
Open Space Plan 2008-2014

Section 7

Analysis of Needs

**Section 7.3.2 Open Space Systems
Management
COMMUNITY
GARDENS**

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Section 7.3.2: Open Space Systems Management COMMUNITY GARDENS

INTRODUCTION

Boston has more than 175 community gardens. Not many decades ago, they numbered a handful. The growth of community gardens across the city demonstrates a strong public 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. Many began as food-producing plots used by people of limited means but have grown to serve as important social and educational centers for gardeners, their families, and neighbors. More 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. 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 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.

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 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

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varied gardens, approximately 6,000 families 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 managed by homeless shelters, rehabilitation centers, housing developments, senior centers, and day care centers, as well as neighborhood residents. The vast number 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.



- Community Gardens
- Other Open Space





City of Boston
Community Gardens
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Prepared by the Design & Construction Unit
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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 across the country that still 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 the Revival Program resulted in 30 new community gardens during the 1970s. In 1976, Boston Urban Gardeners was founded to further the interests of gardening groups. Thanks to these many public and private non-profit garden support and neighborhood groups, 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 (BNAF)—now known as Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN)—purchased and secured 16 of the Revival Gardens from the City of Boston. The South End/Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust (SELROSLT) was established and formalized between 1989 and 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 eight parcels of community gardens and pocket parks owned by the BRA. Since the Land Trust’s establishment, the Berkeley Street Community Garden has been added to its inventory of permanently protected space.

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The Parks and Recreation Department – with funding assistance from the Environment Department – started and administers a Seed Grant Program (originally called the Community Garden Small Grant Program), funding smaller-scale capital improvements to community gardens such as fence repairs, tree trimming, new toolboxes or bulletin boards, and the like. In the first six years of the grant program, nearly \$50,000 has gone to some 130 gardens and green areas.

To address continuing concerns for ownership, investment and support, Garden Futures was formed in 1994 by several citywide and neighborhood wide community gardening organizations. From 1995 to 1996, these groups collectively undertook a study of their 60 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.

In 2001, BNAF and Garden Futures merged to become the Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN), a collaborative of 11 nonprofit organizations that own and manage nearly 100 community gardens. BNAN provides networking, education, and advocacy services. The member organizations as garden owners provide insurance, water system maintenance, capital improvements, fund-raising, and other support to the gardeners.

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, and the Parks Department, which owns six community gardens within public parkland. The Department of Neighborhood Development (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

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outreach through its Community Garden Liaison and its 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 channels 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 \$2.3 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. Along with continuing to support the City's community gardens, the Grassroots Program also assisted in the creation of neighborhood green spaces such as the Crawford Street amphitheatre in Roxbury and the Shawmut Station Corridor Garden in Dorchester. The Grassroots Program also worked on collaborative projects with other City agencies. A new intergenerational community garden was created at Roxbury's Madison Park High School in collaboration with Madison Park Development Corporation. In addition, community-oriented improvements were funded for the Boston Housing Authority's Cathedral and South Street housing developments. In total, over 35 projects for community gardens and green spaces were assisted by the Grassroots Program from 2002-2006.

Through an open Request for Proposals process, the Grassroots Program also conveyed property to nonprofit grantees. The Boston Natural Areas Network received land for six gardens in Roxbury, Dorchester and Jamaica Plain. In the sub-neighborhood of Fields Corner in Dorchester, the Colonel Daniel Marr Boys and Girls Club and VietAID were awarded properties for their new community gardens. The Roxbury Hill Association received land for their community amphitheatre and backyard.

In addition, the Grassroots Program worked on initiatives within the Department of Neighborhood Development such as the low-allergen tree and shrub requirement for the Neighborhood Housing Division's Healthy Home design standards. In association with DND's Homeworks Program and the Urban Ecology Institute, the

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Grassroots Program helped create an ecological landscape program for the City of Boston's homeowners. These free workshops, held at various public libraries on Saturday mornings, provide residents with instruction on how to create low-maintenance, environmentally friendly yards and gardens. Finally, the state provides some resources to urban community gardeners. The Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture facilitates the establishment of farmers' markets. The University of Massachusetts Extension Service in Amherst offers some technical assistance, such as soil testing, to gardeners.

Private and Non-Profit Ownership and Support

Today nearly 30 non-profit organizations own from one to more than 35 community gardens each; more than half of the Boston community garden inventory. Over the past 20 years, these non-profit organizations have raised some \$15 million in private and public funds to construct and renovate gardens in conjunction with individuals and community groups. Up to an estimated \$5 million in additional funds are needed to meet the current capital needs. They have also constructed gardens in conjunction with individuals and community groups.

