

Urban Harvest

Tracy Hood

To the professional planner, the proposal of a community gardening project as a community development initiative may sound simplistic in this era of complexly structured public-private urban development ventures. Yet, this article cautions against such an attitude. Author Tracy Hood reminds planning and other city officials of the value of such small-scale, less costly community development options as community gardens. She lists and describes the many economic, educational and social benefits to be realized from planting and maintaining a garden.

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Over the past six years Providence, Rhode Island and its environs have witnessed the growth of more than twelve community gardens. The locations and populations they serve are certainly diverse, but their goals seem comparable in most cases: to provide low income, often minority and unemployed city dwellers with (1) a means of obtaining fresh, pure vegetable produce at low cost (i.e., usually in return for labor and a seasonal plot fee); (2) an effective use of vacant lots; and (3) a means toward neighborhood unity and cooperation. It could be said that a similar "gardening fever" has spread to most major cities throughout the United States with some areas reporting spectacular success.

Why are these urban gardening efforts working so well? Three important reasons are readily identifiable. First of all, there seem to be relatively few *insurmountable* obstacles blocking the development of community garden projects. Secondly, most cities do not take advantage of their food-growing potential, and they are beginning to realize it. Thirdly, community gardens do not pollute, they do not threaten; they simply provide a degree of seasonal employment and a decrease in food bills for committed participants — a seemingly ideal list of reasons for which one could be persuaded to undertake such a project.

Ironically, responses to something as benevolent as a community garden are often unenthusiastic statements referring to their "dinosaur" status: "Com-

munity gardens? Oh, yeah — a real hit in the 70's. Certainly not priority policy for the 80's." Such responses were actually made (in some many words) by certain Providence policymakers. What is the basis of such sentiments, and what do they indicate about the likelihood for success of community gardens in Providence in 1985?

They are typical because community gardens are generally remembered as a creature of the 70's. By Earth Day, in May, 1970, an environmental movement had taken firm hold in the United States, and community gardens were a part of that environmental statement. A vegetable garden flourishing in the midst of an inner-city ghetto was living testament to a "small is beautiful" ideology. They were also symbolic of community self-reliance, people power, neighborhood co-operation, urban ecology, environmental education, and a type of sustainable agriculture (as long as the land was not slated to become housing stock in five years). Besides all of that, community gardens made plain economic sense. When approximately 600 square feet of land have the potential to yield fresh vegetables for a family of four for a year, they are difficult to argue against.

So why the reaction against community gardens as an outdated form of urban policy? All of the benefits that accrue from community gardens still exist with relatively the same costs. Part of the reason may well be that community gardens are

achieving success

typically the response to a crisis situation. The Great Depression gave rise to the relief garden, typically a 50' x 100' plot producing the staple crops of beans and potatoes. In the 1940's, World War II prompted the United States Department of Agriculture to promote and support community gardens in cities, schoolyards, and urban outskirts; anywhere, in fact, where there was arable land. This venture was in earnest. By 1944, 20 million urban gardens grew 40% of the fresh vegetables consumed in the U.S. In both cases, the need for food was pressing and the city garden gave people a direct means of "helping out", increasing their sense of control in otherwise chaotic times. Likewise, in the mid 70's, with the Oil Embargo and its companion inflation, combined with the environmental movement's attention to chemical additives in processed foods, city folks turned again to community gardens as a means toward regaining a sense of control in their lives, as well as cutting costs on the weekly food bill.

The 70's Energy Crisis, however, has played itself out. The 80's have witnessed a decrease in inflation and, according to experts, a general upsurge in the economy is a reality. Being without food, then, is for most not a pressing issue. But here the key word is *most*. According to the recently published study presented by the Harvard School for Public Policy, there are still approximately 20 million people who *do* face a food crisis. In Providence the number of people on food stamps is estimated to be 26,000; the unemployment rate for Providence is 5.4%. These figures cut across racial and ethnic lines, but they certainly are weighted against the Providence minority and refugee populations. At the very least, most of these people could potentially benefit from growing their own food. This is the first and most important reason why Providence policymakers should take the community garden issue seriously. There are other reasons as well.

