UArizona Maricopa Cooperative Extension Receives USDA Grant to Educate Urban Farmers on Beekeeping and Honey Production

By

**SUBHEADING:** The University of Arizona received a $100,000 grant from the USDA to develop a program that serves underrepresented urban farmers by teaching them to pollinate their crops by keeping bees and diversify their income with bee products.

The University of Arizona Maricopa County Cooperative Extension (MCCE) was awarded $100,000 through the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) and is using the funding to develop an educational program for small-scale and urban farmers and entrepreneurs to learn about beekeeping and honey production in the Sonoran Desert.

The training will provide participants with the skills needed to pollinate specialty crops by keeping bees and to generate alternative sources of income by selling bee products, all the while conserving the honeybee population.

Small-scale and urban farming refers to various types of cultivating and distributing food in urban areas as opposed to large, rural farming. Urban farming benefits cities, neighborhoods and communities by providing direct access to fresh, locally-grown vegetables, fruit, and meat products. Urban agriculture can address food deserts and improve food security and safety for city residents.

“Urban agriculture has proven to be an effective and viable substitute for conventional farming,” said **Ayman Mostafa**, MCCE’s interim director and leader of the new program. “Arizona’s population is increasing, and we are trying to train farmers that can account for that growth and shift in industry that we will see in coming years.”

**Sharrona Moore,** a program coordinator hired with funds from the SCBGP grant, is responsible for ensuring program goals are met. “My role is really about outreach, getting in touch with these farmers that have been underrepresented and gaining that social capital to get them interested in what beekeeping can do for them,” Moore said.

“Urban farmers are often people of color and women who, as a group, have historically been undeserved,” said Mostafa.

Moore, who previously ran a nonprofit farm and is a woman of color herself, said, “By offering programs like this to underserved communities we can get them economically stable while supporting local food.”

“I feel very privileged to serve as the bridge from these communities to the university where we can make an impact on their lives,” she added.

For urban farmers, beekeeping is a critical tool for growing and pollinating crops. “Honeybee pollination is far more effective than any other method of pollination,” Mostafa said.

Although beekeeping provides an economical and organic way of pollinating crops, training is scarce and often inaccessible, making the educational opportunities provided by MCCE especially important for the state’s farming community. The training is offered at multiple UArizona campuses across the state, including in Prescott and Yuma.

“We aren’t confined to just one place which means we can give our students a more comprehensive look at agriculture in Arizona,” Mostafa said.

In addition to pollinating crops, the honeybees in these small-scale farms will produce honey, providing another source of income for farmers. “There is a good market for honey,” Mostafa said. “By selling the honey the bees will already be producing, our farmers can diversify their income and have greater economic security.”

The farmers are taught how to market and sell their products, both for private businesses and for selling products at local farmers' markets. “In some cases, we can give them micro-grants to jumpstart their business,” Mostafa said. “Anything we can do to help our farmers is important to us.”

“From no rain to too much rain to pests, farmers often see crops fail,” Moore said. “A farmer’s income is directly related to crop yield. This program can increase the quantity and quality of crops and create a diversified income stream through bee products so that they can protect themselves economically.”