

Cultivating Community Gardens: The Role of Local Government in Creating Healthy, Livable Neighborhoods

Detailed Case Studies

Improving Food Security in Del Paso Heights, California

Gardening in the San Diego School District

Oregon Food Policy Councils Sow Seeds for Better Health

References

Local government leaders are in a unique position to promote healthy eating and active living in their communities by supporting community gardens. Community gardens are places where neighbors can gather to cultivate plants, vegetables and fruits. Such gardens can improve nutrition, physical activity, community engagement, safety, and economic vitality for a neighborhood and its residents.

Barriers, such as liability expenses, code restrictions and a lack of resources, which often make it difficult for communities to establish or maintain gardens in their neighborhoods, can be overcome with local government engagement. This fact sheet offers case studies, best management practices, resources and tools for policy-makers regarding creative, cost-effective solutions that reduce barriers and facilitate the creation of community garden programs.

The High Cost of Unhealthy Communities

Sixty-five percent of adults in the U.S. are overweight or obese (1), and more than 33 percent of children and adolescents are obese or at risk for becoming obese (2). For adults, the potential health consequences of obesity include cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and some cancers. Obese children are at a greater risk than normal weight children for developing type 2 diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, sleep apnea and orthopedic problems.

In addition to the potential health consequences, obesity creates a substantial economic burden for the U.S. The direct and indirect health costs associated with obesity are estimated at \$117 billion per year nationwide, in the form of worker absenteeism, health care premiums, co-payments and out-of-pocket expenses (3).

Community garden programs with the following characteristics have the greatest potential to strengthen their communities (4):

- Target or include lower-income residents*
- Include neighbors of various ages, races and ethnic backgrounds*
- Provide an open space for community gatherings and family events*

- *Offer educational opportunities and vocational skills for youths*
- *Enable gardeners to sell their produce through a local farmer's market*
- *Build in a method to encourage the donation of surplus produce to food shelters.*

Nutrition - Food Security & Access

Limited access to healthy foods, such as fruits and vegetables, is a major barrier to healthy eating. Low-income, underserved communities are at the highest risk for obesity because they often lack supermarkets, leaving convenience stores or fast-food chains as the main source of meals (5). Expensive fruits and vegetables may also be cost prohibitive for low-income families. Community gardens provide residents of underserved communities the opportunity to grow their own fruits and vegetables, increasing access and affordability.

Physical Activity

The U.S. Surgeon General, along with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American College of Sports Medicine, recommend getting a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week for adults and 60 minutes of moderately or vigorously intense activity most days of the week for children and adolescents. Unfortunately, nearly 40 percent of adults and 23 percent of children do not get any free-time physical activity (6).

Gardening is a recommended form of moderate physical activity. Community gardening can encourage more active lifestyles by providing children and adults the opportunity to exercise by stretching, bending, walking, digging and lifting tools and plants.

Case Study: Improving Food Security in Del Paso Heights, California

The Sacramento neighborhood of Del Paso Heights is an ethnically diverse, low-income community with limited access to healthy foods. Many of the residents are from cultures that value farming, but lack access to gardening space.

To address the area's poor access to fresh fruits and vegetables and the significant increases in obesity, a task force comprised of community and local government organizations convened in 1994 and decided to develop a community garden as their first project. Initial funding was provided by Sacramento County's First 5 Commission to the Sacramento County Women Infant and Children (WIC) Program, and is now managed by the Health Education Council, a nonprofit organization.

WIC worked with residents to transform a previously unused four-acre plot adjacent to Martin Luther King Junior High School into a community garden that now provides space for 85 families to grow produce. Since then, two additional gardens have been established.

In 2005, the Health Education Council, Soil Born Farm Urban Agriculture Project, the city of Sacramento Department of Parks and Recreation and the Mutual Assistance Network of Del Paso Heights established a farmer's market in Del Paso Heights. Five local residents that grow

produce at the Stone Soup Gardens sell their produce at the market. Students from Grant Joint High School's Stone Soup garden sell plants, salsa and flowers at the market.

For more information, contact:

- Bill Maynard, community garden program coordinator, Department of Parks and Recreation, (916) 808-4943 or wmaynard@cityofscramento.org

Open Space

Most urban areas in America do not meet local or state requirements for open space and parks per capita, particularly minority communities that have fewer resources to obtain and retain open space. For instance, in Los Angeles, neighborhoods with 75 percent or more white residents boast 31.8 acres of park space for every 1,000 people, compared with 1.7 acres in African-American neighborhoods and 0.6 acres in Latino neighborhoods (7). Community gardens are an inexpensive way for cities to mitigate this disparity and recapture unused land for the purpose of beautification. A neglected vacant lot can be transformed into a garden where people of all ages can grow food together and strengthen community ties.

