



Cultivating Community Gardens

The Role of Local Government in Creating Healthy, Livable Neighborhoods

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 brochure offers case studies, best management practices, resources and tools for policymakers to develop creative, cost-effective solutions that reduce barriers and facilitate the creation of community garden programs. To read more about these case studies and the resources footnoted in this factsheet, visit:

■ www.lgc.org/healthycommunities

Gardens benefit communities

Community garden programs with the following characteristics have the greatest potential to strengthen communities [4]:

- Provide an open space for community gatherings and family events.
- Include neighbors of various ages, races and ethnic backgrounds.
- Offer educational opportunities and vocational skills for youths.
- Target or include lower-income residents.
- 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.

Unhealthy communities bear greater costs

Sixty-five percent of adults in the U.S. are overweight or obese [1], and more than 33% 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].



■ Nutrition: Food security and 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, recommends 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% of adults and 23% 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.

Environment and Education

■ Creating more 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% 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.

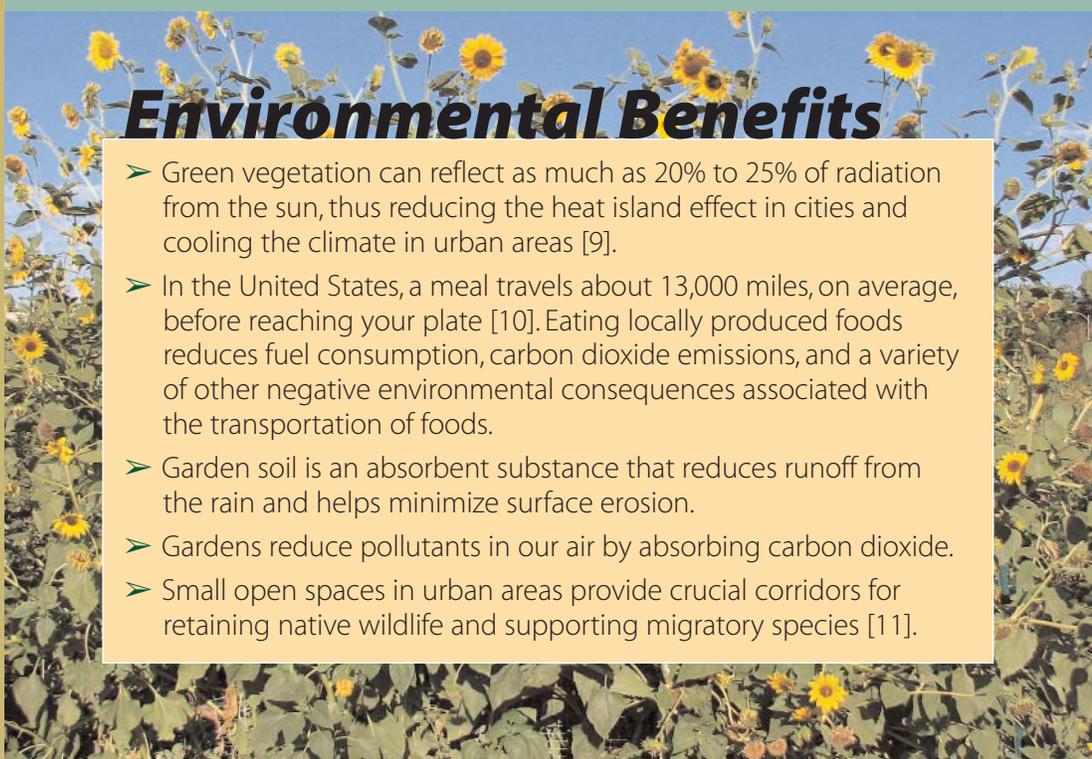
■ Educational opportunities

Hands-on exposure to community gardens can teach children about the sources of fresh produce, demonstrate community stewardship and introduce the importance of environmental sustainability. Gardens are also 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 discipline problems in the classroom [8].



Environmental Benefits

- Green vegetation can reflect as much as 20% to 25% 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.
- 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].



Costs and Benefits

■ Property values and tax revenues

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 with these amenities. In New York, neighborhoods surrounding a community garden saw a 9.4% 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 resources for food banks and homeless shelters. In Seattle, the city's P-Patch Program works with the not-for-profit P-Patch Trust to supply between 7 to 10 tons of produce to Seattle food banks each year through their well-developed community garden network.

