

Community gardening

Community gardening provides shared spaces for residents of neighborhoods or members of institutions (schools, public housing) to grow food on allotted plots for their individual and family consumption, as well as for contributions to food banks.

Gardens are generally sites for various forms of community engagement, such as volunteering (construction, maintenance, growing), public and private functions (holiday celebrations, birthdays and weddings), public art and design, sustainable gardening and building practices, growing and sharing native plants among immigrant communities, environmental and food education, including food and racial justice. They also provide spaces for personal reflection and restoration.

City departments of neighborhoods, or parks and recreation, often sponsor community garden programs, although they might enlist partnerships with community groups, horticultural associations, public housing authorities, school systems, immigrant groups, design-build studios at universities and Extension Services, land trusts, and others. Religious congregations, local schools, and youth organizations also sponsor community gardens, and youth participation has been important to their development as part of youth leadership and food justice strategies in many cities. Community gardening and broader food issues are increasingly becoming part of urban and sustainability planning.

While city departments and nonprofit institutions may provide staff support, most community gardening systems place emphasis on developing local leadership and community participation, often through citywide community gardening associations, such as New York's Green Guerrillas and Denver Urban Gardeners.

Land tenure and leases can be contentious in the face of land scarcity for current and future uses, such as housing, businesses, and jobs, as well as hydroponic, vertical, and for-profit urban agriculture models. Gentrification dynamics also might come into play as neighborhoods are greened and housing prices rise.

The [American Community Gardening Association](#), with more than 250 organizational members, links practitioners across the field.

Brief history

Community gardening in the U.S. goes back to the depression of the 1890s, and then again in the 1930s, as well as to school gardens, WWI gardens, and WWII victory gardens. Women's clubs and garden clubs provided leadership in many cities. Community activism in the 1960s and 1970s helped to spur the current community gardening movement, with persistent themes of community empowerment, community development, racial and ethnic heritage, and open space.

References:

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Samina Raja, Branden Born, and Jessica Kozlowski Russell, *A Planners Guide to Community and Regional Food Planning: Transforming Food Environments, Facilitating Healthy Eating* (Chicago: APA Planners Press, 2008).

Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *To Dwell Is To Garden: A History Of Boston's Community Gardens*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987).

City Cases

Cities vary in how they respond to grassroots action and food justice demands, as well as how they institutionalize city support and partnerships. A few cases provide a sense of their diversity, opportunities, and constraints.

Seattle

Community gardening emerged as a city-sponsored program in the 1970s after the Picardo family donated a family truck farm in 1971, and more gardens were added on city-owned land over the decade. This helped to formalize the P-Patch Community Gardening program, in honor of the Picardos, but with the “P” culturally inscribed in the mantra of “passionate people producing peas in public.”

During the late 1980s, the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) was established in the city, with a Neighborhood Matching Fund that incentivized much civic and green innovation, including additional community gardens. Citywide sustainability planning in the 1990s, in conjunction with neighborhoods, further spurred their growth, and P-Patch became part of DON.

However, as neighborhoods developed their plans, they had to prioritize and estimate costs of various components, and thus had to justify them in a review process with the city council and relevant city agencies. This was designed to ensure broad democratic accountability above the neighborhood level and among potentially competing sustainability and neighborhood improvement goals. This process of democratic accountability helped to secure voter support for funding a bond measure to expand P-Patch.

With civic initiative from many directions, P-Patch developed still richer institutional supports with the University of Washington design/build studio, King County Extension’s master gardeners program, the Seattle Housing Authority, and other city departments and public utilities. Various architecture, design, engineering, and green building firms have also contributed funding, labor, and expertise. The city’s Race and Social Justice Initiative added an explicit racial equity toolkit to community garden planning, which has significantly helped to expand food-security gardens in low-income and immigrant communities.

The P-Patch website provides a current [P-Patch List](#), with links to each of 86 gardens, including features and photos. The 2009 book by Hou, Johnson, and Lawson (below) provides an institutional overview, with rich case studies, beautiful photos, and site plans of six diverse gardens, as well as lessons for the broader field.

In 2021, the Department of Neighborhoods announced a [Food Equity Fund](#), with two tiers of grants (up to \$75,000 and up to \$150,000) to support community work by low-income, people of color, refugees, and other disadvantaged groups.

References:

Jeffrey Hou, Julie M. Johnson, and Laura J. Lawson, [Greening Cities, Growing Communities](#): *Learning from Seattle's Urban Community Gardens* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

Jim Diers, [Neighbor Power](#): *Building Community the Seattle Way* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

Carmen Sirianni, "Neighborhood Planning as Collaborative Democratic Design: The Case of Seattle," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 73 (2007): 373-387.

Jeffrey Craig Sanders, [Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability](#): *Inventing Ecotopia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

Matthew Klinger, [Emerald City](#): *An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

Also see our [City Desk: Seattle](#).

