

Eden for All: Workforce Development, Mental Health and Community Resiliency Initiative

RFP for Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

Organic Growers School

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Application Form

Question Group

Buncombe County requests proposals for projects to help the community recover from and respond to COVID-19 and its negative economic impacts.

Buncombe County has been awarded \$50,733,290 in Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (Recovery Funding), as part of the American Rescue Plan Act. This infusion of federal resources is intended to help turn the tide on the pandemic, address its economic fallout, and lay the foundation for a strong and equitable recovery.

Buncombe County is committed to investing these funds in projects that:

- Align to county strategic plan and community priorities
- Support equitable outcomes for most impacted populations
- Leverage and align with other governmental funding sources
- Make best use of this one-time infusion of resources
- Have a lasting impact

Proposals shall be submitted in accordance with the terms and conditions of this RFP and any addenda issued hereto.

[Click here for the full terms and conditions of the RFP](#)

Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds*

Name of Project.

Eden for All: Workforce Development, Mental Health and Community Resiliency Initiative

Amount of Funds Requested*

\$407,500.00

Recovery Fund Eligible Category*

Please select one:

Address disparities in public health outcomes

Brief Project Description*

Provide a short summary of your proposed project.

In the wake of COVID-19, several studies have shown the mental health benefits of time spent in nature. The original, #1 outdoor recreation activity is foraging: gathering wild food.

No Taste Like Home, LLC (NTLH) is a 26-year-old foraging education company. With over 475 programs a year serving over 3,000 participants, 20 location partners including The Grove Park Inn, and six restaurant partners, NTLH is the largest wild food education organization in the world (<https://notastelikehome.org/>).

Contrary to popular belief, foraging can be safe, easy, and beneficial to the environment. It gives families a fun way to spend time together, enjoying fresh air, sunshine, exercise, nature connection, and free, wholesome food.

NTLH and Organic Growers School, 501c3 (OGS) are collaborating to introduce underserved communities, particularly BIPOC families, to the stress-relieving benefits of foraging (see Need, Link to COVID-19, and Special Considerations).

Project Plan*

Explain how the project will be structured and implemented, including timeframe.

Eden for All is a scholarship fund for NTLH's existing programs and a campaign to hire BIPOC staff. NTLH launched the initiative in 2016, originally focusing on children (<https://tinyurl.com/58e4wc8x>). OGS will help expand the project to meet increased interest and need.

The project will serve approximately 5,000 participants, including up to 50 interns, with the goal of hiring at least 5 guides from among them. NTLH and OGS have the commitment and capacity to extend the program beyond 2026, employing staff hired through the project.

NTLH offers introductory foraging classes, workshops, courses and internships. Classes are 1.5 hours in duration and will be offered, on average during the project, 150 times a year. Workshops last three hours and will be offered 650 times a year. Courses consist of ten weekly three-hour sessions and will be offered twice in spring, summer, and fall.

Topics covered in all programs include:

- identification
- uses and benefits
- sustainable harvesting
- safe handling and storage
- preparation and preservation
- where to forage and where not to, particularly on public lands

Participants receive a 40-page introductory e-book.

From October 15th, 2021 to October 15th, 2026, the project will provide 5263 spaces in classes, workshops, and/or courses to project participants. Participants will be entitled to sliding-scale admission to ten classes, ten workshops, and one course per year. The self-selected cost can be anywhere from 10% to 90% of the public ticket price. Free admission will also be available, as space permits, starting 24 hours before each program. Transportation assistance will also be provided.

All programs are limited to twelve participants. Classes, workshops, and courses are open to all ages. Private groups must include one adult for every two children age 11 and under. School and after school groups will include at least one adult for every five children.

After attending at least one class and two workshops, adult participants may apply for an internship with the goal of becoming a guide with the company. Interns assist guides in conducting workshops, a.k.a., tours. Assistants are paid \$60 per tour.

The project anticipates that 10-50 participants will apply for internships. Internships can last indefinitely. When an intern is ready, they can elect to become a guide in training. Guides in training are paid \$100 per tour.

The project anticipates that at least 5 interns will, within a year of guide training, become guides. Trained guides are initially paid \$150 per tour. Guides with the company for five years or more (including internship) receive \$200 per tour. Guide positions also last indefinitely.

Performance evaluation will be completed by April 1st, 2027.

OGS's EIN is 75-3166329. Our contact is Rod Bowling, Director of Finance, rod@organicgrowersschool.org, 828-689-4353.

Statement of Need*

Describe the need that this project will address. Include data to demonstrate the need, and cite the source of the data.

