

OVERVIEW

Oftentimes community gardening and farming efforts are not a priority in attempts to revitalize urban neighborhoods and empower their residents. However, many studies suggest that for a variety of reasons these gardens act as a catalyst for positive community-wide change. In the greater Boston area, there are approximately 178 community gardens actively being tended to, as well as many community farms nearby. (BNAN, 2004) Most of these gardens and farms have waiting lists for participation, but lack sufficient funding to make them accessible to everyone.

What are community gardens and community farms?

Community gardens and community farms differ in the physical space they occupy. They can be small plots of land that exist within an urban neighborhood or actual farms that exist outside of a city, but both work towards the objectives of strengthening and revitalizing a specific community or population.

- *Community gardens:* The Boston Natural Areas Network defines community gardens as “green spaces that are communally cultivated and cared for; these spaces may consist of individually-worked plots, multiple person caretaker areas, sitting areas, and small-scale children's play-areas.” Their significance and impact are rooted in the fact that their success relies on a collaboration of people working together therefore; they are “an effective community-building strategy that contributes to neighborhood renewal, preservation, and stabilization.” (BNAN, 2004)
- *Community farms:* Community farms (or urban farms) are defined as “large parcels of community land dedicated to the production of food (connected to community agriculture). The community can form contractual associations for community purchases from local farm producers.” Some of the benefits they provide include decreasing food import costs and increasing community involvement and connectedness to the environment. (SCD)

Community gardens and farms are often unique in what they offer and whom they serve. Some garden programs train homeless men and women to tend to the produce, while others bus at-risk youth to farms to learn about gardening and to participate in the harvesting. Despite their differences, community gardens and farms share the common thread of fostering community through activities that connect participants with nature and one another.

The Boston-based Food Project provides both a 21 acre community farm outside the city and two community gardens located in Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods. Founded in 1991, the Food Project brings together thousands of youth and adults to grow organic vegetables that are donated to homeless shelters and sold at urban farmers' markets and to families in suburban Boston.

The history of community gardens

Community gardens have a rich history in the United States dating back more than 100 years. The first gardens were plots distributed in the 1890s to Detroit residents to help them be more self-sufficient as the depression loomed. (Goodman, 2000) During World War I, Americans were implored to grow “liberty gardens” to ensure both troops and citizens had adequate food supplies. These gardens were the combined efforts of government agencies, foundations, businesses, schools, and seed companies to give individuals and communities the instruction and resources they needed to plant vegetables. Because of the phenomenal success of these gardens, during the Second World War, the same strategy was used and the gardens renamed “victory gardens”. (National Museum of American History) In Boston, 49 areas were designated for victory gardens, including the Boston Common and the Public Gardens. However, when the wars ended, so did the gardens and today the Fenway Victory Gardens in Boston is the only remaining victory garden in the United States. (FGS) Community gardens reemerged in the 1960s and became prominent in the 1970's with such milestones as New York City granting the first community garden lease, the U.S. Department of Agriculture introducing its Urban Gardening

Program and the creation of the American Community Garden Association (ACGA). In 1998, according to data collected from 38 cities, the ACGA estimated there were 6,020 community gardens nationwide being maintained by two million gardeners. Throughout their history, community gardens have evolved from providing food during depression and war times to fostering a sense of community among residents. Despite the prosperity that the gardens have experienced, because of the value of the land they are on, their permanent status continues to be fragile. (Goodman, 2000)

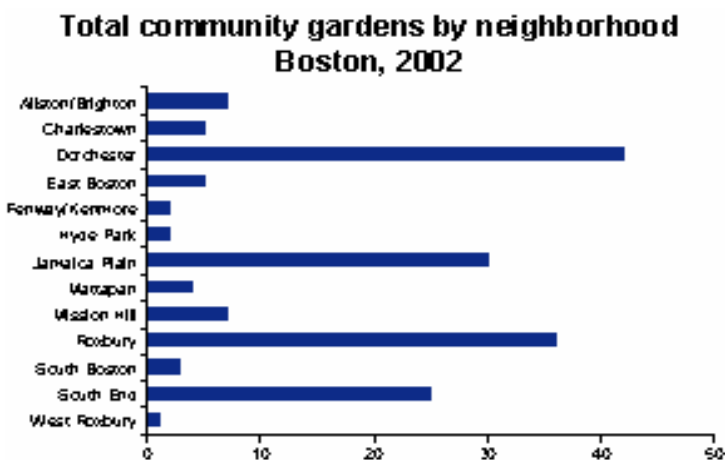
Why community gardens and farms are important

Community gardens and farms are many things to many people. Two of the most important outcomes are creating dialogue among neighbors and sustaining the health of residents through healthy food production close to home. (Linn, 1999)

Fostering a sense of community, a sense of safety. The crowded and noisy aspect of city living tends to alienate individuals and cause urban disconnectedness, instead of creating social ties among neighbors. In a study conducted at the University of Illinois to understand what makes “a collection of unrelated neighbors into a neighborhood,” researchers found that the benefits of a community garden extend much further than just aesthetics. (Kuo., et. al, 1998) The study determined that informal contact in common community spaces, like gardens or farms, increases ties among neighbors. In addition, the frequency of common space use relied on the vegetation that was offered there. The higher the levels of vegetation, the more use the common space received from residents. In low-income inner-city neighborhoods, a community garden that replaces a neglected lot, create ties between residents but in addition and increases their sense of security in that neighborhood. (Kuo., et. al, 1998)

Research conducted at Northwestern University suggested that community gardening can also lead to an empowerment process for inner-city neighborhoods because “the simply human neighborly process of community gardening is ultimately a political activity.” (Malakoff) Oftentimes gardens create community leadership among residents which for many opens the door to local government for people who previously felt powerless.

