

Community Gardens: Growing Communities and Health in the 21st Century



Cities and communities are facing a myriad of challenges in the twenty-first century: budget cuts, unemployment, health problems, food insecurity, climate change. Local leaders are looking for powerful, innovative solutions for their problems. One effective, low-cost tool at their disposal is community gardens, which help cultivate health and connections among families and residents of all ages while creating thriving community spaces.

Community Gardens: What are they?

Community gardens come in many forms and are found in urban and rural areas alike. The American Community Garden Association defines them as any piece of land gardened by a group of people.¹ The most traditional form is to have individual plots assigned to members and have them donate, say, a few hours each month to the maintenance of common areas and to administration. There are, however, other kinds of community gardens. For example in giving gardens, volunteers may work wherever needed, and then the produce is donated to a local food bank.

Community Gardens: A multi-faceted solution

Community gardens provide a way for people to grow fresh organic produce that they might not otherwise afford, give urban dwellers an opportunity to work the earth, and become thriving social centers. Replacing vacant lots with gardens has numerous documented benefits for the surrounding neighborhood: they increase property values, decrease crime (eyes on the street) and add to the sense of community. Community gardens have been particularly popular during economic downturns because they affordably provide a broad array of benefits: they leverage local resources — neglected lots, residents' time — to create things that neighbors want without requiring significant financial investments.

Obesity and San Diego County

Over the last several decades, Americans have experienced significant weight gain, with over 26 percent of the adult population now self-reporting being obese.² In San Diego County, one in four children are overweight or obese with rates higher in underserved areas of need.³ These rates are having a dramatic impact on our community. It is estimated that weight gain, especially obesity, and physical inactivity cost San Diego County more than \$3 billion in 2006 alone.⁴ Community gardens provide residents inexpensive access to healthy foods and physical activity suitable for people of all ages.



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Community Gardens: A multi-faceted solution (cont.)

Climate Change and San Diego County

San Diego County is the first county in the state to set markers for reducing greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) through its land use and transportation planning as part of SB 375. It is estimated that nearly 85 percent of the energy used to produce, process, distribute, consume, and dispose of our food is derived from fossil fuels, a large contributor to GHG emissions. Community gardens can help residents reduce miles from field to fork, vehicular trips to food outlets - the least efficient mode of transportation in the food system, and the heat island effect of cities. They also help absorb carbon dioxide from the air.



Property Values, Crime Prevention, and Community

A study in New York City found that neighborhoods surrounded by community gardens experienced a 9.4 percent increase in property values over a five-year period.⁵ Researchers in Denver concluded that gardeners were more likely to be involved in social activities, connected to their local community, and have more positive physical and mental health ratings.⁶

Community Gardens: Common Barriers and Common Solutions

Community gardens often lack a place in city zoning codes or are treated as if they are a development project with many potential risks. This has put some cities in the position of accidentally creating red tape for gardeners. For example, one garden in the City of San Diego, now recognized nationally for its programs to help international refugees, cost \$46,000 to get a permit.

Cities cannot only remove barriers to community gardens, they must actively encourage them.

Some practical steps include the following:

- Insert positive language into the city's general plans,
- Create clear, easy to follow ways of navigating the zoning code,
- Ensure application or permitting processes are no or low-cost, and
- Identify city departments or agencies to oversee the operation of community gardens on public land.
- Assist in finding land suitable for community gardens and negotiating with landowners if it is privately held.

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Community Gardens: A Snapshot of National and Local Activities

Cities across the country are adopting resident-friendly community garden policies. New York and Chicago host more than 600 community gardens a piece, and Los Angeles allows agricultural uses "by right" in all zones. Seattle offers a comprehensive model: its general plan has numerous references to encouraging community gardening, its zoning allows them "by right" in all zones, and its famous P-Patch program currently runs 73 community gardens.

While support for community gardens in the San Diego region has often been limited to small programs for a few gardens on public land, cities are now taking much more pro-active stances. The City of Chula Vista passed an ordinance in early 2010 that allows community gardens on public lands. San Diego and National City are responding rapidly to interest in community gardens by creating new, supportive regulations. Numerous other county cities are currently exploring adding pro-community garden language to their general plans as they go through plan updates. The language often aligns the community gardens with zoning which allows agriculture "by right" in at least the most significant zones. (This is particularly true of inland North County.) Other cities in the county continue to treat community gardens as a development project and may assess thousands of dollars in fees to get the right permit (though permits might be waived).

Community gardens are popular because they brighten neighborhoods and connect people to their food and the earth. **We encourage local leaders to work with residents to create policies that support community gardens in your neighborhood.**



1 American Community Garden Association. Web. 31 March 2011. <http://communitygarden.org/learn>

2 "Vital Signs: State-Specific Obesity Prevalence Among Adults — United States, 2009" *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Vol. 59. 2010. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm59e0803.pdf>

3 *Our Community Our Kids*. San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative, 2010. Web, March 2011.

<http://www.ourcommunityourkids.org/media/17878/action%20plan%20revision%202010%20final.pdf>

4 "Economic Costs Associated with Overweight, Obesity, and Physical Inactivity in California Counties,* 2006." California Center for Public Health Advocacy, 07 2009, Web. http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/PDFs/Economic_Costs_Table.pdf

5 "Cultivating Community Gardens: The Role of Local Government in Creating Healthy, Livable Neighborhoods." Local Government Commission, Web. http://www.lgc.org/freepub/docs/community_design/fact_sheets/community_gardens.pdf

6 "Growing Community- One Urban Garden at a time." Denver Urban Gardens, Web. <http://dug.org/GGHC>

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www.HealthyWorks.org

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