How Do They Work?

First of all, the urban community garden does not usually require a large, sustained capital investment. The typical vacant lot will require clearing of trash, plowing, some type of soil conditioning, a fence and, if possible, a water system. Once the initial property investment is made, however, the financial burden subsides considerably. Those who maintain the garden are the gardeners themselves, working not for a wage but to reap, literally, the fruits of their labor. A municipality, then, typically has little or no maintenance responsibility once a com-



Birth of a garden

Read P. Brugger

munity garden has been established. (They can be supportive in other ways, however, particularly through politically symbolic gestures.)

Continuing along an economic line of reasoning, the community garden can make a significant dent in gardeners' food bills. In 1984, an annual national survey published by Gardens For All reported that the 1.3 million acres of American gardens were producing 13.5 million pounds of vegetables with a total dollar value of \$12 billion. At a local level, this means that on approximately 440 square feet of land the average family of four could realize a \$324 savings on their food bill. The available land in lower South Providence alone (defined in terms of vacant lots) is approximately 2,146,969 square feet. Is it impossible to imagine South Providence residents growing their own food, *in the city*, at an estimated savings of \$1,580,796 per year?

food cost savings

The economic ramifications do not stop with the gardener's weekly grocery bill. A report by the Tufts University Department of Urban and Environmental Policy, *A Land Resource Opportunity: the Re-use of Vacant Lots in Boston*, cites numerous studies which suggest that "open spaces" in urban areas increase the value of properties within a certain distance from such a space:

diverse benefits

A study of a small urban park in a residential area of Lubbock, Texas (Kitchen and Hendon, 1967) showed that land values declined with distance from the park within a two and one-half block zone of influence. . . . A later study (Lyon, 1972) found that increased property values due to close proximity to parks could be felt as far as one-half mile away from the site. Another study (Hammer, Coughlin, and Horn, 1974) includes information suggesting that the presence of Pennypack Park in Philadelphia accounted for 33% of the land value at 40', 9% at 1000', and 4.2% at 2500'.

Naturally, a small-scale community garden would not necessarily have the degree of effect of a Pennypack Park, but there would certainly be a perceived increase of the value of surrounding properties, even if merely from an aesthetic point of view.

Policy Justifications

A city might argue that the lands used for community gardens, typically managed by not-for-profit neighborhood organizations, would have the effect of decreasing municipal tax revenue because of the exempt status of such organizations. Another look at the Tufts study reveals, however, that "...the maintenance costs for...community gardens...are less than the cost of necessary municipal services for developed land, (and) the rise in costs of public service provisions is greater than the rise in property tax income from developments." Thus, the probable increase in property values *surrounding* a community garden combined with the savings from municipal service costs should offset any revenues lost from land being removed from the tax rolls.

economic questions

source of unity

Economically, then, a community garden provides benefits not only for those directly involved, but also for the neighborhood and the city as a whole. Ideally these benefits are sustainable through changes in policy approaches of successive political administrations simply because they are small-scale, neighborhood run, largely volunteer efforts that do

not demand a high degree of direct municipal support once they have become operative.

Although persuasive, the economic justification for community gardens is too limiting. In fact, there are other, less tangible benefits that contribute to their justification as valid urban policy. The typical city-dweller spends most of her time walking and living in a confined, crowded atmosphere. There is no denying that such a living arrangement can cause a frenetic life-pace that makes city living undesirable. That same frenetic atmosphere, however, combined with air and noise pollution, also causes highly stressful conditions for city-dwellers. There is seldom anywhere to turn for quiet, open space free from traffic jams, honking horns, and crowds. If the need for such space were unfounded it would be difficult to justify the likes of Central Park in New York City or the Common in Boston. Turn of the century urban landscape designers — men like Frederick Law Olmsted and members of the American Park and Outdoor Art Association — were acutely aware of the need for green-space *within* city limits. It is not the same knowing that fresh air and solitude can be found forty minutes away. Many city-dwellers have neither the time, the transportation, nor the inclination to travel to find such space. The space needs to be *in* the city — accessible to all — a vivid, daily reminder of the natural order that exists beyond the highly contrived atmosphere of a city.

