

Case Studies of Community Gardens

Boston Community Gardens

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Boston's community gardens have a long history, and some of the current gardens date back to prior waves of community gardening. For example, Boston residents can still rent a plot for \$10-\$20 per year on a first come, first serve basis at Fenway Community Gardens, where residents grew food during WWII. During the 1970s, a new wave of community gardens emerged on vacant and abandoned lots. From the mid 1970s to early 1980s, the city's Revival Program started about fifty community gardens using Community Development Block Grants from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. The grants paid for water systems, chain link fencing, railroad ties, and soil to create raised beds in new community gardens.

In 1976 the non-profit Boston Urban Gardeners (BUG) was founded. In the following year the Boston Natural Areas Fund (BNAF) was founded to protect 143 undeveloped sites in the city that were listed in the "Boston Urban Wilds" report put out by the Boston Redevelopment Authority. BUG and BNAF networked neighborhood groups with funding from both public and private sources to produce a new basis for community gardening in the city. During the 1980s the organizations also supported community gardens as they faced challenges from zoning, development pressures, and budget cuts in the city government.¹

I interviewed Betsy Johnson, the former director of Garden Futures and interim executive director of the American Community Gardening Association. In the mid 1980s she worked with the Massachusetts Audubon Society on urban open space issues. Her work led to involvement with the South End Neighborhood Housing Initiative, which was formed to figure out what to do with forty vacant parcels of land in the one square mile South End neighborhood. She explained, "As the gentrification and housing price escalation was heating up in the South End, buildings were being broken up and becoming condominiums, and developers were finding they could buy a building and sell each of four or five separate floors for more than they bought the whole building. All of a sudden, houses that had been \$100,000 were selling for \$350,000 to \$400,000, because of the condominium conversions. In 1986 one of the community gardens on the edge of Chinatown was bulldozed for affordable, low-income housing. That was a wake up call for us to be more proactive, so that we would not lose all the gardens."

Mrs. Johnson worked with the neighborhood groups to form the Ad Hoc Housing Coalition, which asked the city to preserve some of the unused land for community gardens and affordable housing. Because the Parks Department was under severe budgetary constraints, it was not able to take the community gardens under its purview, but the city worked with the Trust for Public Land and BUG to develop the South End

Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust. The land trust eventually preserved eight parcels of open space, of which six were community gardens, the other two being “pocket parks.” Other community-based land trusts and non-profits followed in the 1990s, such as the Dorchester Gardenlands Preserve and Development Corporation (DGP).²

In 1994, BNAF, BUG, Dorchester Gardenlands Preserve, and the South End Lower Roxbury Open Land Trust formed Garden Futures to develop a long-term vision and plan for community gardening in the city. Johnson became the director of Garden Futures and expanded the organization into a collaborative of eleven non-profit organizations. As of 2005, approximately thirty nonprofit organizations and six government agencies own or manage approximately 200 community gardens in Boston. One of the programs established by Garden Futures was the City Gardener Certificate Program (renamed the Master Urban Gardener Program in 2003). The program not only educates neighborhood residents in horticultural aspects of gardening, but it also trains them in the politics and administration of community gardens. The education and training equips residents with the knowledge and resource networks to sustain their community gardens.³

In early 2002 Garden Futures and BNAF merged to form Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN), and Johnson became the vice-president of the new organization. As Johnson explained, “Garden Futures created a floor for all the community gardens regardless of who the owner was. It was a place where gardeners could get basic education and look for some political support. However, the problem was that the funders had a difficult time seeing how one organization is different from another. That’s why Garden Futures merged in with BNAN. I just knew that in the long term we were giving up some things by not having an independent Garden Futures. On the other hand, at least most of those basic services would be able to continue long term.”

As of 2005 BNAN owned or managed nearly a third of Boston’s community gardens, but it provided education and resource support to all Boston area community gardens. The organization’s goals include networking together citizens, protecting urban wilds, working to improve food availability and quality for low- and middle-income residents, and educating residents about environmental stewardship, community issues, and sustainable agriculture. Other ongoing BNAN projects include developing new uses for the fifty plus acres of land atop the new underground I-93 tunnels and in east Boston, and helping to create the Neponset River Greenway (connecting urban wild sites as well as areas remediated from hazardous waste sites to public trails) and the East Boston Greenway. BNAN’s community gardening efforts include working with both the city and local for-profit businesses for discounted gardening materials and garbage removal. BNAN also completed a strategic plan for Boston’s community gardens and helped develop the Boston Community Garden Council, which consists of community gardeners sent to represent their neighborhood’s garden, and aims to play the unified voice of Boston’s community gardeners. As of May 2005, an estimated 10,000 Boston residents participate in community gardening, and 48 gardens and organizations (including the Food Project) had joined the Council.⁴

The city supports community gardening efforts mostly through the Grassroots Program of the Department of Neighborhood Development (DND), which administers Community Development Block Grant funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. State support comes in the form of farmers’ markets established by

the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture. The University of Massachusetts Extension Service in Amherst helps with soil testing. The Boston Parks Department and the Environment Department work together to administer the Community Garden Small Grant Program, which gives annual grants of up to \$400 for minor capital improvements such as “fence repairs, tree-trimming, new toolboxes or bulletin boards, and the like.” The two departments also published a resource guide in several languages, for community gardeners to find everything from “gardening instruction to potential funding sources.” As Johnson explained, “The Parks Department does not help us, aside from their small grant program for community gardens. They’ve given out up to a total of \$25,000, I think. Last year it was less than \$10,000, and this year it must be less than \$5000.” Instead, funding primarily comes from fundraisers held by the gardeners. “We [SELROSLT] have an annual garden tour of both public and private spaces. That raises about \$15,000 for us, and the gardeners pay a certain fee based on square footage of the garden, either collected directly from the gardeners or they do fundraising within the garden. We’ve also been able to get a small amount of grant money. We have no staff, so we keep expenses down.”⁵