Among these organizations, BNAN stands out for its longevity and ability to adjust to changing circumstances and opportunities. It supports and owns community gardens and advocates for new parks and urban wilds, particularly in lower income areas. In 2006, BNAN and the Trustees of Reservations joined forces to help sustain the current levels of support for community gardens while planning for future growth.

Maintenance support and technical information for gardens and gardeners are ongoing needs. A consortium of agencies and voluntary efforts continues to support community gardens.

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THE NEXT FIVE 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 five 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 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.
- Enhance skills, experience, and confidence of gardeners as open space advocates, community planners, and stewards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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- Develop sources of financial support for community-based organizations to be able to assume long-term responsibility for maintaining community gardens.

Acquisition and Protection

Great strides have been made to secure established community garden lands in Boston through purchase by non-profit organizations.

Yet some community gardens, owned privately or by the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, remain unprotected or threatened by development. 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.

Mayor Thomas M. Menino, a childhood gardener and longtime supporter of urban gardens, has given a boost to community ownership in the years since he became mayor with transfers of permanent ownership for more than 40 gardens on City property to non-profit associations.

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.
- Continue to evaluate community gardens as candidate sites in the 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 processes by which public agencies, non-profit groups such as community development corporations (CDCs), and multi-service centers can become community garden owners.
- Assess needs for new community gardens.
- Evaluate opportunities for incorporating community garden space on public recreational land through the appropriate agency's capital redevelopment process.

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Maintenance and Support

Community gardeners manage most day-to-day maintenance and operations within nearly 175 individual community gardens. Maintenance support on both public and private land is also provided by non-profit organizations such as the Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN) and the South End/Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust (SELROSLT). 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 and garden support groups. Technical assistance and education from organizations such as SELROSLT for neighborhood-specific needs and BNAN as an umbrella group, help small garden groups to accomplish realistic maintenance goals. Larger or more complex needs such as waste removal, utilities, 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 to the success of the community gardens across Boston cannot be over-stressed.

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.
- 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.

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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.

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, technical, and project management services needed to build infrastructure; develop programs to train new gardeners and establish long-term maintenance strategies.
Materials	All the 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.
Maintenance	Develop a plan for the infrastructure and common areas.

GOALS

- 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.
- Seek long-term funding for the Seed Grant Program. This will continue an important effort that enables gardeners to acquire vital tools, supplies, and services not available through other grant programs.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Act upon, where feasible, the findings of BNAN's 2003 "Strategic Plan for Boston's Community Gardens."
- 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. Support Grassroots' proposed remediation program (currently known as "Garden Renaissance").
- 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.

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 and productive.

The Master Urban Gardener Program (MUG) initiated by Garden Futures (now BNAN) ten years ago, meets many of these community garden education and training needs. The program includes 40 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 40 hours of garden volunteer time. Since MUG was initiated, 250 gardeners have completed the program. They have, in turn, generated more than 10,000 hours of volunteer time for Boston's community gardens.

The annual Boston Gardeners Gathering—meeting for more than 30 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 hosts the Gardeners Gathering on its campus.

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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.

EarthWorks Projects is another community-based organization that includes education and training programs that work in partnership with neighborhood groups and schools to build ecological awareness and community. Among its efforts are the Urban Orchard Project, which 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 for shelter residents, for sale to the public, and to restaurants, on three reclaimed lots totaling one acre. 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 Boston Community Garden Council, a gardener-operated advocacy, information, networking and awareness organization, working to strengthen community gardens.

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.

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- 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 Community Garden Council, both of which strengthen the network of community gardeners citywide and highlight urban gardening techniques.

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 (see above) that develops leaders and formalizes 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.

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- Provide weather-resistant bulletin boards within each community garden to facilitate the dissemination of information 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 the soil's 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.

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.
- 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.
- 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 minimize the use of pesticides and herbicides for the good of the public, the environment, and their own health.

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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.
- Pursue state and city resources for community gardens. Join the Menino Administration to advocate that the federal government increase, rather than decrease by 20% as had occurred since 2001, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) allocations to the City of Boston, which helps support the Grassroots Program. Support efforts to again fund Massachusetts Cooperative Extension community gardening programs.
- Continue Park Partners, the Community Garden Seed Grant Program, and other sources of low-level funding as a means for providing grants to community groups for specific open space improvement projects, including community gardens and neighborhood programming.