The point here is not to raze portions of a city and replace it with elegant parks and fountains. Rather, it is to suggest that cities devote some of their open space for gardening use. This open-space can take the form of small, 5000 to 10,000 square foot lots, dotted with raised bed vegetable gardens, fruit trees, a children's play area and a few benches for resting, chatting and picnicking. When the scale is thus reduced, there is an additional advantage: the participant of a small, urban community garden has, in a sense, a "piece of earth" to call her own, with the concurrent responsibility of nurturing it to ensure its survival. Central Park undoubtedly serves its purpose, but it could never fulfill the personal function of a small-scale gardening project.

If successful, the community garden will be a daily testament to a cohesive, co-operating neighborhood. To get a group of people to work and live harmoniously, it is probably best that they work together toward a defined, achievable end. If that end is in all of their best interests, it is not likely that an individual or a particular sub-group within the



Fall Harvest

Julie Stone

neighborhood will have a need to disrupt the system. More specifically, the successful community garden needs to be an experience in the sharing of resources as well as skills. The Laotian refugee, raised in a rural setting, is an ideal instructor to the Afro-American who has lived in Providence all of her life. The community garden can thus help break down racial barriers that exist within a neighborhood. It is not, unfortunately, the end-all solution to racial tensions. If the logistics of the garden space are not well thought out, there is the possibility that more tension could be created than originally existed! If the gardens are closer to one sub-culture than another, for example, or if the organization that runs the program responds predominantly to one group over another, the possibility of vandalism is greatly increased. As with any urban development project, the community garden requires careful analysis and implementation if it is to be as effective as possible.

Moreover, although it is convenient to assume that rurally raised immigrants can fulfill the role of teacher toward the "city-folks," it is quite another matter that such an arrangement would actually

result. It is likely that the immigrant speaks little or no English, Portuguese or Spanish, or whatever the predominant language of a particular neighborhood. Here the strength and capacities of the managing organization come into play. For, hopefully, such an organization will either have the capacity to get the assistance of translators, or they will at least know who they could turn to to get such information.

neighborhood group
involvement

Other Benefits

The community garden, justified economically and socially, could also be a valuable educational tool. What better way to study the ecology of natural systems than to observe them in one's own backyard. *Education* does not just mean biology or soil science. A garden, when organic techniques are used, represents a system of inputs and outputs that creates a "closed" and a continuous cycle. The circle goes something like this: neighborhood food scraps are collected and composted serving as a consistent and reliable supply of organic matter to add



Inner city garden

Hansi Durlach

to the soil at regular intervals. As the garden season progresses, the inputs of seed and labor result in fresh produce to be harvested, eaten and eventually, in some form, to end back in the compost pile to contribute to next year's season. Excess harvest can be distributed to non-participants in the neighborhood or to the needy in another neighborhood, however the group chooses to arrange it. Some gardening groups have gone so far as to set up community canning and freezing centers. In this way, the urban gardener is imitating a traditional farming ethic of utilizing oversupply in the short-term to prepare for "hard times" over the long run. The community garden is thus a living laboratory in which people, of any age, can learn principles of

ecology, biology, recycling, geology, and plant physiology at whatever level is suitable. In all likelihood the neighborhood garden will first be a demonstration of co-operative effort rather than a place for highly academic pursuit! (A garden started by a local high school, on the other hand, could easily be structured in such a way as to encourage a more formal learning situation.)

