

NEWS / TAMPA

# Among the apartment and office blocks of downtown Tampa something edible grows

New urban farm sprouts up to meet need for fresh produce in 'food desert' through a partnership between the Tampa Housing Authority and three local farmers.



Just yards from The Tempo at Encore apartment building, Zach Oak, 30, harvests carrots at Meacham Urban Farm. The farm opens to the public on Feb. 13. [ IVY CEBALLO | Times ]

By **Christopher O'Donnell**

Published Feb. 8

TAMPA — With a pair of knee protectors bearing the brunt of his work, manager Joe Dalessio slowly worked his way along an ordered row of carrot plants, gently lifting leaves to make sure he didn't miss a single berry



lettuce, kale, carrots, red cabbage, oregano and other herbs are springing out of the soil. Groundwater pumped through sprinkler systems gently rains down on plump heirloom and cherry tomatoes in three large greenhouses.

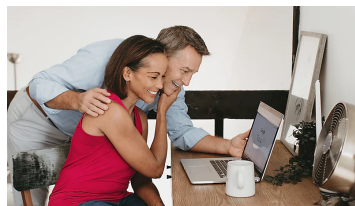
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Meacham Urban Farm, a partnership between the Tampa Housing Authority and three local farmers, plans to start selling fresh vegetables, fruit and eggs to the public on Feb. 13. It is named after Christina Meacham, Tampa's first Black school principal.

The venture, which was funded through a \$725,000 federal Choice Neighborhood Initiative grant, is expected to produce 60,000 pounds of fresh organic produce this year, including 40 varieties of vegetables and herbs, and 30 dozen eggs per week from up to 100 free-range chickens.

The money will also be used to set up and run an on-site educational program for students from Hillsborough County Schools, which owns the land. The school district agreed to lease the land for a nominal amount for at least five years.

The farm is more than another nod to the growing demand for locally grown organic produce. Encore is in an area designated as a food desert by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The label refers to mostly low-income communities that lack supermarkets and where many residents don't have cars or reliable public transportation and rely on fast food and convenience store grub.

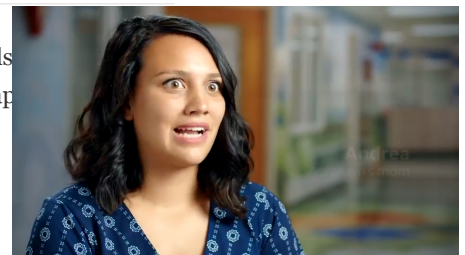


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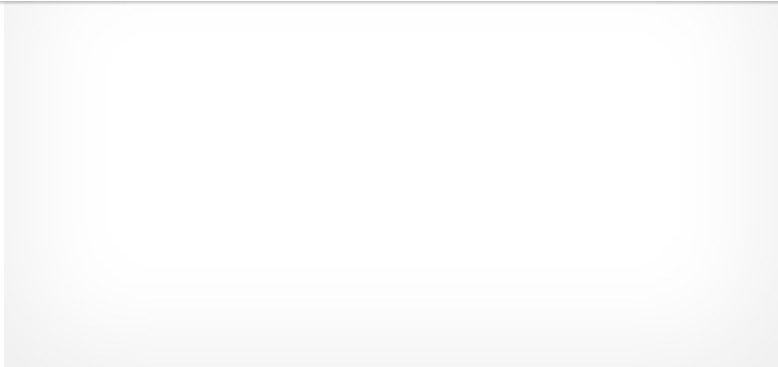
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That's been a problem for Encore where Housing Authority officials to attract a grocer for residents of the complex's more than 1,000 ap which include senior and subsidized housing.



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Things improved a little with the opening of a Publix in Channelside in 2019. But that is still a long hike across many busy roads, especially for the community’s older residents, said Leroy Moore, the agency’s chief operating officer.

The farm will provide affordable fresh produce at the community’s doorstep.

“I still consider Encore a food desert,” Moore said. “We’ve got a diverse population who need to shop, and they can’t afford Publix at all times.”

**RELATED:** [Tampa Housing Authority unable to ring up sale on new grocer for Encore](#)

To make the produce more affordable, shoppers on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program will get a 50 percent discount.

