

Case Studies of Community Gardens:
Cleveland Community Gardens

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Cleveland's community gardens receive a relatively high level of support from grassroots organizations, non-profit research and planning groups, and the city government. Some gardens date back over sixty years and were formed as part of the Cleveland City Schools Gardening Program. However, the majority of community gardens today can be traced back to the mid 1970s, when the Summer Sprout Urban Gardening program was founded. The program is part of the city's Division of Neighborhood Services in the Department of Community Development and has been a leading force in providing resources for the development of the city's community gardens. Currently its management has been transferred to the nonprofit organization Afro-American Market Research and Development Association. Today the city of about 500,000 people has approximately 185 community gardens, which are located on city land, municipal school district land, privately owned land, and nonprofit organizations such as universities.

Before the current wave of community gardening began in the 1970s, Cleveland had other waves of gardening, including victory gardens during World War II and a school gardening program that had started back in the early twentieth century. The school gardening program ended in the mid 1970s due to problems with funding, lack of support from a new superintendent, and busing, which made it more difficult for them to conduct a gardening program. However, in some cases neighborhood groups received permission to use the property for community gardens, and today some of the largest community gardens in the city are former school gardens.

At about the same time that the school horticultural programs were ending, the Summer Sprout and Ohio State University Extension Program were starting. After initially receiving funding in 1978 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Extension's From Seed to Shelf Community Gardening Program was developed. The program advocated the use of community gardens as a means to improve the nutrition of low-income families. The extension program, now known as Cultivating Our Community, provides the training and technical experience for the county's gardens, including workshops for the garden leaders associated with the Summer Sprout program, which is limited to the city of Cleveland. Cultivating Our Community also makes available Master Gardeners, who have earned certification from the Extension and serve as consultants for the gardens. Their technical expertise is available for soil testing, pest control, and other specific growing expertise. They also play an advocacy role by educating and informing local community groups about the possibilities and benefits of a community garden, and they provide a newsletter, demonstration gardens, and their website of general information. ¹

Not all cities in the U.S. have opted to use Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to support community gardening, and Cleveland's decision to do so is probably another key to the relative success of community gardening in the city. CDBG funding helps defray the cost of gardening tools, materials, and infrastructure, such as soil maintenance and tilling. The program's self-described mission statement "is to turn vacant city lots into neighborhood assets. These abandoned lots are transformed into neatly tilled vegetable gardens providing much needed food to residents and eliminating neighborhood eyesores and health hazards."² Although the initiative rests with the garden leader of each garden, Summer Sprout provides considerable assistance. For example, it provides a back hoe to rake the soil, at least twenty yards of leaf humus, and (once the gardeners have spread it) a rototiller for the land.

The Summer Sprout program also benefits from Cleveland's Land Bank program, a city initiative that helps to place empty lots in the hands of qualified local homeowners and commercial developers at a minimum cost. About one third or one fourth of the city's community gardens is located on Land Bank lots. Those gardens are at a higher risk of development, and there have been a few cases where gardens have been lost to new development, but the issue is not as pressing in Cleveland as it is in other cities.

Another contributor to community gardening in Cleveland is EcoCity Cleveland, an environmental planning organization that was founded in 1992. EcoCity's policy mission is to promote equity and sustainability issues throughout metropolitan Cleveland. The nonprofit organization attempts to combat suburban sprawl with a cohesive vision of urban planning and community building, and it provides planning advice to city managers to meet these goals. Projects such as the EcoVillage, a cluster of townhouses in the Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood, demonstrate a commitment to green housing. The organization also plays an advocacy role by networking local stakeholders to create cohesive goals for community gardening in Cleveland.³

Equity and Sustainability

Approximately 80% of Cleveland's community gardens are located in its lowest income neighborhoods, and the gardeners themselves represent the demographic diversity of the city. As part of his reporting obligations for the city, Dennis Rinehart, the former Ohio State University Extension Agent, has compiled demographic data on the gardens, as reported by the garden leaders for 184 sites: 1,877 African-America, 934 white, 176 Hispanic, 75 Asian, 12 Native American/Alaskan Native, and 44 Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders. Some of the gardens are organic, but the decision is up to the garden.

One of the unique features of community gardens in Cleveland is the role of the local police. Twenty-five years ago police officer Dan Kane established a garden that provided a place for local youth to participate in the community, including juvenile offenders performing community service work. Several community gardens in East Cleveland, a predominately African-American section of the city, today are organized by local police officers who view the gardens as a natural extension of community watch programs.⁴

Many gardeners are also encouraged to "adopt a family," with whom the harvest is shared. A recent study completed by the Northeast Ohio Foodshed Network indicates that the Cleveland Block Grant Fund invests \$100,000 annually into the Summer Sprout

Urban Gardening Program, and claims that \$1 million worth of produce is created, a 1,000% return on the investment.⁵

Policy Issues and Recommendations

In 2004 EcoCity Cleveland sponsored community-wide events that were attended by representatives of Cleveland Neighborhood Services, the Cuyahoga Planning Commission, the OSU Extension, and the Cleveland Municipal School District. Those organizations also made four separate policy recommendations, which may be of general interest to community garden programs across the country. First, they recommended that planning for the gardens should be incorporated into the city's planning department. The recommendation follows the model of community gardening in some cities, such as Seattle, where it is part of the city plan. Second, special status should be accorded to land bank lots with developed gardens on them, and be recommended for preservation in planning decisions. This issue is more unique to the eastern cities, where community gardens are frequently located on vacant land and land tenure is an issue. In cities where land values are high or have risen rapidly, gardens on unoccupied land tend to be forced out, and community gardening can only be preserved on land owned by nonprofit organizations or on city land, such as parkland. A third recommendation was that a community urban food steering committee should be formed to advocate and manage permanent community gardens, presumably out of members of each respective stakeholder group. Some American cities now have food policy councils, which can integrate food security and local agriculture issues. Fourth, a new 501(c)(3) organization should not be formed since so many non-profits already exist. Instead, an existing non-profit should expand its mission statement to include land acquisition, fund-raising, and title management.³

Although the four recommendations indicate areas where community gardening in Cleveland can improve its position, in comparison with other cities, community gardening in Cleveland enjoys a confluence of several positive factors that are currently operating in its favor: the high level of vacant lots and willingness of the city to help convert those lots into community gardens, the city's decision to use some CDBG funds to assist community gardens through the city's Summer Sprout program, the assistance of the university extension program, and the advocacy work of organizations such as EcoCity Cleveland. The Summer Sprout program provides material assistance, whereas the extension service provides educational assistance, and the complementary roles been successful.

As with community gardening in most cities, the budget is inadequate. Although block grant funding can go a long way—because it takes only \$1000 to \$1500 to get a small, vacant lot ready for gardening—block grant funding has been reduced in recent years. Likewise, in the 1970s the extension service had a larger staff with people devoted to specific neighborhoods, but in recent years its staff size has been reduced.

Web site: www.summersprout.org

We wish to thank Dennis Rinehart for comments on community gardening in Cleveland made to Colin Beech on June 20, 2005. Rinehart has been involved with the Summer Sprout Program for about ten years. He formerly served as an Ohio State University Extension agent and conducted the urban gardening program in Cuyahoga County.

Additional References:

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