

# D. URBAN AGRICULTURE + COMMUNITY GARDENS

## INTRODUCTION

Urban agriculture is the practice of cultivating and distributing food in a city. This source of food production in the urban setting is helping to meet growing demand for local food in cities all over the country and in the City of Rochester. Urban agriculture practices include community gardens, urban farms, bee keeping, raising farm animals (chickens, goats, etc.), hydroponics (growing food without soil), and aquaponics (raising fish). Urban agriculture operations can range from large industrial-scale hydroponic operations to a small community garden on an individual vacant city lot. Each practice comes with unique land or facility requirements and cities must determine where and under what conditions these practices will be conducted in the city and to what scale.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Community gardens can help meet a growing demand for locally-grown food, especially fresh produce.
- Beyond providing food, gardens bring people together, teach values and skills, and beautify neighborhoods.
- Some urban soils may not be suitable for growing food for consumption.
- It can be difficult to find individuals or groups that can maintain a community garden for several years.
- Creative new ideas and approaches should continue to drive City policy and community programming in support of community gardening and urban agriculture.

## COMMUNITY GARDENS

The most common practice of urban agriculture in Rochester is community gardening. Community gardens offer a number of recognized benefits to individuals, families, and communities, including:

- fostering a sense of community ownership, identity, and pride;
- bringing people together;
- increasing eyes on the street;
- providing unique opportunities for immigrants to grow their traditional foods, provide opportunity for cultural practices and traditions, and connect them to the community;
- teaching youth about nutrition, where food comes from, basic business principles, the importance of community, environmental sustainability, and job and life skills;
- providing a source of nutritionally-rich food and/or income;
- beautifying the neighborhood;
- filtering rainwater;
- providing green space in neighborhoods, which reduces stress and increases a sense of wellness and belonging; and
- increasing property values in the immediate vicinity where they are located.



**PUBLIC COMMENT**

“More gardens provide both beauty and healthy recreation, as well as producing healthy food.”



**PUBLIC COMMENT**

“I want vacant lots to be used for: (1) community gardens to bring pride on an individual basis and (2) gardens to provide fresh produce, improve nutrition levels of children and food security for families and seniors within the city.”

## D. URBAN AGRICULTURE + COMMUNITY GARDENS (CONTINUED)

### COMMUNITY GARDENS CONTINUED

While many residents of Rochester grow a garden on their privately-owned lot, there are many who cannot have a garden where they live because they live in an apartment or their lot is too small. In these cases, a nearby vacant lot becomes an attractive option for growing a garden and enjoying the benefits listed on the previous page. If a desired vacant lot is privately owned, gardeners would have to engage in an agreement with the lot owner to use the space for a garden. If the vacant lot is City-owned, which most of them are, then gardeners must have an agreement with the City to use the lot for a garden.

Through the *Rochester 2034* survey and community discussions, there was a resounding community call for more gardens on vacant lots and reduced regulatory burdens to do so. As of the date of publication of *Rochester 2034*, the City offers two options for using City-owned vacant land for gardens:

- **Garden Permit Program.** The City of Rochester offers seasonal permits for gardeners who want to build and maintain seasonal gardens on City-owned vacant lots. The City processes approximately 80 garden permits each year and gardeners who wish to use the lot for multiple years must get a new permit every year.
- **Lease / License Agreements.** The City also uses standard license agreements or leases to facilitate the use of City-owned land for uses that are longer than short-term temporary uses. These agreements are a good tool for longer term arrangements with provisions for management and maintenance requirements, allowing the City to retain some control. This tool is not routinely used for gardens.

#### ROCHESTER URBAN AGRICULTURE WORKING GROUP

Additional support of community gardeners comes from the Rochester Urban Agriculture Working Group (UAWG). Formed in 2014, the UAWG brings together Rochester's urban agriculture leaders to identify and address issues and challenges facing community gardens and urban farms throughout the city. The UAWG consists of representatives from community gardens, not-for-profit agencies, urban farms, government agencies, universities, community associations, and community members. Each year the UAWG sponsors a community garden conference to provide on-going education and coalition building among the community gardeners in the City of Rochester.