In a time of massive disruption, people need peace, solace, a way to ground. And what better way than literally: see “Exposure to nature during COVID-19 lockdown was beneficial for mental health” (<https://tinyurl.com/4edd57um>); “The Importance of Nature Exposure and Physical Activity for Psychological Health and Stress Perception: Evidence From the First Lockdown During the Coronavirus Pandemic 2020 in France and Germany” (<https://tinyurl.com/3wn6939e>); “Nature Can Improve Mental Health During Pandemic, Study Finds” (<https://tinyurl.com/ynvv7yrn>).

Foraging is a way to “not just to be in nature, but to genuinely connect with it” (<https://tinyurl.com/93kb9u9r>). When you move at the speed of nature, you’re not in such a hurry. Even if you put nothing in your basket, you are still fed. Consider Finland:

The homepage of Visit Finland, the country’s official tourism website, opens with “Finland has been chosen as the happiest nation in the world for three years in a row. Being happy has a lot to do with our daily habits: a short walk in the forest, going ice swimming or tasting something fresh from nature. All of these things add a sense of calm and happiness to everyday life – something we all need right now!” (<https://rentafinn.com/en/>).

Finland’s happiness is not accidental. In 1969, the country launched a fifteen-year campaign to teach foraging. By 1983, 50,000 citizens had been trained. Today, roughly half the population forages regularly — without harming the forest. Many sell their harvest locally and as far away as Italy (<https://tinyurl.com/y5hz2zv8>).

Buncombe County is uniquely positioned to outdo Finland. We sit in the center of the most biodiverse temperate forest in the Western Hemisphere, possibly in the world (<https://tinyurl.com/3r4k2vkv>). Our area is home to over 500 common wild edibles (<https://tinyurl.com/mv7teerj>), many not available anywhere else. Asheville could be the center of sustainable green industry, the foraging capital of the country.

Link to COVID-19*

Identify a health or economic harm resulting from or exacerbated by the public health emergency, describe the nature and extent of that harm, and explain how the use of this funding would address such harm.

“The mental-health crisis of the pandemic is real. A staggering 4 in 10 adults have reported symptoms of anxiety and depression, a quadrupling of the pre-pandemic rate. More than 1 in 4 mothers report that the pandemic has had a major impact on their mental health. 24% of parents have reported being diagnosed with a mental-health disorder since the start of the pandemic. Visits to primary care for anxiety and depression have increased 13% among kids.

“The full array of suffering has yet to completely present itself. The available data show that traumatic events and the related upheaval directly affect our individual and collective mental health. Studies on major life disruptions—natural disasters, epidemics, civil unrest—show that the burden of mental illness increases afterward...

“Even when people really mean to exercise and eat healthy foods, burnout—a state of low energy and low motivation—is a common barrier to realizing those good intentions” (Lucy McBride, “By Now, Burnout Is a Given,” *The Atlantic*, 6/30/21 (<https://tinyurl.com/c7swwvc2>)).

Most of us resist exercise for good reason: it’s unnatural (<https://tinyurl.com/yt7rsw4z>). We are built to forage. It’s the original Easter egg hunt: like geocaching or Pokemon Go except with berries. It’s free. And the miracle of foraging for parents is that children with no interest in greens, mushrooms, and other healthy foods suddenly become VERY interested when they find and harvest them themselves.

Foraging is a basic skill. Teaching it combats hunger, malnutrition, obesity, nature deficit disorder, and more. Foraging can be safe, easy, and convenient. There is more wild food in the city than in the country. Foraging can literally be a walk in the park. Commercial foraging can even combat poverty, but that is beyond the scope of this project.

Nature connection is healing. And like the author of *Family Foraging* says, “you can’t get much more connected to the land than eating from it” (<https://tinyurl.com/5f4jtf3t>).

Population Served*

Define the population to be served by this project, including volume and demographic characteristics of those served.

NTLH is a social enterprise. Its public programs are all by donation (see last question at <https://notastelikehome.org/faq/>). This policy is advertised not to tourists but to locals (see e.g., second to last paragraph at <https://tinyurl.com/42sm26fx>). This project would allow NTLH to expand that offering.

The project will serve roughly 5,000 county residents. Outreach will focus on BIPOC families with children. We will also accept BIPOC adults and, as space permits, members of other historically underserved communities as defined by White House executive orders (<https://tinyurl.com/93dzvv78>, <https://tinyurl.com/3xf67rc8>). School and afterschool programs in QCTs will also be invited to participate.

In promoting the project, NTLH will also promote OGS’s BIPOC offerings and opportunities.

Applicants will complete an enrollment form asking them to identify as falling into one or more of the above categories. If so, they will receive an intake survey. Upon completion, they will receive discount codes with which to register.

Enrollment and intake forms will also be available in Spanish. Owner/CEO of NTLH is Latinx and a native Spanish speaker. If needed, programs in Spanish will be conducted.

Results*

Describe the proposed impact of the project. List at least 3 performance measures that will be tracked and reported. If possible, include baselines and goals for each performance measure.

