

# Supporting Community Gardens

## Gardening Matters' Recommendations for Cities and Counties

### BACKGROUND

#### Community Gardens: Growing Demand

Interest in community gardens is growing among individuals, organizations and government agencies. Gardening Matters received more requests for space in existing community gardens within the first three months of this year than in all of 2008. In addition to its referral program, Gardening Matters received 40 requests for assistance in establishing new community gardens. 99% of all garden inquiries received by Gardening Matters are related to food production.

Two major movements are driving increased interest in community gardens:

- 1) **Locally grown Food and Urban Agriculture** is gaining ground in the United States. Urban residents are concerned about where their food comes from and how it is grown. Furthermore, they are concerned about climate change and are interested in reducing their carbon footprints. Growing one's own food is energy efficient and provides assurances of food safety.
- 2) The **economic crisis** has placed many families in financial difficulties. Communities are better prepared to meet the stresses of environmental and economic crises when people can meet their own food needs. Today, community gardens can provide significant, direct economic and dietary support to individuals and families. *During WWII, 40% of produce consumed in the United States was grown in Victory Gardens.*

#### Community Benefits

Community gardens serve as outdoor education centers. Gardens provide the knowledge and resources that lead to the production and consumption of fresh, nutritious, and locally grown food.

#### Community Garden Benefits

Stronger communities

Reduced carbon footprints

New green jobs

Greater food security

More stable neighborhoods

Greater environmental stewardship

Enhanced environmental health

Improved Nutrition

More physical exercise

Community gardens improve neighborhoods. Studies show a correlation between increased quality of life and the presence of community gardens, as well as increased property values.<sup>1</sup> Community gardens bring diverse people together for a common cause, leading to stronger, integrated communities.

Community gardens provide vital recreational space in densely built neighborhoods, reducing crime<sup>2</sup> and providing a "hands-in" green space where children and adults can literally touch nature, addressing the "Nature Deficit Disorder" coined by Richard Louv.

#### Individual Benefits

Community gardens provide opportunities for people to maintain good health, and to combat obesity, chronic disease, and food insecurity by increasing access to fresh produce and by providing physical activity. Nearly all people, regardless of their health and mobility status, can grow gardens. The social networks that develop when gardening in community result in improved mental health and civic cohesion.

Even a small garden plot can make a significant reduction in a person's grocery bill.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gatewaygreening.org/WhitMireStudy.asp> and <http://lsr.nellco.org/nyu/lewp/papers/46/>, respectively. More available at <http://www.gardeningmatters.org/Resources/read.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Kuo, F. & Sullivan, W. (2001). "Environment and crime in the inner city: Does vegetation reduce crime?" *Environment and Behavior*, 33(3), 343-367.

For examples of model policies, see [Establishing Land Use Protections for Community Gardens](http://www.healthyplanning.org/modelpolicies/communitygardenpolicies.pdf) (March 2009), prepared by Planning for Healthy Places, a project of Public Health Law & Policy with funding from the California Department of Health. (<http://www.healthyplanning.org/modelpolicies/communitygardenpolicies.pdf>)

Community gardens should not be seen as an interim use of land until developed.

Community gardens need secure land in order to fulfill their potential as a community resources and meeting places.

Gardeners can build successful gardens when they know their soil building and community building results will have a long-term future.

Garden fees pay for the water, liability insurance and land lease fees, for example. Fees must also cover any repairs due to vandalism, annual soil amendments, and the replacing or repairing gardening tools.

With public support, community gardens can become accessible to those who may not otherwise be able afford the garden fees.

Public support is critical in order for community gardens to fulfill their potential as community assets. For more, see "Multiple Benefits of Community Gardening" fact sheet at [http://www.gardeningmatters.org/Resources/multiple\\_benefits.pdf](http://www.gardeningmatters.org/Resources/multiple_benefits.pdf)

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Gardening Matters draws on 40 years of community gardening principles and programming, developed from the experiences of professionals and practitioners across the US. The Twin Cities gardening community relies on Gardening Matters for high quality information, education, coordination, and collaboration, all focused on strengthening urban community gardens.

