

Urban Agriculture Group: Policy Brief

A) The Problem and Supporting Evidence

In the year 2008 the number of people living in urban areas worldwide reached the number of people living in rural areas for the first time. In North America specifically, in 2007 approximately 81% of the population lived in urban areas (United Nations 2008). With a large part of the population depending on others for food production, the issue of food access and security is extremely important. Additionally, the spread of food deserts limits access in economically marginal urban centers. These trends are very evident in Northeast Ohio, and within the town of Oberlin.

Urban agriculture initiatives can operate at the scale of a small farm, community garden, or backyard garden, and provide a local source of healthy, affordable, fresh food that is produced and distributed in the same community. The benefits of urban agriculture include reduced crime, improved health, economic opportunities for participants, use of vacant lots, and increased property values (Community Food Security 2003). Urban agriculture can address the important issues of environmental degradation and social justice, and, as history has shown, produce a substantial amount of food to feed the ever growing population of America and the world.

In tune with the international swell of urban agriculture in recent years, community gardening in Oberlin is an initiative of interest among many residents. Although programs such as CityFresh and the New Agrarian Center have increased availability and notoriety of the local food movement in NE Ohio, many Oberlin residents are experienced gardeners themselves. What many of them lack, however, is land, materials, and infrastructure.

On this note, a community greenhouse is a greatly needed structure in Oberlin that would serve as a resource for gardeners. A greenhouse will provide a location for individual gardeners who don't have materials or a place to start seeds. This infrastructure will also extend gardeners' growing seasons, allowing them to get their plants in the ground earlier in the year and increase the amount of food they grow over the course of the summer. The greenhouse will also hopefully be a gathering place where gardeners can swap advice and suggestions in their gardening plans.

B) The Solution Framework and First Action Steps

Future projects will be necessary to continue progress towards this goal but a greenhouse is a critical step towards supporting urban agriculture and facilitating action. Its presence signals a commitment to urban gardening and to fresh, healthy produce.

Building the greenhouse requires completion of the following steps. We found a design for a "2-liter greenhouse" built mostly from recycled materials, based on a greenhouse at Blue Rock Station in Philo, OH. We next need to secure an accessible location and the approval from the town government and zoning committee. We will obtain the 2-liter soda bottles through drives at local schools, work places and places of worship and will acquire the other materials through donation or purchase. The greenhouse will be built through the collaboration of community members, college, Joint Vocational School and public school students and with the help of a contract manager to coordinate the process. We will complete the greenhouse in May.

Further steps towards creating a garden-friendly city can include the creation of two community gardens in Oberlin on abandoned properties in the Zion Village and action to include urban

agriculture in the City Council and Zoning Board Policy by Spring 2010.

C) Case Studies

People have been organizing to create spaces for gardening in American cities since the 1890s starting with the promotion of vacant-lot cultivation meant to provide land and technical assistance to the unemployed (Lawson 2005). Presently, urban agriculture is an important component of urban development because it is an alternative source of household incomes, employment, and nutritional, cheap food for the urban poor (Drechsel 2001). For example, recognized as a world leader in urban agriculture, Cuba saw the merits of UA during its post-Soviet economic crisis which resulted in severe food insecurity in 1989. Cuban cityscapes changed dramatically to make room for chicken coops and plantains, especially in vacant lots. Less than a decade later, urban agriculture accounted for almost 60% of all Cuban vegetable production, and the average production outputs in some municipalities reached the level required to meet recommended daily dietary vegetable intake. It is clear that Cuba's innovative use of urban agriculture greatly reduced food insecurity for much of the population. Further, urban agriculture managed to take unsightly vacant lots and transform them into productive land.

P-Patch program in Seattle, WA has evolved since 1973 to accommodate changes in budget, urban development policies, and social concerns about education, the environment, and economic opportunity. New programs have been added over time such as Lettuce-Link, which is meant to encourage gardeners to cultivate extra food for the needy. Additionally, Lettuce-Link provides drop-drop off boxes and volunteers to deliver produce to food banks daily. P-Patch is also closely allied with the Cultivating Communities program which provides an opportunity for immigrants to continue using traditional farming practices and to grow culturally specific foods. Cultivating Communities has also helped to establish economic opportunities for immigrant families through community-supported agriculture.

D) Interviews

Amidst the overall general interest of urban gardening projects in Oberlin, several leaders have shown particular commitment to (re)creating Oberlin as a garden city. Among these are members of the Garden Ministry of Mt. Zion Baptist Church, including Wes Jackson and Tracie Haynes, and the Zion Community Development Corporation, a non-profit organization serving Oberlin's Zion Village. It is likely that these organizations will create two new gardens this season for the use of interested residents. Judy Wright, director of Zion CDC, has compiled a document of several possible sites on abandoned property for a garden run by the CDC. The Zion Village Garden, going on its third year, is also ready to enter a new phase from donating its food to elderly and health-compromised community members into profit-making venture. In speaking with both Tracie and Ms. Wright, it is clear that shared materials and resources is both a necessity and a commitment of their groups. Tracie in particular has stressed the importance of erecting a community greenhouse to bolster current and future garden projects in Oberlin.

In speaking with members from the Public Education and Public Health Policy Groups, it is clear that Urban Agriculture provides many avenues for collaboration. Isabel Roth of the Public Education Policy Group mentioned an interest on her group's behalf on increasing the purchase of local and organic foods in regional grocery markets, which will create an immediate market for the Zion Village Garden as it shifts to for-profit production. Activities such as building a greenhouse and establishing new gardens will also directly engage people in education not only in nutrition, but cultivation and ecological methods as well. Alice Manos of the Public Health Policy Group emphasizes the necessity of direct involvement and food availability to be incorporated into nutrition education. Making small, individual plots available to community members will assume this model of engaged education and provide access to food that many seek to complement nutrition education.

E) Collective Statement of Purpose

The purpose of the Urban Agriculture Policy Group is to enact the necessary steps for the establishment of Oberlin as a garden-friendly city. We as a Policy Groups recognize the numerous benefits that community gardens can bring into cities and neighborhoods through community involvement, improved nutrition and stewardship of neighborhood land. The intention of this document is to support the following:

- Creation and care of accessible community gardens throughout Oberlin.
- Encouragement of urban agriculture as a viable method of community building.
- Increasing the visibility and prevalence of community gardens in the city of Oberlin.
- Increasing the access of Oberlin residents to fresh local food.
- Engagement and participation of community residents in the cultivation of their own food.
- Embracing multiple models of urban agriculture including individual plots, open gardens, and storeside gardens.
- Promoting community-college relation building and inter-generational activities.
- Creation of a educational community garden to serve as a hub for promoting urban agriculture and local food initiatives around town, with components on nutritional education and youth leadership.

SOURCES

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