

Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture



Background

Definition

Urban agriculture refers to growing vegetables, fruits and herbs, and raising livestock and animals in an urban setting. Urban agriculture activities include: home gardening in front and backyards and planting strips, container and rooftop gardening, keeping livestock (e.g., chickens, rabbits), beekeeping, operating larger urban farms, and private and public community gardening. Urban agriculture also encompasses related commercial activities such as the production and sale of value added products like jams, pickles, and honey, and on-site sales of locally produced food. Home and community gardeners typically grow food for their own consumption, donation, or limited nonprofit sales. Community gardens typically engage a number of stakeholders. Urban farms operate on a larger scale than community gardens, grow produce for sale, and often require a business license to operate.

Urban agriculture can play an important role in increasing food security, building community, and improving the environment. Gardening and other food production activities help to supplement residents' diet with fresh fruits and vegetables and increase outdoor physical activity. Community gardens offer safe, natural spaces for community members to meet and socialize.

Gardens and urban farms provide increased access to open space, especially for residents living in multifamily buildings with limited or no green space for gardening. Home gardening can help to reduce the burden of food costs, and larger scale community gardens and urban farms often offer training and job-skills programs for youth and other community members.

Urban agriculture can improve watershed health by reducing stormwater runoff. Gardens and urban farms can also help to mitigate the urban heat island effect and provide additional habitat for struggling urban ecosystems.

Health, equity and sustainability considerations

On average, gardeners eat **double** the servings of fruits and vegetables than non-gardeners.

There are a number of equity considerations for community gardening programs. Programs should consider equitable access to resources, including where garden plots are located, outreach to encourage broad participation, and accessibility of sites for all ages and abilities. Among other guidelines, [Seattle](#) manages its P-Patch waitlists with an eye toward reflecting the neighboring community and representation of populations underserved by the program.

In recent years, raising backyard chickens, small livestock, and beekeeping has become increasingly popular. Many cities have successfully updated their ordinances to allow animals, but it can be controversial and raise concerns about impacts on neighbors. Permitting processes should consider what will work for the broader community. Pilot programs have been used in other cities and can be an effective way to test new approaches and understand the benefits and concerns.

While gardens have health-promoting benefits, understanding of soil conditions and potential contaminants is important. Adopting best management practices is also important to ensure that gardening is a sustainable, environmentally beneficial activity.

Many local jurisdictions' development regulations do not protect, or may even actively restrict, urban agriculture and food growing activities. Outdated zoning ordinances and lack of policy coordination can cause these activities to be considered illegal or extra-legal. To ensure the sustainability and viability of community gardens and urban agriculture, jurisdictions should adopt or update zoning and land use policies that authorize and protect them.

Community gardens and urban agriculture can help to supplement fresh fruit and vegetable intake, and lessen the burden of limited access to food retail. It should be noted that community gardens are just one component of the larger goal of improving access to fresh, healthy food. See the [Healthy Food Retail guide](#) for other strategies to increase food access in your community. Additionally, King County has resources available that measure food access, available at [King County AIMs High](#).

Program and Policy Examples

Program examples—How is it used locally?

Local jurisdictions can support new and existing community gardens and urban agriculture in a variety of ways. Cities can provide financial support, make municipal land and water available for free or at reduced cost, or act as partners in operating gardening programs.

The [Federal Way Community Garden Foundation](#) is a non-profit group that helps Federal Way community members to design, build, plant, and maintain vegetable gardens. All of the gardens distribute their produce to the community. Gardens located within a school help to feed children from that particular school. Several of the larger gardens organize with homeless programs, subsidized and transitional housing units, and senior programs. The foundation also offers gardening and nutritional education.

The City of Seattle and a nonprofit land trust manage the [P-Patch Program](#). The community garden program plans, administers, and protects gardens throughout the city, supporting more than 75 gardens on private and public land. They also provide special programs to youth, low-income and underrepresented communities.

Metro Parks Tacoma has partnered with community groups to develop a one-acre [food forest](#) in Swan Creek Park. The food forest includes a variety of trees, shrubs and perennials that provide free, healthy, nutritious, low-maintenance food for the community. This project hopes to change the community's culture around food, much in the way that community gardens transform the local landscape.