Gardening Matters recommends the following government actions related to community gardening:

### **Establish permanent community gardens in every neighborhood**

- Work with Gardening Matters and community gardeners to secure current community gardens located on city or county owned property through transfer to a nonprofit organization or other legitimate model.
- Work with Gardening Matters to identify properties for future community gardens.

### **Starting new community gardens**

- Work with Gardening Matters to develop and support community gardens.
- Community outreach workers interested in starting community gardens contact Gardening Matters to learn best practices and available resources for establishing successful community gardens.

### **Land accessibility**

- Provide long-term leases (5-10 years or more) for community gardens on public property to be used for community gardening.
- Provide lease agreements to gardeners for access to land for the duration of an entire local gardening season from April to November.
- Waive liability insurance requirements for community gardens on publicly-owned land. *New York City waived this requirement for community gardens on city land as of March 2006.*<sup>3</sup>
- Inventory and assess available public property for use as community gardens. The assessment should include reasonable amendments to the property that would permit a garden, such as raised beds.
- Reduce taxes or fees on land used for community gardening.
- Establish development easements or zoning that prevent buildings from being developed on the property to protect the permanency of and lower the tax burden to the community garden.
- Consider agricultural or community gardening zoning to reduce costs and support development. These spaces can create livability in higher-density housing areas.

### **Garden Effectiveness**

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub\\_newsroom/press\\_releases/press\\_releases.php?id=19761](http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_newsroom/press_releases/press_releases.php?id=19761)

- Provide funds or matching funds for community outreach or have community outreach workers work with Gardening Matters to strengthen existing community gardens by developing technical skills among gardeners and by encouraging community-building protocols within the garden.
- Create an interdisciplinary local foods planning team within the planning department or public health department and/or within your state association/chapter. This team could work with local nonprofit organizations and individuals to continuously advance community gardening and other forms of urban agriculture.
- Assist Gardening Matters in making community gardens accessible to all people regardless of language or culture. Utilize current mechanisms to get important information to potential gardeners, and inform them of the presence of community gardens, how gardens operate and how to join.
- Enable residents to access land and require that they demonstrate that they are a community garden and operate democratically in order to retain access. Gardening Matters could facilitate this.
- For parks and schools, enable community gardening in areas not utilized for other activities, and do not require background checks for participating gardeners.
- Work with Gardening Matters to identify areas where there is a critical need for community gardens, such as areas with high-density housing and poor access to green space and/or low to mid-income levels.

### Healthy Soils

Soil contamination fears are a barrier to growing produce in backyards and community gardens, whether or not there is soil contamination.

- Address soil contamination concerns by providing soil testing and public education to increase environmentally safe methods for growing vegetables.
- Support neighborhood composting to avoid trucking of compost materials and making it more accessible for residents. Increase support for home-based composting.

### Water

- Support access to water for community gardens.
  - Increase access to water hydrants or alternate water sources for community gardening needs.
  - Keep water hook-up costs low. Enable gardeners to contract with someone to open/close hydrant access.
- When a community garden is slated for a property where a house is scheduled to be demolished, coordinate the work so that the water hook-up is established at the time the house is razed, thus saving money for all and expediting the property for community food production.

### Tools & Other Material Resources

- Rescue gardening tools and equipment from foreclosed properties and make them available to community gardens and low-income gardeners. Work with a nonprofit organization to distribute these important tools.

- For community gardens on public property (such as city, county, parks, schools, etc.), work with gardeners to identify ready support, such as leaving woodchips from onsite pruning/tree removal work (from healthy trees).
- Update zoning codes and city leases on vacant properties as needed to provide gardens with reasonable semi-permanent structures in the garden, such as toolsheds, pergola, or signage.