
Open Space Plan 2015-2021

Section 7

Analysis of Needs

Section 7.3.2 Open Space Systems
Management
COMMUNITY
GARDENS

Analysis of Needs

Section 7.3.2: Open Space Systems Management COMMUNITY GARDENS

INTRODUCTION

Boston has 175 community gardens located in 11 Boston neighborhoods. Not many decades ago, they numbered a handful. The growth of community gardens across the city demonstrates a strong commitment for these special forms of green space. An integral part of the open space network of parks, playgrounds, natural areas, and unbuilt spaces in the city, these community gardens are perhaps the most personal and directly representative green spaces in their neighborhoods.

Community gardens are vital focal points in many Boston neighborhoods and unique among the city's open space types. Most began and continue as food-producing plots used by people of limited means but have also grown to serve as important social and educational centers for gardeners, their families, and neighbors. As importantly, gardens facilitate the empowerment of residents by involving them in community planning processes that define an appropriate balance of open and built spaces. Community gardens also serve to welcome newcomers to existing neighborhoods and offer neighbors common goals of healthy active living. The work involved in creating and preserving community gardens has brought many residents together, whether or not they are gardeners, to both protect neighborhood character and provide the space necessary for gardening and gathering.

Usefulness, self-sufficiency, beauty, productivity, cooperation, and education are some positives that grow out of community gardens in addition to the food and flowers raised. Well-managed gardens are a source of community pride, while flourishing gardens contribute to the perception of gardens and their environs as secure, healthy spaces within Boston's neighborhoods. Residents use community gardens as safe meeting places, and by virtue of the variety of cultures represented by the city's gardeners, these spaces are also a common meeting ground for shared neighborhood experiences.

Analysis of Needs



Analysis of Needs

The community gardens of Boston range in size from the Clark-Cooper Community Garden at the Massachusetts Audubon Nature Center (the former Boston State Hospital lands in Mattapan) and the Boston Parks and Recreation Department's Richard Parker Victory Gardens in the Fenway, each with more than 300 individual garden plots, to tucked-away places developed on corner vacant house lots with as few as ten plots. In these varied gardens, approximately 15,000 residents harvest a wide array of food annually, generating fresh, healthy produce that in turn contributes significantly to the household budgets of low- to moderate-income families. Gardens are located in almost every city neighborhood and are owned by city and state agencies and a variety of non-profit entities. Community gardens are located on parkland, the grounds of public housing developments, and school and social service agencies. Many, particularly those owned by non-profits, are located on formerly abandoned or undeveloped lots. Community gardens also reflect the city's diverse ethnic make-up with significant representation of Asian, Caribbean, Eastern European, African-American, and Hispanic populations.

This plan is a summary of information and goals defined by the many agencies and organizations instrumental in the development, support, maintenance, funding, and advocacy for community gardens in Boston. The plan's overall intent is to set realistic goals for the next five years, goals that will sustain a larger and more long-term vision for the gardens.

History and Development

Historically, Boston has one of the oldest and largest community gardening systems in the United States. In the 1890s, with the onset of an economic depression, vacant lots and city land were set aside for food production by individuals. During World War I, community gardening surfaced again in Boston as "Victory Gardens," providing food for local consumption as much of the nation's commercial food supply was allocated for shipment abroad. During World War II, community gardening again became a critical component of the war effort by significantly buttressing domestic food production.

The Fenway Victory Garden (later named the Richard D. Parker Memorial Victory Gardens) is one of the few Victory Gardens in the

Analysis of Needs

country that dates from World War II. However, in the 1970s additional community gardens arose from vacant house lots created by arson, abandonment, and demolition, especially in the most economically distressed neighborhoods. Strong grassroots efforts toward community development, self-help, and state legislation resulted in the creation of many new gardens.

Other early efforts such as Boston's Revival Program resulted in 30 new community gardens during the 1970s. In 1976, Boston Urban Gardeners (BUG) was founded as a non-profit organization to further the interests of gardening groups. With their support, community gardening emerged from the 1970s as a solid neighborhood-based system.