City Gardens

A fourth, valuable result of any community gardening effort is the improved nutritional value of the food that is grown compared to the "store-bought" equivalent. Numerous studies indicate that home grown food has a much greater chance of re-

taining a higher nutritional value simply because it spends less time traveling from ground to table. Further, certain processing and packaging methods cause foods to lose a variety of vitamins and minerals. According to *The Edible City*, "Because of (long-distance transport), fruits and vegetables must be picked before their natural maturing time, before the nutrients have had a chance for maximum nutrition and flavor development. Another detrimental effect... is that produce begins losing nutrients when picked. For example, corn will lose 50% of its sugar within 24 hours at 75 degrees Fahrenheit."

The warning light that flashes in most people's minds at this point, however, is the problem of lead in city gardens. The fact that lead accumulates in urban grown fruits and vegetables is undeniable. This problem, therefore, must be confronted and its ramifications must be understood in order to avoid the possibility of health-threatening lead contamination, particularly for children under the age of six (the highest risk group). The latest reports indicate that lead, besides contaminating the exposed surfaces of plants, is also absorbed through their root systems. What has been discovered, however, is that leafy vegetables and root crops have the highest concentrations of lead, whereas fruiting plants store lead mostly in their leaves, leaving the fruit relatively pure.

Such facts do not mean, however, that the urban garden is doomed, but rather that certain procedures should be carefully carried out to reduce, to the greatest extent possible, the hazards associated with lead contamination. The seven "good gardening practices" advocated by Boston Urban Gardeners, Inc. are: (1) Locate gardens away from roads if possible, and lay out gardens to keep leafy greens and other hard-to-wash vegetables as far from the street as possible. Planting a protective hedge "street-side" is also helpful. (2) Discard older, outer leaves of vegetables before eating. (3) Add lime to soil to bring pH up to as close to 6.5 to 7.0 as possible. It has been suggested that when soil has low levels of lead, a neutral pH may help inhibit lead uptake by the plant. (4) Add organic material as often as possible. (5) Use mulch... Mulches will help keep airborne lead off the soil surface so that it can't wash down into the soil where it could be taken up by the plant. (6) Peel all root crops to remove lead that may have concentrated in the peel. (7) Grow vegetables in containers in clean topsoil if the lead level in the soil is extremely high.

While the food is likely to be "healthier" when fresh-picked out of the community garden, so are those who do the picking. Particularly for the aged, gardening provides a certain amount of physical, outdoor activity that many people may be lacking in their daily routine. Actually readying an abandoned lot might even require a modicum of heavy physical labor which could attract the neighborhood youth's attention, and perhaps even continued interest and participation.

Benefits of Community Gardening

Finally, the community garden offers a means through which a group of often powerless people can regain a sense of control over their own environment, in a very real, hands-on sense. They have the opportunity to help formulate the overall plan; to assist with the physical renovation of the property; to be responsible for their own plot or for a section of a co-operative plot; to participate as a part of a group on common work days; and to celebrate the seasons at Spring Clearing and Fall Harvest.

The community garden is a humble, small-scale approach to an over-whelming urban dilemma. But its small size, flexibility and lengthy list of benefits makes it an ideal project for any city to support. *A City Gardener's Guide: Growing, Surviving and Reaping the Fruits of Our Labor*, a publication of the Boston Urban Gardeners, succinctly states the concepts behind the community garden.

Urban agriculture is more than a pleasant pasttime for a good interim use of vacant land... (It) is a serious (but joyful) challenge to the common view of what city life must be like. It is also a demonstration that we do not have to be helpless in the face of uncontrolled prices or basic necessities or continual degradation of our basic environment. Urban agriculture is land reclamation; it is revegetation, it is food and fiber production, it is community development in the most basic sense. Perhaps most important we see in community gardens the seeds of community control of resources and of the quality of city life. □

awareness of problems

safety tips