Development regulations and model ordinances

The City of Tacoma adopted a revised urban forestry element in its comprehensive plan in 2010. Since then, they have been revising their city code to ensure that the plan may be implemented. Tacoma recently amended its code regarding poultry husbandry. The change was brought about after a member of the Sustainable Tacoma Committee identified that the animal code discouraged residents from keeping poultry by requiring a 50-foot setback for chicken coops and imposing criminal penalties for offenders. The City examined other jurisdictions' codes regarding chickens and worked with code enforcement to draft new rules. The revised code was presented to the community for feedback and passed in 2012. Additionally, a community petition prompted the City of Tacoma to allow raised bed gardening in planting strips on a permit basis. The code was revised simply to allow this and to remove the annual fee for occupying the right of way.

The City of Seattle enacted code changes in 2010 to encourage urban agriculture and protect existing farms and gardens. See [Summary of Seattle Code Changes](#) and [Ordinance 123378](#).

In 2013, the City of Federal Way amended its regulations to remove barriers to urban agriculture and respond to growing interest in cultivating food in the city. [Ordinance 13-754](#) added several definitions, including community gardens, cottage food operations, farmers markets, farm stands, and urban agriculture. The regulatory package also amended the sign code to allow signage for farmers markets and urban agriculture. The city also amended the allowable use tables to allow urban agriculture in every zone (depending on size), in addition to other regulatory changes.

Keeping livestock, like chickens, is increasingly popular in urban areas. Cities typically regulate keeping livestock by specifying the number and kinds of animals allowed in certain zones. These regulations aim to manage noise and smell and provide adequate living conditions. The King County Department of Development and Environmental Services' [Small Animals and Livestock Information Services Bulletin](#) provides an overview of livestock regulations in the county. Municipal Research and Services Center's [Regulating Livestock and Other Farm Animals](#) resource page provides best practices and model ordinances.

In San Francisco, California, Mayor Ed Lee enacted the "Salad Law" in 2012 allowing urban agriculture in all areas of the city. See San Francisco Administrative Code: [Urban Agriculture Program](#).

Performance evaluation/success stories

Given the small-scale and diffuse nature of urban agriculture, comprehensively measuring existing levels of urban agriculture and change over time is challenging. In 2013, PSRC identified options for measuring urban agriculture for various purposes in the report [Measuring Urban Agriculture in the City of Seattle](#). Measurement tools depend on overall objectives, but include GIS analysis, surveys, and indicators. Seattle's P-Patch Community Gardens program includes a triennial survey of gardeners; surveys can be a useful tool for evaluating success of specific programs.

There are numerous examples of successful programs and partnerships that teach gardening skills, increase food access, and address environmental issues. The [Rainier Beach Urban Farm and Wetlands](#) (RBUF) is an urban community learning farm where people learn to [grow food in the city](#). The farm used to be called the

Atlantic City Nursery and is owned by Seattle Parks and Recreation. Seattle Tilth was granted co-operatorship of the site in 2011 along with Friends of Rainier Beach Urban Farm and Wetlands. With the help of community volunteers and organizations, Seattle Tilth is developing the eight-acre site into a dynamic farm that will be an educational place for the whole community.

THE RBUFW works closely with the Rainier Beach community and tailors its programs to meet the needs of residents. The youth program focuses on the large East African immigrant population in the neighborhood, provides a safe place for teenagers to learn practical skills, and provides access to healthy food.

Implementation

Developing policy language

According to the Puget Sound Regional Council's [Food Policy Blueprints](#), a code audit is an effective policy action to encourage urban agriculture.

From the [policy blueprint](#):

A code audit could focus on urban agriculture holistically, or a targeted subject, e.g., community gardens. In either case, the audit and subsequent code changes should be mindful of the sustainability of implementing a policy, particularly in view of tenure and maintenance of property that will be farmed or gardened. Involving external groups with dedicated interests in urban agriculture, such as conservation districts, can help both the audit and review of proposed code changes.

Jurisdictions will first need to understand the location and types of urban agricultural activities currently allowed. Then, desired activities, including their scale and permitted locations, can be examined. Different agricultural activities may require amending definitions, land use codes, zones, and site requirements in zoning and development regulations. For example, jurisdictions have identified and developed policies and code language that address:

- *Zones suitable for urban agriculture and community gardens*
- *Where gardening is allowed on private property (e.g., planting strips, front yards)*
- *Accessory structures (hoop houses, cold frames, tool sheds)*
- *Roof treatments*
- *Vertical/Indoor farms*
- *Bonuses for including gardening space or edible landscaping in development projects*
- *Animals allowed*
- *Pest management*
- *Onsite sales of produce/products*
- *Licensing for offsite sales*
- *Community kitchens*
- *Incorporating gardens/fruit trees in landscaping guidelines*
- *Targets for community garden access*
- *Composting and waste*
- *Water use and reuse for agricultural purposes*

Model policy language

Model policy language is a useful starting point for communities to tailor and adopt as amendments to their existing zoning laws, or as part of a comprehensive zoning update. Local jurisdictions vary considerably by size, density, availability of land, and demand for urban agricultural activities and there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to zoning for urban agriculture. ChangeLab's [Seeding the City](#) provides model definitions and types and use regulations.