## COMMUNITY GARDENS CONTINUED

Starting and operating a community garden is a challenging task. In addition to needing sufficient sunlight and access to water, a successful garden requires commitment of neighborhood leadership and volunteers willing to work in the garden. Studies show that another key element of success is the availability of skill-building opportunities for volunteers. This helps to ensure ongoing participation and momentum while cultivating new leaders for the future.

The level of commitment necessary for running a successful community garden means that gardens need to be strategically placed where there is easy access by a population that will volunteer to work in the garden. The gardens also usually need to be near an occupied building where occupants can keep an eye on the garden. Lastly, success is more likely if there is a sponsor for the garden that can help with the capital costs and equipment.

### PUBLIC COMMENT

**“Rochester residents should be allowed to use vacant lots for gardening, and to put up greenhouses, hoop houses, tunnels, and other garden production aids.”**



## D. URBAN AGRICULTURE + COMMUNITY GARDENS (CONTINUED)

### CITY OPERATIONAL SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY GARDENS

The City of Rochester is committed to supporting community gardens, providing technical advice and gardening supplies, including plants, soil, mulch, and materials for raised beds. The City's Flower City Feeling Good series is a spring/summer program that aims to get community members outside, active and engaged. The series kicks-off in April and May with horticultural workshops and garden talks at recreation centers and city libraries. These workshops are provided in partnership with Monroe County Cornell Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners.

The Rochester Blossoms Plant Giveaway takes place every May and is open to community gardeners and neighborhood groups that hold a City garden permit or steward a neighborhood street mall, etc. (no private gardens). This event typically has more than 130 groups sign-up for the giveaway, with each group receiving two to three flats of annuals. In the autumn, the City sponsors another plant giveaway to provide mums, bulbs, and occasionally perennials for community gardens. When funding is available, the Coordinator of Horticultural & Environmental Programming provides lumber and rain barrels to gardens based on need and seniority.



#### MUNICIPAL COMPOSTING FOR GARDENS

The City Department of Environmental Services composts yard wastes and street sweepings, making the compost available for pick up by city residents or delivery to garden permit holders. Currently, the City does not recommend that municipal compost be used for vegetable gardens, however, each year the City orders food grade compost (approximately 20-30 yards) for giveaway to a portion of the community gardens that are raised bed vegetable gardens.



#### WATER FOR GARDENS

The City will install a metered water spigot on a permitted garden site. The meter must be tied to a sponsor who is responsible for the water bill. Currently, there is no budget designated for water installations; therefore, groups seeking to have water installed may be responsible for the cost of installation. This cost is often a limiting factor for community gardens, so they seek other options to securing a water source for their gardens. As an alternative to a water spigot on site, community gardeners may choose to enter into an agreement with a property owner of an adjacent lot to share water and compensate the owner for costs associated with the garden's water use.

## ZONING PROVISIONS TO ALLOW FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE

The City Zoning Code has few provisions pertaining to gardening or agriculture which generally means that the use is not readily permitted. The only relevant provision in the Code allows agricultural uses as temporary uses with a prohibition on any permanent structures. This limited attention to the subject of agriculture has sparked a substantial amount of public urging for more flexibility and allowances in the Zoning Code to reduce the current regulatory barriers to gardens as a principle and long-term land use.

### NY AGRICULTURE AND MARKETS LAW (ARTICLE 2-C §31F)

The State Legislature finds and declares that community gardens provide significant health, educational and social benefits to the general public, especially for those who reside in urban and suburban areas of this state. Furthermore, it is the articulated public policy of the State to promote and foster growth in the number of community gardens and the acreage of such gardens. It is therefore the intent of the legislature and the purpose of this article to foster growth in the number, size and scope of community gardens in this state by encouraging state agencies, municipalities and private parties in their efforts to promote community gardens.

## NYS SUPPORT OF COMMUNITY GARDENS

State law defines community gardens as “public or private lands upon which residents of the state have the opportunity to garden on lands which they do not individually own.” There are well over 1,000 registered or permitted community gardens in New York’s cities and many more cases where residents have rescued vacant private or public lots in an effort to build more livable neighborhoods.

The NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets supports community gardens through their Community Gardens Program, which was “created to support the thousands of New Yorkers who are building greener, healthier cities through community gardens, school gardens and educational farms.” The mission of this program is to help develop and sustain community gardens in New York by leveraging resources across state agencies. The mission is based on [Article 2-C of the Agriculture and Markets Law](#) – mandating the Department of Agriculture & Markets to:

- Assist in the identification of vacant public land for community gardening purposes
- Coordinate on behalf of interested community groups and state or local agencies to facilitate the use of vacant public lands for community gardens
- Support and encourage networking among community garden programs around the state.

## D. URBAN AGRICULTURE + COMMUNITY GARDENS (CONTINUED)

### CHALLENGES

While community gardens, including those where vegetables are grown, are gaining momentum in Rochester, there are some challenges to seeing the movement reaching its full potential. For starters, urban soil in a city that has been almost fully built out for generations is generally not considered suitable for growing and consuming food.

Establishing and maintaining a community garden is labor intensive. In recent years, there have been examples of well-meaning individuals and groups that want to start a community garden but fail to follow through on upkeep. It can be challenging to sustain the interest and capacity of a group of neighbors and/or volunteers to regularly tend to a plot, let alone remain committed to the off-site logistics and organizing necessary to sustain a group's effectiveness.

There is strong support for more urban agriculture in the city, which was made clear throughout the community engagement process for *Rochester 2034*. However, those passions and convictions need to be matched by a commitment to the required labor and organizational efforts, as well as the creative techniques needed to overcome environmental restrictions.

#### FLOWER CITY GARDEN CONTEST

The City conducts the annual Flower City Garden Contest where community members can nominate their own garden or a community garden.



## CREATIVE NEW IDEAS

Rochester is poised to embrace urban agriculture on a larger scale. We have available land and intend to refine regulations to encourage these activities. As concerns about access to healthy food and overdependence on non-local sources continue to rise, the Flower City should nurture this emerging trend. Below is a sampling of creative ideas for consideration that communities are using to increase the presence of food and plant cultivation in an urban setting.



### PUBLIC COMMENT

**“Would LOVE to see more community gardens and initiatives that get fresh produce into food deserts and food pantries.”**

### FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

Across the country, cities and regions are engaging various stakeholders to form food policy councils or task forces to look at a wide range of food policy and access issues, including food distribution and production challenges in cities, and work together to develop solutions. A local council/task force could focus on Rochester’s food deserts, document existing services, needs, gaps, and opportunities, and develop food access policies and initiatives that help to improve community food access and nutrition. This group could also assess the risks and benefits of in situ gardening (i.e., growing directly in the ground without raised beds) on city lots to inform City policy.

### EDIBLE LANDSCAPES

Some cities have enacted policies and actions to create edible landscapes. With the goal of connecting people to real food, city leaders and community members are looking at public walkways and spaces for ways to integrate fruit trees and vegetables into the landscaping. This has multiple benefits, not the least which is public foraging and appreciation.

### HYDROPONICS / AQUAPONICS

Hydroponics is a system of agriculture that utilizes nutrient-rich water rather than soil for plant growth. It does not require natural precipitation or fertile land in order to be effective. Hydroponic systems do not require pesticides, require less water and space than traditional agricultural systems. This makes them optimal for use in cities, where space is limited, and where there are defunct industrial buildings that lend themselves to this reuse. Aquaponics adds the raising of fish to the hydroponics system.