In the 1980s, community gardens faced important battles for property rights in a climate of aggressive development and re-zoning. Because the city faced extreme financial cutbacks, the Boston Natural Areas Fund – now known as Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN) – purchased at gardeners' request and protected 16 of the Revival Gardens from the City of Boston. The South End/Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust (SELROSLT) was established and formalized in 1991. A Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) contract was established with the national non-profit Trust for Public Land and Boston Urban Gardeners to assist with the formation of SELROSLT. This effort permanently protected 16 community gardens and pocket parks owned by the BRA.

To address continuing concerns for ownership, investment and support, Garden Futures was formed in 1994 by BUG, BNAN, SELROSLT and Dorchester Gardenlands Preserve. These groups collectively undertook a study of their 60 non-profit owned gardens in order to better able to understand capital and human infrastructure needs related to long-term sustainability. The report was issued in early 1997 and recommended new efforts toward education, networking, and public outreach.

By 2012, Garden Futures, the gardens owned by BUG (which had closed its doors in 2000), and SELROSLT were acquired by BNAN making it the single largest non-profit owner of community gardens in Boston. In addition to its protection of 59 community gardens, BNAN expanded its capacity to provide garden education

Analysis of Needs

and resources for all of the city's 175 gardens and serves as a central home for all Boston's community garden information.

In recognition of its growth and expanded work, in 2001, the organization's name was updated to Boston Natural Areas Network. In the last ten years, BNAN's staff and the annual budget have grown fivefold. In recognition of the growing demands and responsibilities that rest with the organization, BNAN became a division of the Trustees of Reservations (TTOR) in 2006. The Trustees of Reservations is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving properties of scenic, historic, and ecological value throughout Massachusetts. The affiliation of a state-wide and city-wide organization will bring unprecedented conservation capacity and create a new paradigm for how such work is done in the City of Boston and in Massachusetts; bringing together the complementary strengths of each organization.

In 2014, BNAN has formally integrated into TTOR, so that it will be the Boston Region of TTOR. This means that many support functions that BNAN performed for itself will now be provided by TTOR, leaving more time, resources, energy, and efficiency for delivering on the core mission.

Ownership, Investment, and Support

Public Ownership and Support

The City of Boston owns many community garden properties through the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the Boston School Department, the Department of Neighborhood Development (DND), and the Parks Department, which owns six community gardens within public parkland. The DND plays a crucial role in garden ownership as the agency that manages land that became City-owned through abandonment and foreclosure: many of these are vacant lots. Some of these properties have been allocated for community gardens. In addition, the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) provides community gardening opportunities at a number of its residential developments citywide.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, via the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), also owns land in Boston where community gardens are located. Public support for community gardens is evidenced through the Parks Department's outreach through its Community Garden Liaison and its

Analysis of Needs

Maintenance Division, working with other community garden service providers, and supporting spring and fall garden clean-ups with trash pickups. The Department's Park Partners program includes community gardens in its growing list of open spaces and their advocates.

The DND administers the Grassroots Program, which competitively awards federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to neighborhood groups for converting vacant land into community gardens. Through Grassroots, existing gardens have been improved and new gardens created.

Over the last five years, the Grassroots Program has awarded approximately \$1.9 million of federal funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Community Development Block Grant Program. These grants were directed toward community-sponsored, nonprofit-developed projects in Boston's low and moderate income neighborhoods. The Grassroots Program has also worked to renovate and expand some of the city's largest community gardens including Leyland Street Community Garden in Dorchester, Nightingale Community Garden in Dorchester, and Rutland Washington Community Garden in Roxbury. The program will continue to support opportunities to revive older community gardens and expand the number of plots in existing community gardens especially where there are opportunities to use city owned land to do so. In total, over 26 community gardens, 2 new urban farms and 9 other projects in the development stage have been assisted by the Grassroots program from 2007 - 2014.