Philadelphia

Community gardening in Philadelphia goes back at least to the 1890s and its history has included a diverse array of African Americans from the South, as well as immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Latin America. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Neighborhood Gardens Association and then the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) began to bridge gaps between mostly female suburban gardening clubs and inner-city neighborhoods through partnerships with neighborhood settlement houses and community centers. In the 1970s, PHS consolidated various projects under Philadelphia Green.

In the postwar decades, the city was faced with deindustrialization and significant loss of population, leaving more than 40,000 vacant lots and building structures (houses, housing projects, docks, warehouses, factories, derelict railroads, canals, landfills). With a Center City development strategy and strong economic growth in the 1990s under Mayor Ed Rendell, community gardening re-emerged as a way to claim some of the vacant land for neighborhood improvement and empowerment and to resist gentrification that accompanied new growth in finance, real estate, information, hospitals, and higher education.

Utilizing an assets-based community development model, PHS and Philadelphia Green partnered with the city and locally-based foundations and community development corporations to fund staff, training, technical assistance, and gardening tools. By the mid-1990s, Philadelphia Green had a staff of 40 working with 1,100 neighborhood groups and 2,000 greening programs. During the two-term mayoralities of John Street (2000-2008) and then especially under Michael Nutter (2008-2016), the city began to integrate community gardening into neighborhood development and sustainable city planning across a range of issues.

Mayor Nutter's wife (Lisa Nutter) had been part of the group that helped produce the foundational study, *Old Cities/Green Cities: Communities Transform Unmanaged Land*, led by J. Blaine Bonham, Jr., long-time executive director of PHS and Philly Green. Nutter lent further support with a *Greenworks* vision in 2009, the creation of the Food Policy Advisory Council in 2011 (staffed by the Office of Sustainability), the development of the *Green City, Clean Waters Plan*, and the Philadelphia Land Bank.

Tensions persist among various parts of the urban gardening movement, with some alliances that favor multiple uses of land for gardening, affordable housing, and community and business development (the latter generating significant revenue from jobs and taxes for city services), and others focusing more on gardening as a grassroots food justice and local self-determination strategy – although there are many overlaps. These tensions play out over the length of leases for community gardens. Some tensions also exist between older African American gardeners and white Millennial gardeners as they settle in the city after attending colleges in the local area.

References:

Christina D. Rosan and Hamil Pearsall, *Growing a Sustainable City? The Question of Urban Agriculture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017). [CivicGreen Bookshelf review](#).

J. Blaine Bonham, Jr., Gerri Spilka, and Darl Rastorfer, *Old Cities/Green Cities: Communities Transform Unmanaged Land* (Chicago: APA Planning Advisory Service, 2002).

Philadelphia Land Bank, [Strategic Plan and Performance Report](#) (2019).

Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, [Annual Report: July 1, 2020-June 30, 2021](#)

[Philadelphia Greenworks](#).

New York City

Since the 1960s and 1970s, community gardening has been concentrated in lower-income neighborhoods and communities of color, especially in the outer boroughs of Brooklyn,

Queens, and the Bronx, as well as in upper Manhattan. Gardens have often been sites of neighborhood empowerment, community development, and food justice, although they have also provided opportunities for gentrification as they contributed to the increase in land values.

In the late 1970s, the city utilized federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to help develop Operation Green Thumb, which was later incorporated into the Department of Parks and Recreation. This engaged residents as stewards of vacant city-owned land, if only as a step to planned development at a later date. In addition, the New York City Housing Authority, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and the USDA Urban Garden Program promoted community gardens.

Protests and lawsuits over garden leases and Green Thumb licenses heated up especially in the 1990s, but courts initially sided with the city's right to balance the benefits of open space and gardens with housing development, construction jobs, and other community facilities. Mayor Rudolf Giuliani (1994-2001), militant about market logics in the disposal of land yet designating many sites for affordable housing, was met with militant grassroots action, as well as the state attorney general's efforts to stop garden destruction.

Several nonprofits, such as the New York Restoration Partnership and the Trust for Public Land, helped to save over one hundred gardens through purchase from the city, though with diverse forms of local engagement, garden design and governance. The administration of Michael Bloomberg (2002-2013) helped to stabilize the community garden program, though it remained at a disadvantage relative to the MillionTreesNYC campaign in the formal city sustainability plan (PlanNYC).

The New York City Housing Authority also supports community gardening at many of its more than three hundred sites, home to one-half million people.

References:

Lindsay K. Campbell, *City of Forests, City of Farms: Sustainability Planning for New York City's Nature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017). [CivicGreen review](#).

Kristin Reynolds and Nevin Cohen, *Beyond the Kale: Urban Agriculture and Social Justice Activism in New York City* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2016).

Efrat Eizenberg, "The Changing Meaning of Community Space: Two Models of NGO Management of Community Gardens in New York City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36 (2012): 106-120

Robert Fox Elder, "Protecting New York City's Community Gardens," *New York University Environmental Law Journal* 13 (2005): 769-803.

[GrowNYC](#).