# D. URBAN AGRICULTURE + COMMUNITY GARDENS [UAG]

## ACTION PLAN

GOAL	STRATEGIES	PARTNERS
<p><b>UAG-1</b></p> <p><b>Support urban agriculture as a valid reuse option for vacant land and vacant buildings.</b></p>	<p>UAG-1a Adopt a comprehensive urban agriculture policy that addresses the environmental, health, social, and economic benefits of urban agriculture and provides a vision for the future of urban agriculture in Rochester.</p>	<p><b>City,</b> Urban Agriculture Working Group, Community Groups/Funders</p>
	<p>UAG-1b Make changes to the Zoning Code that allow urban agriculture as a principle use within specified parameters.</p>	<p><b>City</b></p>
	<p>UAG-1c Market strategic sites for large-scale hydroponic and aquaponics operations to support food production, workforce development opportunities, and employment.</p>	<p><b>City,</b> Urban Agriculture Working Group, Community Groups/Funders</p>
	<p>UAG-1d Build on existing recycling and composting programs, focused on enhancing collection of organic material (yard and food waste) at a community-wide scale for use in a composting program. Some ideas include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Pilot a program at the Rochester Public Market for collecting compost.</li> <li>– Pilot a program of isolating leaf and organic debris at park sites.</li> <li>– Create leaf compost without street sweepings to produce organic material that would be ‘food grade’.</li> </ul>	<p><b>City</b></p>
	<p>UAG-1e Continue and enhance the City’s Flower City Feeling Good series through additional funding and funding sources.</p>	<p><b>City,</b> Community Groups/Funders</p>

**Notes:**

1. Partners listed in bold are recommended to lead the implementation of that strategy.
2. For a list of partner acronyms see [Appendix A](#).

GOAL	STRATEGIES	PARTNERS
<b>UAG-1</b> <b>Support urban agriculture as a valid reuse option for vacant land and vacant buildings.</b>	UAG-1f To respond to community demand, identify and evaluate policy and funding sources for providing water to community agricultural uses.	<b>City</b>
	UAG-1g Pursue grants to support food-based community gardens as well as innovative urban agriculture initiatives that offer workforce development programs and job opportunities.	<b>City, NYS, Community Groups/Funders, Urban Agriculture Working Group</b>
	UAG-1h Sponsor grants to support community gardening as well as other urban agriculture applications.	<b>Community Groups/Funders</b>
	UAG-1i Explore the opportunity to convene a local or regional Food Policy Council or Task Force. The most appropriate entity to lead this effort would need to be identified.	<b>City, Monroe County, Foodlink, RCSD, Education/ Medical Institutions, GFLRPC, GTC, Urban Agriculture Community, Urban Agriculture Working Group, Community Groups/Funders</b>

# D. URBAN AGRICULTURE + COMMUNITY GARDENS [UAG]

## ACTION PLAN

GOAL	STRATEGIES	PARTNERS
<b>UAG-2</b> <b>Facilitate community gardening on City-owned vacant lots.</b>	UAG-2a Create a long-term (5-10 years) permit/lease arrangement for community garden sponsors who have demonstrated sustainable gardening operations over the course of a full growing season and have support by the immediate neighborhood.	<b>City</b>
	UAG-2b Convene a meeting with representative gardeners and relevant City staff to assess the garden permit process and garden support to discuss opportunities for improvement and efficiencies.	<b>City, Urban Agriculture Community</b>
	UAG-2c Allow gardeners to respond to Requests for Proposals for vacant lot redevelopment in areas where gardens may be a desired amenity and widely supported by the surrounding neighborhood, and particularly within the lower demand housing market.	<b>City</b>
	UAG-2d Work with refugee service providers to use City-owned vacant land in low-demand market areas for community gardening and programming.	City, Community Groups/Funders

**Notes:**

1. Partners listed in bold are recommended to lead the implementation of that strategy.
2. For a list of partner acronyms see [Appendix A](#).

GOAL	STRATEGIES	PARTNERS
<b>UAG-3</b> <b>Explore innovative urban agriculture initiatives.</b>	UAG-3a Research the feasibility of introducing edible landscaping into public parks, streetscapes, and landscaping around public buildings.	<b>City</b>
	UAG-3b Research the feasibility of using a hydroponic/aquaponics operation as a potential employee owner coop project as a community wealth-building initiative.	<b>City</b> , Community Groups/Funders
	UAG-3c Explore support for installation of high tunnels, hoop houses, and other season-extending production aids on City-owned and private land. Specifically, work with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service New York to extend High Tunnel Initiative to urban farmers.	Urban Agriculture Working Group, City, NYS