Along with continuing to support the City's community gardens, the Grassroots program continues to assist in the creation and strengthening of long-term community assets. Two examples are the renovation and expansion of Revision Urban Farm which included a new greenhouse, retaining wall, and learning amphitheater for its youth training programs; and the enhancement of Roxbury Community College Garden greenhouse, so as to assist in its food production and access programming.

The Grassroots Program has also worked on collaborative projects with other City agencies, namely the Urban Agriculture Pilot Program in association with the BRA and the Mayor's Office of Food Initiatives. The 2010 pilot resulted in the development of two

Analysis of Needs

new urban farms in Dorchester, the Tucker Callendar Street Urban Farm managed by Revision House/Victory Programs, and the Glenway Bradshaw urban farm management by City Growers/Urban Farming Institute. These new farms were key to the development of Boston's Article 89 Urban Agriculture Zoning approved in November 2013.

In addition, Grassroots funded the design and construction of two community gardens at Boston Housing Authority's Old Colony and West Broadway developments working with South Boston Grows and the South Boston Neighborhood Development Corporation. The BHA and Grassroots will continue to consider other possible opportunities to develop community gardens.

Through an open Request for Proposals (RFP) process, the Grassroots Program has also conveyed property to nonprofit grantees. The Boston Natural Areas Network received land and funding for the creation of two gardens in Dorchester and the renovation and expansion of another in Roxbury. Other organizations such as The Cooper Center in Roxbury, the Nonquit Neighborhood Association, the NUBIA Center and the Egleston Community Orchard (via the Commonwealth Land Trust) also were conveyed land for open space use.

Finally, the state provides some resources to urban community gardeners. The Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture facilitates the establishment of farmers' markets.

Private and Non-Profit Ownership and Support

While the Commonwealth and the City own the land of several community gardens in Boston, most are owned by private and non-profit entities.

Among these these non-governmental organizations, BNAN stands out for its longevity and ability to adjust to changing circumstances and opportunities. It supports and owns 59 community gardens and advocates for new ones, particularly in lower income areas. As the newest region of the statewide land preservation group The Trustees of Reservations, BNAN helps sustain the current levels of support for community gardens while planning for future growth.

Analysis of Needs

THE NEXT SEVEN YEARS

Since the 1970s, community gardens have emerged as an integral element of Boston's open space system. Today community garden space is in demand in a number of city neighborhoods, yet stability and permanency remain issues for many established sites.

Recommendations should respect the delicate balance between external support services and self-sufficiency. The following list delineates areas of focus over the next seven years:

- Community Gardens and Community Development
- Acquisition and Protection
- Maintenance and Support
- Capital Investment
- Education, Training, and Programming
- Management
- Productivity
- Resource Development

Community Gardens and Community Development

Community gardens serve many functions in a neighborhood: as sources of fresh food; as gathering areas facilitating communication among neighbors; as a recreation resource (annual Gallup Polls continually show gardening to be one of the most popular leisure activities); and as crime-free areas which can provide an extra measure of security to neighboring homes. In short, a flourishing community garden can help grow not only healthy foods, but a more livable neighborhood as well.

GOALS

- Involve neighborhood organizations, residents and youths in planning, building, and maintaining community gardens.
- Support community-based initiatives to develop new gardens and improve existing ones.
- Target neighborhoods where community garden improvements will help leverage other funding and support other community development initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide publicly funded grant programs to support garden capital, operating, and programming needs.
- Continue and expand DND Grassroots program to create new and update existing community gardens owned by non-profit organizations

Analysis of Needs

- Encourage gardeners and their leadership to participate in neighborhood-wide organizations.
- Advocate for a balance of open space and built areas in both publicly and privately funded development projects.
- Develop sources of financial support for community-based organizations to be able to assume long-term responsibility for maintaining community gardens.
- Encourage community participation in public agency neighborhood development projects to ensure that community garden interests are promoted and incorporated into project plans.