■ Community pride and 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]. 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 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 in Vermont is a partnership between the city's parks department and the nonprofit Friends of Burlington Gardens. The city provides administrative, office and staff support and in-kind equipment contributions. It oversees eight community gardens at a total annual cost of \$40,000, which is partially offset by \$17,000 in garden revenue each year.

www.enjoyburlington.com/Programs/CommunityGardens.cfm and www.burlingtongardens.org

Gardening in San Diego schools

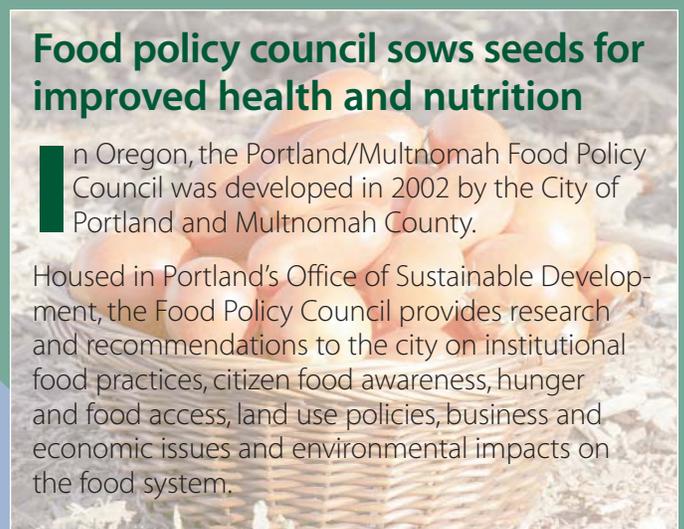
In San Diego, students at Rosa Parks Elementary School enjoy the benefits of a community garden right on their school's campus. The school is located in the City Heights neighborhood where residents are predominately Latino, African-American and Southeast Asian, and 55% of families earn incomes below the federal poverty level.

The teachers 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.

Food policy council sows seeds for improved health and nutrition

In Oregon, the Portland/Multnomah Food Policy Council was developed in 2002 by the City of Portland and Multnomah County.

Housed in Portland's Office of Sustainable Development, the Food Policy Council provides research and recommendations to the city on institutional food practices, citizen food awareness, hunger and food access, land use policies, business and economic issues and environmental impacts on the food system.



How Local Governments Can Help



Through a variety of policies and partnerships, local and state government can promote healthier communities by improving residents' 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.

In Seattle, the P-Patch Community Garden Program, in the city's parks and recreation department, 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 with the program to acquire, build, preserve and protect the gardens. The Trust also provides advocacy, outreach and educational programs for gardeners.

www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch
(206) 684-0264, p-patch.don@seattle.gov

www.ppatchtrust.org
(425) 329-1601, ppatch.trust@ppatchtrust.org

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

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

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

■ Include community gardens in your general / comprehensive plan.

In California, Berkeley'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. The general plan lists action steps, which include pursuing community gardens in specific new developments and high-density areas.

www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/planning/landuse/plans/generalPlan/openSpace.html
(510) 981-7410

■ 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 aids in their creation and emphasizes the importance of this use to the city.

www.cityofboston.gov/bra/pdf/ZoningCode/Article33.pdf
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 Recreation and Park Commission considers the committee's recommendations.

www.parks.sfgov.org/site/recpark_index.asp?id=27041
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.

OASIS NYC, the Open Accessible Space Information System Cooperative, 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.

www.oasisnyc.net
Matthew H. Arnn, USDA Forest Service NE area regional landscape architect, (212) 542-7134, marnn@fs.fed.us

Read more at www.lgc.org/healthycommunities

The Local Government Commission is a nonprofit, membership organization that provides inspiration, technical assistance and networking opportunity to local elected officials and other dedicated community leaders working to create healthy, walkable and resource-efficient communities. To join or learn more about the LGC: www.lgc.org

Leadership for Healthy Communities is a national partnership initiative supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to help state and local leaders create and promote places, policies and programs that enable active living and healthy eating. www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org