Cities in Massachusetts

Various cities across the state have included community gardening in their food planning and food justice strategies, as well as to brand themselves as sustainable, inclusive, and diverse. Gateway cities receive some state funding as well, in addition to support from a range of nonprofits and foundations. Sociologist Sara Shostak examines Somerville, Lowell, and Boston in depth, and draws upon her field research in other cities as well. Her study focuses especially on culture and memory as these inform local systems and strategies, as well as material constraints and opportunities, such as vacant lots and contaminated soils.

Somerville

The city, referred to as “Slummerville” only a few short decades ago, shares in much of the postindustrial dynamism of Cambridge and Boston, which has provided opportunity to bridge the older ethnic (especially Italian, Portuguese, and Irish) cultures of urban growing with young hipster and “foodie” cultures and practices – though less so with recent immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The mix, reflected in responsive governance under successive mayors (especially Joseph Curtatone, 2004-2022), has been largely successful, though not without strong gentrification pressures.

Lowell

A city with some of the earliest textile mills (now largely a National Historic Park), Lowell remains a Gateway City for new immigrants, especially from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The gardens serve as a source of ingredients for various national foods, as well as for cross-cultural exchange, English language acquisition, civic integration and engagement.

Boston

The city has a long history of community gardening, but its recent wave is marked by pointed struggles to critique slavery and reclaim farming as a source of memory, identity and sovereignty in some predominantly Black neighborhoods, such as Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan. In the postwar decades, these neighborhoods have seen racial shifts, disinvestment, arson, toxic contamination, and other challenges that make urban agriculture an inviting strategy, though not without conundrums. Among these is the cost of testing and remediating land for farming versus other potential uses that may empower communities and provide opportunities.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture provided a \$25,000 planning grant (through its Local Food Promotion Program) for the city’s Urban Agriculture Visioning Group. This included stakeholders across the spectrum of commercial and noncommercial growers, as well as multiple city agencies, foundations, land trusts, farming institutes, community development corporations, and neighborhood health centers. The city’s Office of Food Initiatives and the Boston Redevelopment Authority oversaw the process, which was also coordinated with the Boston Food Policy Council.

While some in Boston's neighborhoods see urban agriculture as a revolutionary strategy of sovereignty that can help come to terms with the history of racial oppression, others focus on assets-based community development, and still others stress commercial opportunities, especially of high-tech hydroponic methods and vertical farming. They argue that these can be compatible with local control and the transformation of the local food economy, which does not require a romanticization of growing in the dirt.

In other local food projects around the state, such as Nuestras Raíces in Holyoke's Puerto Rican community, young urban farmers can envision an exciting mix of rootedness in land and hydroponics in buildings, with equitable access to land and technology.

Various visions of community gardening increasingly integrate climate change adaptation, especially after Hurricane Sandy in the New York metropolitan area in 2012.

References:

Sara Shostak, [*Back to the Roots: Memory, Inequality, and Urban Agriculture*](#) (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021).

Northbound Ventures LLC, [*Urban AG Visioning: A City's Vision for Growing Food, Community, and the Economy*](#) (September 2015).

[Urban Farming Institute.](#)

[Corner Stalk Farm.](#)

Persistent challenges

Community gardening has contributed in many ways to healthy communities, social capital, and civic life in cities of various types, and provides an important venue for youth activism, job training, and food justice. Food access and sustainable agriculture, of course, are much larger policy issues than community gardening.

Nonetheless, challenges persist and tensions manifest themselves for democratic governance at the city level, as well as in neighborhood deliberations over the mix of goals and the relative benefits and costs to various parts of the community. These include:

- *sustainability planning*: how much weight should community gardening have within broader sustainability and resilience plans, and through what forms of neighborhood participation, multi-stakeholder visioning, food policy advisory councils, and formal city planning should this be determined?
- *racial memory*: how much emphasis should community gardeners place on collective memories of oppression rooted (for African Americans) in slavery and discriminatory land use and how much on community development and healthy food, in partnership with

a broad range of city, nonprofit, and for-profit partners? Are there tensions and tradeoffs? Is community gardening a privileged strategy for racial equity or liberation?

- *low-tech soil and high-tech hydroponics*: what mix might work best in cities with diverse food access, economic development, relative land scarcity and land values, and climate adaptation challenges?
- *gentrification*: how might tendencies to gentrification be limited as community gardening or other sustainability strategies increase land values?

References:

Christina D. Rosan and Hamil Pearsall, *Growing a Sustainable City? The Question of Urban Agriculture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), chapter 7. [CivicGreen Bookshelf review](#).

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Warren James Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, second edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

Sally K. Fairfax, Louise Nelson Dyble, Greig Tor Guthey, Lauren Gwin, Monica Moore, and Jennifer Sokolove, *California Cuisine and Just Food* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

Garrett Broad, *More Than Just Food: Food Justice and Community Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

Jennifer Meta Robinson and James Robert Farmer, *Selling Local: Why Local Food Movements Matter* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*, second edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

Thomas A. Lyson, *Civic Agriculture: Reconnecting Farm, Food, and Community* (Medford, MA: Tufts University Press, 2004).

We welcome suggestions and comments to help improve this entry: civicgreen@tufts.edu

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