Acquisition and Protection

The local food movement has grown substantially over the last seven years. The public is more aware today of what they are eating and are looking for fresh, safely grown and prepared food. This interest in growing and eating fresh produce means that more people are looking for space for their own garden. In a dense city, this interest can generate a dramatic demand for community garden space.

Great strides have been made to secure established community garden lands in Boston through purchase by non-profit organizations. Yet some community gardens remain unprotected or threatened by development, whether owned privately or by an agency of the City of Boston or the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

As the City of Boston and non-profit groups plan for Boston's open space, the important need for gardens should be considered when setting priorities for acquisition.

There is a need for more land trusts as the number of nonprofits and neighborhood groups interested in developing community gardens has greatly increased.

GOALS

- Provide long-lasting protection to community gardens.
- Encourage the establishment of new community gardens and encourage other non-profit organizations and groups, such as CDCs, to become garden owners or partners with a public agency owner.

Analysis of Needs

- Engage private multifamily residential housing and low and moderate housing owners in the development of community gardens on their property.
- Develop more public support for land trusts through resources and training on their structure and organization.
- Continue to evaluate community gardens as candidate sites in the City's Open Space Acquisition Program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop a defined process to secure and manage long-term community gardens through the coordination of public, non-profit, and community resources. Develop mechanisms for long-lasting protection while allowing for flexibility to respond to future needs should community gardening interest wane in particular areas.
- Establish efficient processes by which public agencies, non-profit groups such as CDCs, and multi-service centers can become community garden owners.
- Make private multifamily residential housing owners aware of opportunities to acquire land for community gardens to provide financial and health benefits for their residents.
- Assess needs for new community gardens and new models for community garden types.
- Evaluate opportunities for incorporating community garden space on public recreational land through the appropriate agency's capital redevelopment process.
- Encourage the creation of more small land trusts in order to hold, own, and manage land for community garden use.

Maintenance and Support

Community gardeners, as volunteers, manage most day-to-day maintenance and operations within the 175 individual community gardens. Training for maintenance skills on both public and private land is also provided by non-profit organizations such as BNAN. In addition, City agencies such as the Parks Department and the Public Works Department contribute to this effort.

Maintenance activities are, therefore, spread among both gardeners, garden support groups and garden owners. Technical assistance and education from organizations such as BNAN, help small garden groups to accomplish realistic maintenance goals. Larger or more complex needs such as waste removal, utilities,

Analysis of Needs

emergency repairs and delivery of compost, soil, woodchips, or manure are best addressed with a scale of support represented by the Parks Department, Public Works Department, and the Water and Sewer Commission. The importance of public sector maintenance support is critical to the success of the community gardens across Boston and needs immediate attention by City agencies

GOALS

- Reinforce and systematize basic maintenance services to community gardens citywide.
- Encourage environmentally sound and efficient gardening practices such as composting and water conservation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage materials recycling, including composting, by the gardens, garden support entities, and public agencies. Build on city mandate for restaurant composting to increase the availability of low cost local compost/soil.
- Continue removal of seasonal clean-up trash by the Parks Department and expedite a program for the Public Works Department to include such items in its regular contracted waste removal process, so that garden waste is picked up as part of residents' trash pickup.
- Continue to provide and deliver compost – with the compost tested annually for possible contaminants – to community gardens.

Capital Investment

Building a garden can be a process that radically transforms an area from a derelict wasteland into a source of pleasure and pride. A garden encourages neighbors to be outdoors, to talk with each other, and to get involved. A garden that is built by a community will reflect its spirit – the uniqueness of each site, the characteristics of the larger community, and the talents and efforts of the individuals involved.

Capital items such as water systems, soil enhancement, and equipment are essential elements in the life of a community garden. Investing in new gardens or improving existing ones may be the first step toward investment in other neighborhood facilities.