Educational Opportunities

Hands-on exposure to community gardens can teach children about the source of fresh produce, demonstrate community stewardship and introduce the importance of environmental sustainability. In addition, gardens are great places for children to learn math, business and communication skills through applied activities and interaction. Integrating environment-based education into academic programs improves reading, math, science, and social studies test scores and reduces classroom discipline problems (8).

Environmental Benefits of Community Gardens

- *Green vegetation can reflect as much as 20 percent to 25 percent of radiation from the sun, thus reducing the heat island effect in cities and cooling the climate in urban areas (9).*
- *In the United States, a meal travels about 13,000 miles, on average, before reaching your plate (10). Eating locally produced foods reduces fuel consumption, carbon dioxide emissions, and a variety of other negative environmental consequences associated with the transportation of foods.*
- *Garden soil is an absorbent substance that reduces runoff from the rain and helps minimize surface erosion.*
- *Community gardens reduce pollutants in our air by absorbing carbon dioxide.*
- *Small open spaces in urban areas provide crucial corridors for retaining native wildlife and supporting migratory species (11).*

Case Study: Gardening in the San Diego School District

Students at Rosa Parks Elementary School in the San Diego, Calif. can enjoy the benefits of a community garden right on their school's campus. The school is located in the City Heights

neighborhood where residents are predominately Latino, African-American and Southeast Asian, and 54.5 percent of families earn incomes below the federal poverty level.

The school's principal worked with the San Diego School District and other partners to identify and designate a piece of land as an educational garden. Students from the Cesar Chavez Service Learning Club generated a plan for a garden and gained community support for the proposal. The students designed the garden to include compost and flowerbeds; a birdbath and feeder for natural insect control; and planting beds to grow vegetables and herbs consistent with the diets and customs of the diverse neighborhood population. The students also coordinated a school farmer's market where harvests can be distributed to students and families.

Teachers at Rosa Parks Elementary School use the school's community garden to take students outside the classroom and offer interactive instruction on health and nutrition, science, mathematics, ecology and agriculture.

Funding for the garden came in the form of grants and support from the San Diego Women's Foundation and Scripps Mercy Hospital. One-time capital expenses and operational maintenance during non-school hours were and are covered by the school.

For more information:

- Visit the Rosa Parks Community Garden Web site:
<http://parks.sandi.net/Pages/Garden/index.html>
- Contact Kitty Gabriel, Rosa Parks Elementary, technology consultant,
kgabriel@sandi.net

Property Values & Tax Revenue

Green space adds property value to neighborhoods by beautifying spaces and creating more attractive places for people to walk and enjoy life outdoors. People are willing to pay more to live in places that provide these amenities. In New York, neighborhoods surrounding a community garden saw a 9.4 percent increase in property values within the first five years of its opening (12).

Community Services

Community gardens can be integrated into broader community projects such as after-school programs for children, activities for the elderly and a resource for food banks and homeless shelters. In Seattle, the Department of Neighborhoods' P-Patch Program works in conjunction with the not-for-profit P-Patch Trust to supply between seven to 10 tons of produce to Seattle food banks each year through their well-developed community garden network.

Community Pride & Ownership

The safety and vitality of a healthy community relies heavily upon the invested pride and ownership that residents have for their neighborhood. Community gardens offer a focal point for neighborhood organizing, and can lead to community-based efforts to deal with other social concerns. They give youth a safe place to interact with peers, while involving them in beneficial

activities (7). Community gardens can increase safety by providing more eyes on the street (13). Furthermore, communities that develop semi-public spaces where people can become actively engaged in their community have significantly lower crime rates than neighborhoods where these amenities do not exist (14).

Community Gardens are Affordable

The annual cost of most community gardens are minimal because community residents, rather than city employees, are responsible for maintaining the gardens. Cities can help establish community gardens by identifying and purchasing viable sites for gardens, providing water for irrigation, necessary infrastructure as a one-time capital expense, and insurance liability to relieve small nonprofits or community members of this burden.

Some cities provide organizational structure for community gardens through their parks and recreation departments as a strategy for long-term survival. For example, the Burlington Area Community Garden (BACG) in Vermont is a partnership between the Burlington Parks Department and the nonprofit Friends of Burlington Gardens. The Department provides administrative, office and staff support and in-kind equipment contributions. BACG oversees eight community gardens at a total annual cost of \$40,000, but brings in \$17,000 in revenue each year.

