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EIN: 58-2339007

Year founded: 1997

Website: [www.wyldecenter.org](http://www.wyldecenter.org)

Employees: 8 full time, 14 part time

Board members: 18

FY 2024 Operating Budget: \$1,074,334

Fiscal Year: July 1 – June 30

### **Organization Overview**

The mission of the Wylde Center is to support resilient communities by connecting people to nature through environmental education and public greenspace. Established in 1997 as Oakhurst Community Garden Project, the organization was founded as a space to garden, grow food, and experience nature in an urban environment. Renamed in 2012, today Wylde Center enhances the quality of life for residents across metro-Atlanta, through community programs that focus on environmental education and food equity. Wylde Center preserves eight acres of greenspace at five sites in DeKalb County, Georgia (Oakhurst Garden, Sugar Creek Garden, Hawk Hollow, Edgewood Community Learning Garden, and Mulberry Fields Garden) located in four different Decatur and Atlanta neighborhoods where we offer extensive environmental education and community engagement programs. We fulfill our mission through the following core program areas:

**Environmental Education** for school-aged children, with a focus on under-resourced

communities and Title 1 schools where youth lack access to safe outdoor recreation, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Students develop skills in environmental science, organic gardening, health and nutrition. Programs are accessible and abundant, culminating in over 23,000 student interactions each year at Wylde Center gardens and schools across metro Atlanta.

**Urban Greenspace Conservation & Native Habitat Restoration** to provide access to nature within an urban environment and demonstrate the value of open land within an urban ecosystem. All of the Wylde Center gardens are located in DeKalb County and are free and open to the public for recreation and learning.

**Community Engagement** to build environmental awareness, support community gardening and connect members of the public with the natural world. Through public events, hands-on workshops and opportunities to volunteer, community members gain knowledge and skills in sustainable living. We offer programs for families, nature enthusiasts and the curious novice.

### **Education Program Detail**

Wylde Center's extensive environmental education program is the cornerstone of our mission. We provide in-school learning, after school programs, and field trips that bring students from across Atlanta to Wylde Center gardens. 73% of our education programs are offered at no cost, to ensure we reach low income communities where children lack access to greenspace and fresh foods. We currently work in six Title 1 schools where students experience poverty and food insecurity. **During the FY 2022-23 school year, of the 23,672 student interactions we recorded, 79% of those students were DeKalb County residents.**

### **Program Goals:**

- Provide children with outdoor, experiential learning opportunities
- Support teachers in delivering environmental science curriculum
- Support schools and communities in practices of gardening and composting
- Foster connections to nature to inspire life-long learning and environmental stewardship
- Ensure equitable access to fresh foods for youth across Atlanta
- Introduce young people to locally grown produce and healthy eating

We work towards these goals through the following program activities:

***In-school learning:*** Each year, we deliver in-school programs to 20+ schools in City Schools of Decatur and Atlanta Public Schools districts. Wylde Center meets students in their classrooms and school gardens for experiential learning linked to the common core curriculum. We work closely with teachers to design age-appropriate lessons that reinforce school subjects and inspire deeper engagement with environmental science. For schools seeking in-depth partnership, we offer Farm to School programming, which focuses on connecting children with the source of their food. Wylde Center educators work year-round in schools to build a culture of healthy eating. They teach lessons in growing and preparing fresh foods; exploring the ecology of food; and connecting food to culture and community. Wylde Center's programs empower students and teachers alike with educational resources like environmental science lessons, sustainable on-site garden beds, recipes for the school cafeteria, and taste tests to introduce children to eating fresh, local produce. Most of the students we serve reside in food deserts, defined as low-income areas where families lack access to vehicles and are more than ½ mile from a supermarket. As such, Wylde Center programs provide critical exposure to fresh fruits and vegetables, which has a transformative effect on student attitudes about healthy eating. In our taste tests with students, 78% reported a positive response to eating new fresh foods, like turning spinach into pesto, salad or smoothies.

***After school programming:*** Wylde Center offers a free after school Garden Club that teaches young people the basics of gardening and the food web. Students plant and tend to beds, then have the chance to harvest vegetables that they can take home to share with family. Weekly classes take place at our Edgewood Community Learning Garden in Atlanta and at affordable housing units where we have partnerships to maintain on-site garden plots. Current partners are the Decatur Housing Authority and Amani Place (Edgewood, Atlanta).

***Field trips:*** Held at Wylde Center greenspaces, school field trips encourage students to explore academic classroom content with a hands-on, experiential approach that inspires curiosity and reinforces learning. Wylde Center educators create a fully immersive outdoor learning experience based in environmental science concepts linked to each

school's core curriculum. Students explore natural systems and learn about human impact on the natural world. Each year, 20+ schools from more than 10 school districts participate in Wylde Center field trips.

### **Community Impact:**

**Improving access to outdoor education:** A growing body of research endorses outdoor learning as a proven strategy for boosting academic performance, as well as social and emotional growth. When students spend time outside, it aids memory, focus and attention. It reduces anxiety and encourages calm. Plus, kids are *moving*, which is good for their bodies and brain development. We all want these experiences for our children, but many schools in Atlanta's urban core lack access to greenspace and the resources to leave campus for encounters with nature. Through low- and no- cost programs for schools, Wylde Center improves access to nature-based learning, ensuring all students can reap the benefits.

**Youth gain skills and opportunities to thrive:** Through Wylde Center's educational programs, children engage with the world around them in meaningful ways which motivates learning and civic interest. Our students not only gain knowledge about the environment, they gain social and emotional skills like confidence, problem-solving and independence. They not only learn to practice environmentally-friendly behaviors, but they learn that they have the ability to take action in their communities. The long-term impact of our work is that young people gain knowledge and opportunities to thrive. They learn to create a relationship with the natural world and the resources that come from it. This prepares them to embark on healthy lives with awareness of their responsibility as environmental stewards.

**Food equity:** Community health depends on equitable access to nutritious food, yet 1 in 7 children in Atlanta today are food-insecure. This disproportionately affects low income families and communities of color where residents experience food injustice – the unequal access to fresh foods based on systemic disinvestment. Food injustice results in negative health outcomes that can lead to physical and emotional stress, and chronic illness. Wylde Center works to promote food equity by empowering neighborhoods and

schools with community gardens where they can grow their own fruits and vegetables. Children in our programs gain access to fresh foods and learn to enjoy them through engaging activities and cooking. They learn to make healthy food choices, priming them for a lifetime of healthy eating.

**Mental Health & Wellness:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has declared a mental health crisis for our youth, with unprecedented levels of hopelessness, distress and self harm reported amongst children. Spending time in nature has been shown to improve mental and emotional health. It fights anxiety and depression, restores emotional regulation, and elevates mood. When young people are immersed in nature, they experience decreased stress and improve their capacity to rebound from pressure and worry. Wylde Center's programs promote well-being for children and families, serving as an important community resource. More than ever, visitors to Wylde Center tell us that our gardens are *places of hope* where residents discover that they can take an active role in caring for the planet in the face of the climate crisis. We provide opportunities for civic engagement and climate action that counteract despair, and promote empowerment.