Analysis of Needs

Areas of potential need for capital funding encompass land (discussed above in “Acquisition and Protection”), initial garden construction, and ongoing re-investments:

Water	Install hook-ups, including meters and backflow prevention devices; upgrade and repair watering systems.
Development	Design services for a community-determined plan for the garden infrastructure; contractor, engineering, technical assistance, and project management services needed to build infrastructure; programs to train new gardeners and establish long-term maintenance strategies.
Materials	Supplies and hardware necessary to construct and sustain a garden.
Equipment	Tools for initial construction but more crucially, the hoes, rakes, shovels and other tools needed for day-to-day gardening.

GOALS

- Develop permanent, rolling funding stream for capital investments in new and renewing community gardens.
- Reduce the capital costs of developing community gardens by encouraging the co-development of community gardens with residential, institutional, and other developments.
- Support ongoing funding from the US DHUD Community Development Block Grant Program for the Grassroots Program.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide financial support for ongoing community garden capital assessments.
- Continue to earmark through DND’s Grassroots program a substantial portion of federal Community Development Block Grant funds for development of community gardens.
- Work with gardening organizations, along with appropriate public and private sector representatives, to help enable local garden groups to plan and pay for water system installations, upgrades, and subsequent water charges themselves.
- Encourage a streamlined process for the engineering and permitting of water line construction at community gardens by non-profits. Pair this with more research and cost assessment of onsite water retainage systems.

Analysis of Needs

- Develop a marketing campaign to local nonprofits on the virtues of including community gardens in their development plans.

Education, Training, and Programming

Community gardens have both a great need for and the substantial promise of education and training that will ultimately enhance their communities. Appropriate educational programs can assist gardeners of all ages in a mutual quest to grow nutritious food, beautify neighborhoods through site improvement, and manage gardens equitably.

Several grassroots organizations that pursue goals directly or indirectly related to nourishing community gardens are already in place.

The Master Urban Gardener Program (MUG) offered by BNAN, meets many of these community garden education and training needs. The program includes 30 hours of classroom instruction, discussions and hands-on demonstrations of gardening skills that range from plant propagation to establishing community garden rules. Those who complete the MUG Program agree to give back at least 30 hours of garden volunteer time. Since MUG was initiated, over 500 gardeners have completed the program. They have, in turn, generated more than 150,000 hours of volunteer time for Boston's community gardens.

The annual Boston Gardeners Gathering – meeting for 38 years – provides an opportunity for many gardeners to attend workshops and learn from each other. Northeastern University has become a valuable community gardening resource through offering classrooms and technical support for the MUG program and also hosting the Gardeners Gathering on its campus.

The Food Project operates two “urban farms” in Boston to develop youth leadership skills where produce is raised for city markets and city youth are trained and utilized in all phases of growing food.

Since 2011, when the Earthworks organization closed its doors, BNAN has taken over the management of the Urban Orchard Project in conjunction with the City's Grow Boston Greener program and support from MA DCR. The Urban Orchard Project

Analysis of Needs

establishes and cares for productive fruit-bearing plantings in undeveloped open spaces, schoolyards, housing developments, and other sites which integrate community gardening with fruit, berry, and nut growing.

The ReVision House in Dorchester is a shelter for homeless young women and their children. Part of their program includes an urban micro-farm that grows a wide variety of food crops on three reclaimed lots totaling one acre for shelter residents, sale to the public, and to restaurants. Internships provide training to shelter residents and local students in hands-on gardening skills.

Community gardens can also lead to neighborhood efforts beyond the garden gate. Leadership development training is the basis of the MUG Program and community support activities of BNAN and its member organizations. Gardeners are increasingly being encouraged to provide greening projects, education, food donations, and other services to their neighborhoods.