Equity and Sustainability

According to Johnson, “There’s a whole host of cities and community gardens, primarily in the Northeast, and some in the Midwest, where the community gardens sprung out of neighborhood disinvestment and people needing to do something about vacant lots. Gardeners were gaining access to grow food for themselves and their families and friends.” The programs were developed largely without support from the city government, except for some free composting. However, the Boston Housing Authority supports several community garden spaces in residential developments, and the city’s Department of Neighborhood Development administers the federal Community Development Block grants program. Project sites that are funded through the program must be either city-owned or owned by a non-profit, and be in neighborhoods where 51% of the population is of low or moderate income. Between 1995 and 2000, more than 45 community gardens received federal funding for a total of \$2.5 million. Annual Community Development Block Grant funds allocated to a single project cannot exceed \$150,000. The problem with DND funds, according to Johnson, is that they can be “quite difficult for a small organization to access.”⁶

Of the projects in Boston that connect low-income neighborhood residents and food from urban agricultural efforts (but not community gardening programs per se), two stand out: The Re-Vision House and the Food Project. Founded in 1990, Re-Vision House shelters pregnant and homeless women. The Re-Vision House Urban Farm was founded shortly thereafter from concern about “the nutritional well being of the families living at the shelter and for the residents of Franklin Field, the neighborhood in which the shelter is located.” Re-Vision House’s one-acre Urban Farm is “an organic micro-farm whose guiding vision is environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable urban agriculture. The farm enhances the delivery of nutrition services throughout our community and increases local awareness of the social, environmental, and economic benefits of sustainable urban agriculture.”⁷

The Food Project, founded in 1991, uses urban agriculture as a youth leadership development tool on two urban farms in Boston, where produce is raised according to sustainable agriculture guidelines for city markets. Hundreds of teens per year are trained and utilized in all phases of growing food on urban Boston lots and on thirty-one acres owned by the organization in rural Lincoln, Massachusetts. The Food Project donates about half of its produce to local shelters and sells the rest through community-supported agriculture crop shares and farmers' markets. The organization also helps neighborhoods remediate lead-contaminated soils.⁸

Policy Issues and Recommendations

BNAN's Strategic Plan for 2003-2008 highlights the following goals: 1) further recognition of the range of benefits offered by community gardens, 2) more garden integration with the larger environment and city planning departments, 3) strengthened organizational structure, public stewardship and education, 4) more realization of the political force gardeners have in Boston, and 5) stimulating diversification of gardeners for more cohesive community neighborhoods across demographic categories. Boston appears to provide an effective community gardening model for municipalities, non-profits, and local neighborhoods, and BNAN envisions Boston as a future community gardening model for other cities.⁹

In the Parks Department's Open Space Management Mission, recommendations for community gardens over the next two years include: 1) supporting and expanding programs such as the City Gardener Certificate Program (see above), 2) supporting organizations such as BNAN that institutionalize a support network of city and state agencies, landowners, non-profit organizations, and garden leaders by identifying relevant organizations, defining their contributions, and developing their commitments to gardens, and 3) providing weather-resistant bulletin boards within each community garden to facilitate the dissemination of information pertinent to garden management and for general informational purposes. The Parks Department also suggests minimizing "the unnecessary use of pesticides and herbicides" and emphasizing "safe, low-cost intensive gardening techniques."¹⁰

The city's high property values spur the threat of community garden loss to property development, but the ownership by land trusts and other nonprofits formed to protect community gardens helps the Boston city government. However, Johnson makes the point that the non-profits were created in Boston to deal with community garden protection and establishment, and there continues to be little more than token support from the Parks Department. As she explained, "The South End Land Trust manages more open space parcels than the Parks Department does in the Lower Roxbury and South End neighborhood, and we get no tax dollars."

Johnson believes that BNAN uniquely provides a model to other cities in terms of the "existence of a single entity that has some involvement with all the gardens in a given area and the degree of non-profit organization ownership of gardens." She contrasts Boston's model with those in Chicago and Portland: "In Chicago, the city decided that these small community gardens and small pocket parks were not cost effective for their parks department to maintain. So they set up a non-profit land trust like the South End land trust, to become the owner of these gardens. But they've also committed \$100,000

each (\$300,000) a year for this non-profit organization. That is, the parks departments of the city, county, and state are providing \$300,000 for twenty years to make the capital improvements and to own these community gardens. They forced the non-profit to take on what the parks department should be doing, but at least they're paying somebody else to do it. In our case, we took on what should have been Parks Department responsibilities for no money, although we did get the land. The other model, which is under attack right now, is Portland, Oregon. There the gardens are owned and basically run as part of the city's parks department, but they also have active friends groups. So the gardens are in line with the public-private partnership that is the main park management model that's really driving park management everywhere in the country right now."

"What we suffer from is that we need to get across that we're a cause that needs to be supported." explains Johnson. "If people want to do something about hunger, they give to a food bank. But they should teach them to fish rather than give them a fish. If they want to support community building, they give to a community development corporation or a community organization. They don't think about giving to community gardening, which is really all these things. The average person still doesn't even know what a community garden is."

Based on an interview with Rachel Dowty, May 31, 2005.

Web site of BNAN: <http://www.bostonnatural.org/index.php>

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