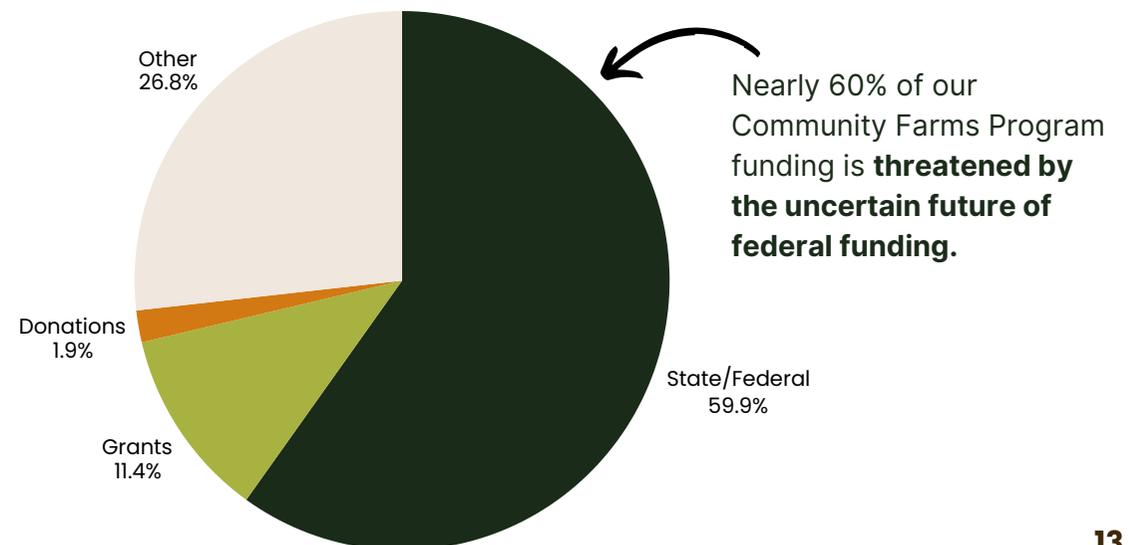
Together, we can cultivate a future where farmers and families flourish. Join us in growing a more inclusive and sustainable food system for all.

Why Your Support Matters Now More Than Ever

Overall, State and Federal grants account for over 44% of Cultivating Community's 2025 budget.



Federal Funding Freeze Puts Community Farms Program At Risk



Nearly 60% of our Community Farms Program funding is **threatened by the uncertain future of federal funding.**

Don't just fund a moment.
Fund a movement.

A food justice future requires consistent and sustained effort over time. No matter the news or challenges ahead, help us secure a more just and equitable food system right here in Maine.

Contribute and find out more at
bit.ly/foodjusticefuture

If you prefer to donate via check, please send it to: PO Box 3792, Portland, ME 04104.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all of the community farmers and growers, as well as the funders and partners, who contributed valuable feedback and input throughout our planning process.

Report made possible by