GOALS

- Continue to form partnerships with and provide resources to organizations such as BNAN and its member non-profit organizations to further training.
- Support training programs in landscape skills, gardening, and leadership to promote both the proper uses of materials and environmental awareness.
- Continue the efforts of the Boston Garden Council, a gardener-operated advocacy, information, networking, and awareness organization working to strengthen community gardens.
- Enhance skills, experience, and confidence of gardeners as open space advocates, community planners, and stewards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a broad-based advisory group to strengthen, expand, and coordinate with the environmental education efforts for children and youth in all areas of Boston.
- Develop expanded opportunities for field trips, hands-on training, environmental education, and awareness for the Boston Youth Fund.
- Continue to support the annual Gardeners Gathering and the Boston Garden Council, both of which strengthen the network of community gardeners citywide and highlight urban gardening techniques.

Analysis of Needs

- Support BNAN's Master Urban Gardener (MUG) program and other initiatives that provide leadership training for community gardeners and include current leaders as resources.

Management

Efficient management of community gardens comes from the strong leadership of coordinators who are typically responsible for most garden-wide functions. Leadership, however, must empower gardeners rather than create dependency. It is essential to the creation and continued existence of such leadership that there be strong outreach and support from a network of public and non-profit agencies.

The preferred management structure is a leadership team that includes a liaison/contact who collects plot fees, calls for services, and coordinates clean-ups and special efforts.

As noted in an earlier section, BNAN's MUG Program now addresses many of these concerns. Coursework includes classes related to garden coordinators, their various roles, and how they can create leadership teams to better accomplish the multiple tasks involved with managing a community garden open space.

GOALS

- Identify strong leadership in gardens and increase the percentage of gardeners involved in garden leadership and maintenance.
- Sustain the network of agencies and community organizations committed to the support of community gardens as a permanent part of the city's open space.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support and expand programs such as the MUG Program that develop leaders and formalize a support network among them on both a citywide and neighborhood basis.
- Support 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.
- Provide weather-resistant bulletin boards within each community garden to facilitate the dissemination of information

Analysis of Needs

pertinent to garden management and for general informational purposes as well as a place to display BNAN's list of Good Gardening Practices.

Productivity

The influx of immigrants from gardening and farming cultures along with others of lesser means results in many people turning to gardening as a vital source of nutrition for their families. Garden plots in the city are generally small and there are not enough to meet the demand from new gardeners each year. Thus, only by increasing productivity can more food be made available to more people.

Another issue related to productivity is soil condition: often it is shallow, lacking in organic matter, and must be tested for lead and other pollutant toxicity. There is also a lack of topsoil to compensate for erosion and years of intense growing and the necessary organic matter is either unavailable or too expensive for most gardeners.

GOALS

- Develop and implement an educational program that emphasizes safe, low-cost intensive gardening techniques.
- Provide materials and equipment that will increase productivity.
- Reduce the capital costs of developing community gardens by supporting key elements as primary city infrastructure such as water lines and compost/soil.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Design new gardens and redesign older ones to promote intensive production of food.
- Deliver tested compost to gardens annually where significant erosion has occurred or enhancement is needed. Build on city mandate for restaurant composting to increase the availability of low cost local compost/soil.
- Educate gardeners on organic gardening methods, closer spacing, improved varieties, spot placement of fertilizer, advantages of mulching and compost making, use of season extenders and preventive measures, and prompt action for pest control.

Analysis of Needs

- Support non-profit organizations such as BNAN and its member organizations to create demonstration gardens at locations throughout the city, emphasizing safe, low-cost intensive gardening techniques.
- Educate gardeners to eliminate the use of pesticides and herbicides for the good of the public, the environment, and their own health.

Resource Development

The mosaic of support for community gardens is broad and complex, combining government, voluntary, and private support for maintenance, materials, labor, and special projects. The need exists to further develop this support network so as to achieve all the goals of the community gardening system.

GOALS

- Develop, through the initiative of garden support agencies and organizations, private/public partnerships and expanded private financial support to assist community garden programs, special initiatives, and vocational training efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to commit substantial portions of DND's Grassroots Program for community garden land development by non-profit organizations. Maintain DND planning for Grassroots program grants as a public/private process involving neighborhood residents and garden support entities.
- Develop sources of low-level funding as a means for providing grants to community groups for community gardens.