For more information, visit: www.enjoyburlington.com/Programs/CommunityGardens.cfm or www.burlingtongardens.org/

Case Study: Food Policy Councils Sow Seeds For Better Health

Oregon's Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council (FPC) was developed in 2002 by a joint action of the city of Portland and Multnomah County. Housed in Portland's Office of Sustainable Development, the FPC provides research and recommendations to the city on institutional food practices, citizen food awareness, hunger and food access, urban land use policies, business and economic issues and environmental impacts on the food system.

In November 2004, urban planning students from Portland State University (PSU) took inventory of all city-owned land that could be used for community gardens and other urban-agriculture initiatives. Based on their findings, the FPC formed technical advisory committees to explore how to integrate urban agriculture into city-owned properties. The FPC also formed a committee to ensure that food policy is considered and incorporated, where appropriate, into Oregon's short and long-range plans at all levels.

The FPC also conducted in 2004 a community food assessment and market basket survey in the Lents neighborhood that indicated the need for better food security. In response, the FPC acquired grant funding to facilitate the creation of home gardens, cooking classes for children, adolescents and adults, and a children's summer camp. This pilot food assessment project was so successful that the FPC is now determining how to use it as a model for other neighborhoods throughout Portland.

For more information:

- Visit Portland's Office of Sustainability's Sustainable Foods web page at <http://www.portlandonline.com/osd/index.cfm?c=41480>

- Contact Steve Cohen, Food Policy and Programs, (503) 823-4225

How Local Governments Can Help

Through a variety of policies and partnerships, local and state government can promote healthier communities by improving resident's access to fresh fruits and vegetables and designing environments that encourage active living.

The following items are resources local leaders can reference when working to establish community gardens in their neighborhoods:

Create a municipal community garden program

The P-Patch Community Garden Program, operating under the City of Seattle's Department of Parks and Recreation, protects the longevity of community gardens by acquiring land with open space funds. This program currently has more than 54 operating gardens throughout Seattle. The not-for-profit P-Patch Trust works in conjunction with Seattle P-Patch to acquire, build, preserve and protect the gardens. The P-Patch Trust provides advocacy, outreach and educational programs to P-Patch gardeners.

Web sites: <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/>
<http://www.ppatchtrust.org/>

Contact: (206) 684-0264, p-patch.don@seattle.gov
(425) 329-1601, ppatch.trust@ppatchtrust.org

Create a municipally funded not-for-profit organization to support community gardens

NeighborSpace is a nonprofit organization funded through and operating in the city of Chicago, the Chicago Parks District, and the Cook County Forest Preserve District, which is empowered to acquire property to preserve land for community gardens. NeighborSpace acts as a land-trust for community gardens and accepts liability for the site. Since 1996, NeighborSpace has acquired more than 50 sites throughout Chicago for preservation as community garden space.

Web site: <http://neighbor-space.org>
Contact: (312) 431-9406, info@neighborspace.org

Include community gardens in your general/comprehensive plan

Berkeley, California's general plan states that the city will "encourage and support community gardens as important open space resources that build communities and provide a local food source" in the open space element. Berkeley's general plan lists action steps, which include pursuing community gardens in specific new developments and high-density areas.

Web site: <http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/planning/landuse/plans/generalPlan/openSpace.html>
Contact: Mark Rhoades, manager of land use planning, (510) 981-7410,
mrhoades@ci.berkeley.ca.us

Allow zoning for community gardens

Boston established a specific community garden category that can be zoned as a sub-district within an open space zoning district. Identifying prime locations for community gardens aides in their creation and emphasizes the importance of this use to the city.

Web site: <http://cityofboston.gov/bra/pdf/ZoningCode/Article33.pdf>
Contact: Jeff Hampton, senior zoning planner, (617)918-4308,
Jeffrey.Hampton.bra@CityofBoston.gov

Create a community garden committee

San Francisco has a community gardens policy committee that works to implement the community garden objectives established in the city's general plan. The objectives currently include expanding community garden opportunities throughout the city by establishing policies and implementing garden standards. The committee's policy recommendations are taken to the Recreation and Park Commission for consideration at a public meeting.

Web site: http://www.parks.sfgov.org/site/recpark_index.asp?id=27041
Contact: Margaret McArthur, recreation and park commission liaison, (415) 831-2750,
margaret.mcarthur@sfgov.org

Provide an easily accessible inventory of all vacant public/private lots and open space

Open Accessible Space Information System Cooperative (OASIS NYC) is a collaborative of federal, state, city, nonprofit and private organizations that provide online maps of all open space in New York City to help enhance the stewardship of open space. The USDA Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service were founding partners and funders, and local and state departments provide data and information services.

Web site: <http://www.oasisnyc.net/>
Contact: Matthew H. Arnn, USDA forest service NE area regional landscape architect,
(212) 542-7134, marnn@fs.fed.us

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