Opportunities for funding

There are a variety of in-kind and monetary funding programs and grants available at the national, regional, and city level. It is important to find a grant or funding program that best fits your urban agriculture programs and policies.

City and county government can use a variety of funding sources to launch a community garden program and acquire land. In this region, sources have included general funds, parks levy funds, Conservation Futures Program funding, and funding from conservation districts. The City of Seattle's P-Patch program offers an example of a city-run project supported by a non-profit (The P-Patch Trust) that funds acquisition of land, among other activities.

The City of Seattle's [Neighborhood Matching Fund](#) provides neighborhood groups with city resources for community-driven projects that enhance and strengthen their own neighborhoods. All projects are initiated, planned and implemented by community members in partnership with the city. Every award is matched by neighborhoods' or communities' resources of volunteer labor, donated materials, donated professional services or cash.

King County [Environmental Awards and Grants](#) offer a variety of funding opportunities for community garden implementation and new projects linked to environmental stewardship and health.

The [King County Conservation District Grant Program](#) awards grants for projects that "directly improve the condition of natural resources to provide education and outreach to increase awareness, build capacity to enhance implementation of natural resource improvement projects and implement pilot of demonstration projects."

The American Community Garden Association (ACGA) keeps a robust and up to date [website](#) with funding opportunities and grant programs across the country.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) [People's Garden Grant Program](#) was designed to invest in urban and rural areas identified as food deserts and/or food insecure areas, particularly those with persistent poverty. The major goal of the People's Garden Grant Program is to facilitate the initial investment needed in these communities, not long-term support. The USDA also manages the [Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program](#) for community food projects that promote comprehensive responses to local food access, farm, and nutrition access.

Considerations for local implementation



There are many legal and practical issues affecting urban agriculture that should be considered when implementing these model land use policies. These include:

- Soil contamination: [EcoTools: Urban Gardens and Potentially Contaminated Land](#)
- Food handling and food safety: National Sustainable Agriculture Information Center [An Illustrated Guide to Growing Safe Produce on Your Farm - IP382](#)
- Pesticides and other environmental regulations: National Association of State Departments of Agriculture: [Federal Environmental Laws Affecting Agriculture](#)
- Compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): [Making Your Garden Accessible](#)
- Animal welfare and control: Animal Welfare Institute's [Animal Welfare Approved Standards](#)

The Washington State University (WSU) Extension [Master Gardener Program](#) provides support for community gardens and conducts Community Garden Specialist training. These volunteers receive additional training in working with communities to grow food.

Challenges to implementation

Challenges to implementing and maintaining community gardens and urban agriculture typically fall into five categories:

- Existing policy: As discussed earlier, existing land use and zoning policy may limit or restrict food production activities. It is essential to review and understand current policy and make revisions as needed. For examples of different program options, please see [Urban Agriculture: A Sixteen City Survey of Urban Agriculture Practices Across the Country](#).
- Land availability and cost: Undeveloped land can be hard to come by, especially in densely populated areas. And land that is available is often out of the price range for a local jurisdiction or community group. Private-public partnerships, such as the land agreement at Rainier Beach Urban Farm and Wetlands and the P-Patch Program's work with a nonprofit land trust, can help to facilitate and provide more resources for land procurement.
- Funding: While there are numerous grants and funding opportunities available for gardens and urban farms, most programs are extremely competitive and only provide funding for garden creation, not maintenance. Projects should look for a diverse group of funding options to help maintain funding over the long-term.
- Maintenance: Community members and city staff are often very excited to create and develop a new community garden. It is more difficult to maintain community participation in the long-term, especially for routine garden maintenance and continued funding. Creating a garden council or leadership group can help to encourage ongoing investment.
- Create markets: Urban farms can thrive when there is a guaranteed market for their products. Creating opportunities for farmers to sell produce directly to the community via farmers markets, and pop-up stands, or connecting local retailers to urban farms, can help create markets for local produce.

Resources

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department's Healthy Community Planning Toolbox Policy Intervention Tools: [Land Use and Healthy Food](#), [Economic Development and Healthy Food](#) (2013)