The project has two goals: education and recruitment.

Educational impact is tied to participation. Relative to their degree of participation, project participants will forage more, be familiar or at least acquainted with more wild edibles, and will incorporate more wild foods into their diet.

Acquaintance is defined as being able to recognize an edible. It will be measured by the ability, given a photo of an edible, to choose the correct name from a list of choices. Familiarity will be measured by the ability to correctly choose the edible from a selection of images of similar plants or mushrooms.

1. For each class they attend, participants will spend, on average, one more hour a week foraging than they had been spending previously. Workshop participants will spend two more hours. Course graduates will spend three.

2. For each class they attend, participants will be newly acquainted with one wild edible. For each workshop, they will be newly acquainted with two edibles and newly familiar with one. For each course, they will be newly acquainted with ten and newly familiar with five.

3. For each class they attend, participants will gather and eat, at least once, one edible with which they had not been previously acquainted. For each workshop, participants will collect and consume two new edibles. For each course, participants will gather and prepare ten new edibles.

Project recruitment goals are to fill ten year-long internship positions each year for five years and to hire five guides from among these interns.

Evaluation*

Describe the data collection, analysis, and quality assurance measures you will use to assure ongoing, effective tracking of contract requirements and outcomes.

Regarding quality control, the clientele that program participants will be joining consists of 87% tourists paying full price. Evaluation forms are filled out by participants at the close of each program, and follow-up emails communicate a money-back guarantee. Evaluations are transcribed and reviewed quarterly. Visitors also post reviews, and for ten years, NTLH has been the #1 foraging tour company on TripAdvisor in the country.

On intake, participants will complete an at-home, on-screen baseline exam, testing them on their knowledge of the thirty most common edibles in the region, each illustrated at different stages of growth.

Adult project participants will be surveyed three months after their last participation in the project. The same test will be included.

Three months after the close of the project period, after all exit surveys have been received, results will be compiled, tabulated, and measured against project goals. The total number of intern and guide positions filled through the project will also be determined.

Equity Impact*

How will this effort help build toward a just, equitable, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery? How are the root causes and/or disproportionate impacts of inequities addressed?

Since the pandemic, there has been an “explosion” in visitation to national parks (<https://tinyurl.com/2rjpax3w>). Interest in foraging is up 25-500% (<https://tinyurl.com/bpvwxary>, <https://tinyurl.com/amuujd3k>, <https://tinyurl.com/7uuukn3c>). NTLH enrollment is up 48%.

BIPOC, however, particularly Blacks, face a number of barriers to outdoor recreation, particularly foraging (<https://tinyurl.com/5w953ty5>). One is fear of the woods. But foraging need not involve camping or even hiking. Classes, held in central Asheville, will show the abundance available right in town.

There is also a lack of role models. This project is designed to change that by offering lucrative employment. In the project period, NTLH will conduct 3,065 tours. The total income for assistants will be \$183,900. Interns that start guide training in 2025 will, by the end of their third year guiding, have earned on average \$52,441. Five guides, our project target, will have earned \$262,205. If the number of guides is more or less than five, the total stays the same. The same goes for assistants, regardless of how the work is divided among them.

From mid-March to mid-October, each guide leads 2-3 tours a week; each intern assists 1-2 tours. There are only a handful of tours in the winter, but these are less than half-time positions, allowing for a second job that pays more steadily through the year.

While only a fraction of participants will go on to join NTLH staff, there is also the educational value for all involved. With guides earning a total of \$262,205 in their first three years, \$183,900 going to assistants, and \$350,000 in instruction, the total project value *starts* at \$796,105. Guides and interns will hopefully stay with the company long after 2026. And NTLH intends to continue the program in order to hire more.

Project Partners*

Identify any subcontractors you intend to use for the proposed scope of work. For each subcontractor listed, indicate:

- 1.) What products and/or services are to be supplied by that subcontractor and;
- 2.) What percentage of the overall scope of work that subcontractor will perform.

Also, list non-funded key partners critical to project.

Our sole subcontractor will be NTLH, providing 100% of the work involved, including promotion/recruitment, program delivery, and evaluation.

NTLH has been working to hire BIPOC staff since September of 2020. They are currently partnering with Hood Huggers International, leading workshops for their young adult program. But the pool is small, and thus far, no candidates have emerged. This is why we have partnered to undertake a larger endeavor.

Bountiful Cities Project, NTLH’s fiscal agent since 2013, is providing Dr. George Washington Carver Edible Park (at Stephens-Lee Recreation Center) as a location for classes. (They are not sponsoring this project because they are applying for another project.) Christmount is providing their 600 acres (400 in conservation), for workshops. The NC Center for Health & Wellness and UNCA’s Food Equity Initiative, NTLH partners since 2018, are providing The Kellogg Center for workshops. Riverlink is providing an 11-acre parcel at the Wilma Dykeman House. We are also permitted to use the Buncombe County Collier Cove Nature Preserve. Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, NTLH location partner since 2009, is helping to identify additional locations.

