



How American Cities Can Promote Urban Agriculture

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In his original plan for the city of Philadelphia, William Penn declared that every home should have ample space “for gardens or orchards or fields, that it may be a green country that will never be burnt and always be wholesome.” Before militiamen or throngs of protestors, the Boston Common nourished grazing cattle. Urban agriculture has cropped up again and again in cities throughout American history – from “relief gardens” for the poor in the 19th century, to “victory gardens” of World War II – and for good reason. If embraced and encouraged, urban agriculture can create economic, cultural, environmental and educational benefits. In recent years, various cities have developed good urban agriculture programs. By distilling their successes and struggles, my colleagues and I identify a series of best practices in this area.

Tailoring Programs for Varied Communities

“Urban agriculture” is an umbrella term encompassing a wide array of practices. Good programs **take account from the start of community preferences that vary**. Beekeeping or backyard chickens, for example, might be considered progress in Portland but backwardness in Baltimore. Controversies often arise, but they offer opportunities for dialogue. When disputes erupted about the 140-acre Hantz Farms proposal in Detroit, for example, officials convened public meetings to fashion a vision of urban agriculture. Cities like Portland and Vancouver have formed urban agriculture task forces composed of private citizens, government representatives, and organizational partners to advise the cities on planning and code issues.

In most cities, urban agriculture of some form is already practiced, whether regulations officially enable it or not. It is important to **take stock of these existing operations and practices**. Important elements to consider include: the number of gardens and gardeners, their demographics, the type and location of existing gardens, popular agricultural practices, and where space exists to expand urban agriculture. Numerous cities have benefited from conducting “urban agriculture land inventories,” in which mapping professionals use satellite imagery and public records to determine which publicly-owned plots are best suited to urban agriculture.

Communities should develop an independent agency or department to manage urban agriculture. Because urban agriculture is a multi-faceted process, many city agencies currently regulate its disparate aspects; Parks, Public Works, Environmental Protection, Sustainability, Health and Sanitation, Land Banks, and other departments all have their hand in working with growers. Centralizing this authority under one department can streamline regulation and simplify the process of establishing gardens and farms. Boston’s Grassroot program, Chicago’s Neighborspace program, and New York’s Green Thumb program are all excellent examples.

Municipalities should audit existing codes and laws. Although most relevant regulations will be found in local zoning ordinances, other codes might have unexpected effects on urban agriculture – including ordinances

regulating produce sales, market stands, shade trees, and noise. In Los Angeles, a near-forgotten, yet narrowly-worded, 1946 “Truck Gardening Ordinance” threatened to limit agricultural sales exclusively to vegetables before it was amended by the city’s governing body. Municipalities should also be aware of state and federal regulations that might affect agriculture policy decisions. Right to Farm laws typically operate at the state level and may restrict localities. Notably, Detroit and other large cities in Michigan had to postpone regulation of urban agriculture until they were exempted from their state’s Right to Farm rules.

Ways to Facilitate Urban Agriculture

Although public sentiment should determine where urban agriculture is appropriate, there are opportunities to incorporate some form of agriculture or gardening in every land use zone. Cities from Seattle to Philadelphia have incorporated urban agriculture into existing land use codes. Small acreage projects unlikely to create nuisances include backyard gardens typical of single family homes and should be permitted virtually anywhere. Yet large acre, high nuisance projects – such as multi-acre urban farms relying on heavy machinery or animal husbandry – are better suited for the city edges or industrial zones.

While permitting urban agriculture outright in this fashion has proven successful, other creative ways that cities have enabled urban agriculture include:

- Creating new zones for urban agriculture specifically, as in Boston and Cleveland.
- Permitting urban agriculture as “conditional” or “accessory” rather than primary use. This allows local planning and zoning boards to maintain control over how such uses are developed, without restricting them. However, this approach can become too cumbersome and likely to disproportionately burden applicants with fewer resources.
- Land can be directly supplied -- through adopt-a-lot programs and leasing underused spaces to citizens or qualified urban farmers. Offering flexible, medium- to long-term leases is critical, as security of land is vital to the success of urban farms.

Good Management to Sustain Citizen Projects

Finally, municipalities must take steps to ensure that citizens practicing urban agriculture do so responsibly. Some of the most effective approaches include:

- Passing or revising codes that limit the use of pesticides and fertilizers
- Enforcing time restrictions on the use of noisy farm equipment (although this is not typically an issue on small plots where hand tools are most common)
- Providing training opportunities through city departments or local cooperative extension services
- Requiring preliminary testing of land and monitoring of soil toxicity, soil nutrition, and any utility lines running through a property
- Offering access to rain barrels or municipal water hookups

- Including urban agriculture in all future urban planning efforts, including master plans.