While government money paid for construction and set-up costs, the farm will be expected to pay its own way going forward, Moore said. There will be no annual subsidy from the housing agency.

Joe Dalessio is one of three farmers who own and run Meacham Urban Farm in Tampa. (CERBALLO | Times )

Growing his own food has been a passion for Dalessio, one of the three farmers at Meacham, since he was 14. He started his first farm business after graduating with



others have for baseball or movies.

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Just 30, his most recent venture was the 1-acre Black Finger Farm in Lutz. But unlike that farm, which was prone to flooding in the rainy season, he will be able to grow year-round at Meacham.

“This is everything I’ve been working up to,” Dalessio said. “I can’t wait to see what this will become.”

All of the produce at Meacham will be organic. Instead of pesticides, the farm will use natural deterrents to protect the crops, such as green lacewings, which feed on aphids.

The hens will have the run of the northern end of the garden and are protected from predators by an electrified fence.

Heirloom tomatoes seen inside a green house at Meacham Urban Farm in downtown Tampa. [ IVY CEBALLO | Times ]

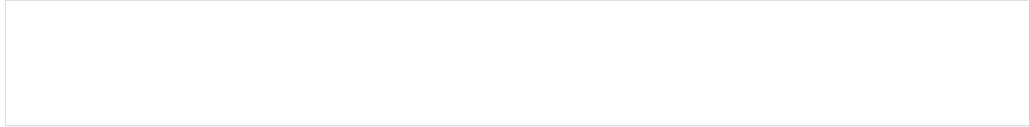
Longer term, there are plans to add pineapple and peach trees and to add to the farm’s lone beehive so it can also sell honey.

Dalessio’s partners at Meacham are Travis Malloy, who started Trail family farm east of Tampa, and Kristin Beauvois, who also worked at Meacham. It also employs three workers.

Moore said it took the Housing Authority a while to find the right farm. He hopes that one day soon, an Encore grocery store and local restaurant



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“These guys are incredible; they’re well educated but they’re in the ground, hard-working and believers in this.” he said. “That’s the special sauce.”

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**What:** Meacham Urban Farm

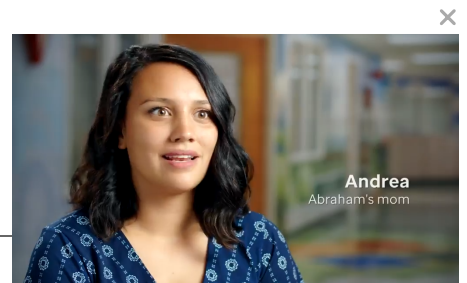
**Where:** 1108 E. Scott St., Tampa

**When:** Open 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. on weekends beginning Feb. 13

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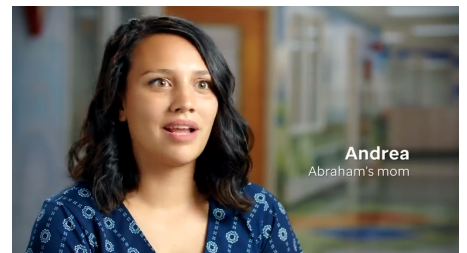
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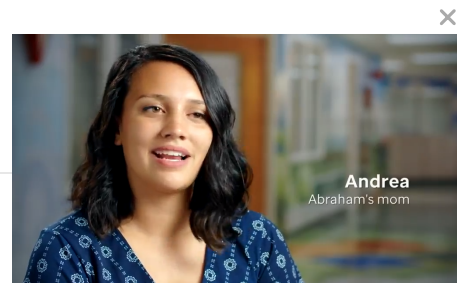
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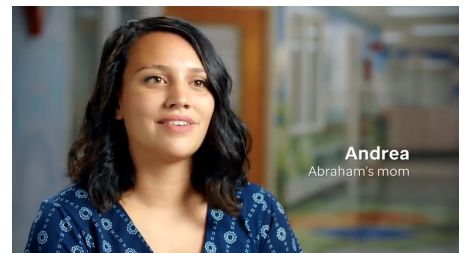
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