SeekHealing (aid for mental health/addiction), also a NTLH partner since 2018, is applying separately for a van, in part to transport participants to project programs. Hood Huggers has also agreed to provide transportation.

Bounty and Soul, NTLH partner since Spring of 2020, will advertise the program. In January of 2021, Patchwork Alliance also agreed to help promote the project, as did MANNA Food Bank back in 2012. Other promotional partners include Pathways to Parks, Outdoor Afro, Beloved Asheville, and Asheville Poverty Initiative. Explore Asheville is assisting with outreach to other potential partners.

We will be consulting with similar existing programs across the country, including Community Nature Connection and Latino Outdoors (<https://tinyurl.com/3dv4tz54>).

Capacity*

Describe the background, experience, and capabilities of your organization or department as it relates to capacity for delivering the proposed project and managing federal funds.

For 27 years, OGS has conducted classes and other programs for organic farmers and home growers. OGS presents the largest annual sustainable agriculture conference in the Southeast and maintains a strong commitment to social justice and inclusion (see e.g. <https://tinyurl.com/p6ffk8ak> or <https://tinyurl.com/2zu4268s>). For more information, see our 2019 Impact Report (<https://tinyurl.com/jtas56j3>).

Since its inception, with the exception of pandemic assistance, NTLH has been completely self-funded by its own programs. NTLH has been growing by 23% annually since 2017. This project will represent less than 15% of the company's volume in the project period.

Alan Muskat is NTLH's founding CEO. For 15 years, Muskat gathered over 500 pounds of wild mushrooms a year, supplying over 100 restaurants and hotels, including The Biltmore Estate and The Grove Park Inn. He has spoken at several OGS conferences as well as The U.S. Botanic Garden and has appeared in over 300 publications.

In 2016, Muskat served on the North Carolina regulatory committee that established the first standards for commercial wild mushroom sales in the state. He is currently completing a 600-page guide to foraging with a focus on mushroom hunting. For more info, visit <http://www.alanmuskat.com/>.

Muskat personally trains each NTLH guide using his 250-page training manual. Current guides have been with the company on average for at least four years.

Budget*

Provide a detailed project budget including all proposed project revenues and expenditures, including explanations and methodology. For all revenue sources, list the funder and denote whether funds are confirmed or pending. For project expenses, denote all capital vs. operating costs, and reflect which specific expenses are proposed to be funded with one-time Buncombe County Recovery Funds.

Download a copy of the budget form [HERE](#). Complete the form, and upload it using the button below.

OGS Recovery-Funds-budget.xlsx

Special Considerations*

Provide any other information that might assist the County in its selection.

This project falls under two additional funding categories:

- **AID TO IMPACTED INDUSTRIES:** 87% of NTLH’s revenue is based on tourism. In the first 3 months of COVID, company revenue declined by 92%.

- **SERVICES FOR DISPROPORTIONATELY-IMPACTED COMMUNITIES:** the project provides “evidence-based educational services and practices that address the academic needs of students and/or their social, emotional and mental health.”

Given the stresses of COVID-19, rest and relaxation can be a challenge. Foraging provides an “excuse” to take time out — outside, that is.

There is something uniquely comforting about the activity of foraging. For one, it requires noticing, a.k.a., mindfulness, which is often prescribed for stress. Many people won’t go to a meditation class, but they will go for a walk in nature, especially on a scavenger hunt. What better way to “take in the landscape?”

It is a sad irony that, while the poor are loath to lower themselves to “scavenging,” the rich can’t wait to do so. NTLH is frequently featured in Explore Asheville’s marketing efforts (e.g., <https://tinyurl.com/ybgodcb9>). The #1 restaurant in the world for four out of five years from 2010 to 2014 centered around foraging.

The joys and benefits of foraging are not incidental. They are inherent to hunting and gathering because feeding ourselves from nature is what we’re designed for. It’s what we evolved to do (<https://tinyurl.com/ymfvs6ja>).

Foraging is a treasure hunt, but the treasure is not something you can put in your pocket or your mouth. In this time of insecurity, foraging provides something much more valuable than food. It gives us the feeling of being provided for, of being surrounded by a benevolent, supportive world. What could be more reassuring?

Foraging is a homecoming. It brings us back to where we belong. We are all entitled to experience the peace that nature provides. It is our birthright. Foraging uncovers the real Garden of Eden, and it has been here all along.

File Attachment Summary

Applicant File Uploads

- OGS Recovery-Funds-budget.xlsx