Improved individual well-being: In addition to the social benefits provided by community gardens and farms, evidence supports that an individual’s contact with nature, either actively tending to it or passively watching it, vastly improves one’s mental health. Research shows that people in contact with nature, experience better moods, stress relief, and less fatigue. (Kuo., et. al, 1998) Furthermore, just the presence of vegetation helps reduce the damaging effects of pollutions common to urban areas.



Source: The Boston Foundation Indicators Project 2002 and the Boston Natural Areas Network

Community supported agriculture as an alternative

Most states import 85-90 percent of their food from other places. On average, food travels 1,300 miles from farm to market. Studies conducted by the University of Massachusetts suggest that 35 percent of Massachusetts imported food could be grown closer to home putting \$1 billion dollars back into the Commonwealth’s economy. (Van En. et al, 2000) In an effort to help small farmers struggling to compete with larger farms, community supported agriculture (CSA) has been introduced to keep their produce local. CSA is defined as:

A partnership of mutual commitment between a farm and a community of supporters which provides a direct link between the production and consumption of food...and to develop a regional food supply and strong local economy; maintain a sense of community; encourage land stewardship; and honor the knowledge and experience of growers and producers working with small to medium farms. (Van En. et al, 2000)

Like community gardens and farms, CSA creates a bond between the resident and the environment around them. CSA provides community residents with “memberships” to a local farm. Members collectively support the farm financially and oftentimes through volunteerism. In return, they receive fresh produce throughout summer and fall months. The CSA movement in the United States began in the 1980’s in Massachusetts as an experiment, and now has more than 1,000 CSA farms throughout the United States.

In Massachusetts, Waltham Fields Community Farm (WFCF) is a successful example of community farm management and CSA. WFCF is located on six acres leased by UMass where a vegetable, flower and herb farm is managed using organic principles. In addition to charitable and educational programs, WFCF offers a CSA program where shareholders are given opportunities to participate in various farm projects. WFCF services four emergency food programs and 40 volunteer groups.

Boston’s community gardens and farms

In Boston, most community gardens are supported and/or owned by non-profit organizations and city and state public agencies. In 1995, the Boston Natural Areas Network began the task of assessing the needs and assets of these gardens. Several trends common to most area gardens emerged. Boston’s community gardens are consistently under funded and almost all have waiting lists for gardeners. As a result, they tend to lack adequate infrastructure, training and fund raising capabilities and operate in a stopgap manner. They estimated that more than \$1.6 million would be necessary to bring the 60 non-profit gardens they surveyed to minimum conditions.

Ownership and the ongoing struggle to preserve community gardens

Public land is made available by municipal governments to local organizations and agencies for a period of a year or two. Organizations like the Trust for Public Land work with local groups to help them establish non-profit status and raise funds to purchase properties. Despite research that outlines the many benefits associated with community gardens, oftentimes these gardens are treated as a luxury, not a necessity for community well-being. This is particularly problematic in urban landscapes where property values are so high, that oftentimes the dollar becomes the bottom-line. What is not always taken into account is that sustaining gardens are considerably less costly for local government than sustaining new development. For example, by preserving community gardens, governments do not have to accommodate the many costs associated with development such as schools, trash removal, fire and police protection, and water which tend to cause a considerable drain on local budgets. (TPL, 2002)

Many community garden and farm advocates are pleased with the growing body of research that supports their activities, but still feel tied to the stigma that community gardens are nice, but not essential. Furthermore, many community gardens continue to exist or not exist at the whim of government officials and operate on shoestring budgets.

WORKS CITED

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Local & State

Boston Natural Areas Network

www.bostonnatural.org

Community Farms Outreach

www.communityfarms.org

The Food Project

www.thefoodproject.com

National

American Community Gardening Association

www.communitygarden.org

Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture

www.buylocalfood.com

National Gardening Association

www.garden.org

The Trust for Public Land

www.tpl.org

Youth Build U.S.A.

www.youthbuild.org

Government

U.S. Department of Agriculture

www.usda.gov

For more information on this and other local issues, we encourage you to utilize the *Boston Indicators Project*, available online www.tbf.org/indicators. Produced and maintained by the **Boston Foundation**, this web site features indicators of change and progress in ten sectors and is regularly updated with new information and reports.



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About Boston Cares

Boston Cares organizes and leads volunteer teams and services in and around Boston that have a positive impact on individuals and communities. Since 1991, thousands of people of all ages have volunteered through Boston Cares at over 240 Greater Boston schools and non-profits.

Boston Cares is a member of the Hands on Network (formerly City Cares,) an alliance of volunteer organizations working to transform individuals and communities through service and civic engagement, with affiliates and partners in 41 US and international locations.



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