



Memorandum

To: Climate Action Plan Steering Committee
From: Kelly Flynn, Sustainability Intern
CC: Common Council Members
Date: April 27, 2021
Re: **Community Garden Recommendations**

A goal in the City of La Crosse's 2009 *Strategic Plan for Sustainability* is to "increase the number of community gardens, including establishing a garden at City Hall and to increase the amount of food grown within the City". Community gardens have become a successful tool in promoting a local, healthy diet, increasing food security, and fostering a sense of community in neighborhoods across the country. Gardening also has the potential to reduce the city's greenhouse gas emissions. Meals in the United States can travel about 1,500 miles to get from their source to consumer. Shipping food over long distances emits more greenhouse gases than getting food grown locally. Community gardens would contribute to the city's goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2050 while promoting community health and environmental education.

While many residents are able to garden in their own yard, others—including renters and residents with small yards—could benefit from the fertile soil and camaraderie of community gardens. La Crosse has two community gardens and seven school gardens run by non-profit organizations. In 2020, the City launched its Victory Garden program to increase food security and engage the community while it struggles through the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Best practices at these gardens and successful strategies from other cities' community gardens will serve as the foundation of this research and recommendations.

This memorandum covers research from twelve cities on how they promote community gardens and urban agriculture. It reviews municipal zoning ordinances, education and outreach initiatives, and community garden programs of four Wisconsin cities and eight other cities across the U.S. To conclude, this memo recommends SMART goals for consideration in the upcoming Climate Action Plan. Goals will consider number and size of community gardens, number of users, amount of funding, and program leadership.

Urban Agriculture Zoning Practices

One common strategy to encourage urban agriculture is flexible zoning requirements. Cities can remove barriers in their code and add language which confirms which urban agriculture practices [are allowed and where](#). Nearly all case study communities adopted definitions and standards for community gardens. Seattle, WA and Kansas City, MO added urban agriculture ordinances allowing people to sell food that

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they've grown at their homes. In addition, [Seattle](#) clearly defines "community garden" and "urban farm", and only requires permits for urban farms over 4,000 square feet. Kansas City established [Urban Agricultural Zones](#), which offer tax and stormwater incentives for growers in blighted areas.

Another zoning practice employed by local governments is to specify where and how public land can be used for urban agriculture. For example, [Milwaukee](#) allows community gardens in institutional and park zoning districts. Its municipal code also lays out the requirements for obtaining a [Community Garden Permit](#) and the associated process for approval or denial. The urban agriculture zoning practices of the case study communities can be found in Appendix 1, and example zoning definitions are in Appendix 2.

Outreach and Education

Outreach and education are a critical piece to several of the case study community garden programs, including Madison and Milwaukee, and Bloomington, IN. At a most basic level, they serve as a way to put the municipal code in a public-friendly context, digitally and physically. Beyond that, they can collect resources in one place for residents to easily access, or even host classes and workshops.

The City of Madison's [website](#) includes educational materials for residents hoping to participate in a community garden or plant in their own yard. Most notably, it has a [brochure](#) outlining landscaping and planting requirements that comply with the noxious weed ordinance, so residents can plant edible, native, and pollinator friendly terraces and yards. The [website](#) provides guidance for navigating the edible landscapes permit process in the [Edible Landscaping Ordinance](#) as well.

Milwaukee partners with local nonprofit Groundwork Milwaukee to educate gardeners and promote community outreach. This collaboration produced the [Milwaukee Urban Garden Community Handbook](#) on how to start, run, or work with a community garden. It outlines how to identify a suitable garden location and provides logistical support for navigating the construction and permitting process, establishing leadership, and maintain the garden. In addition, Milwaukee has one-stop shop [community garden page](#) for any frequently asked questions. It lists contacts for local nonprofits that are involved in community garden efforts and outlines the process for starting and maintaining a community garden on city-owned or private land.

Bloomington has three community gardens and encourages the use of these gardens by providing resources, funding, and classes for residents who want to rent a community garden plot. Its Park & Recreation Dept. hosts classes including [Community Gardener 101](#), [Guidelines to Growing Organic Plants](#), [Building Better Soil](#), and more. The City partners with a nonprofit organization called Bloomington Community Orchard to host [events and workshops](#) on things like pruning, nut grove planting, medicinal/edible herbs, tree grafting. These partnerships can allow for greater participation and expanded resources available to residents.

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Program Management

In order to encourage community gardens, many local governments have allowed gardens to be built on city-owned land and vacant lots. Two ways that cities have gone about permitting gardens on public land include through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or a garden lease program. Eau Claire entered into an [MOU](#) with the Community Garden Network to lay out the roles and responsibilities of each party and develop a management plan for their community garden. These gardens are then managed by neighborhood associations who recruit volunteers for the day-to-day maintenance of the garden.

Madison, Minneapolis, MN, and St. Louis, MO, all employ garden lease programs. St. Louis currently leases over 500 lots for community gardens throughout the city. Its [program](#) allows residents to lease Land Reutilization Authority (LRA) lots for a 5-year period for \$1.00 per year. This program leases lots that are currently not for sale because they are needed for larger, planned developments, but can be used as community gardens in the meantime. The garden lease is a win-win. The lessee benefits by receiving site control and being allowed to garden, and the City benefits by alleviating the heavy workload of its maintenance crew and Forestry Division. Further examples of community garden programs in cities can be found in Appendix 3.

Recommendations

The Climate Action Plan Steering Committee could strengthen its support for community gardens by including SMART Goals in the Climate Action Plan for flexible zoning for urban agriculture, educational resources, and garden lease program. A SMART Goal for zoning could be to have the Environmental Planner draft an ordinance to define and codify some kind of food growing permission in every zoning district by within six months. Stretch goals could be to create ordinances that allow on-site sale of produce by right in all districts, and that regulate food growing on city land.

An education and outreach SMART goal to follow could be to have the Environmental Planner create a user-friendly guide walking residents through the different processes as applicable within one year. This would include creating a webpage hub for the materials. A stretch goal could be to have the Parks & Recreation Department host at least three classes or workshops annually for residents to learn how to start and care for a garden, whether it be in their yard on part of a community garden.

Lastly, a SMART goal for a garden lease program could be to increase the number of community gardens in La Crosse by 2030, by leasing community garden space in seven parks and on three vacant lots. This could be accomplished through a direct lease or through a MOU where a community organization has members or volunteers maintain the gardens. By reducing the amount of transportation required to get our food, La Crosse can help reduce its carbon footprint. While reducing the potential impacts on the climate, local food can also help surviving climate change by increasing local resiliency.

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Appendix 1: Zoning Practices

- [Kansas City, MO](#) defines home garden and community garden; offers tax and stormwater incentives for growers or vendors in blighted areas; and allows sale or donation of whole, uncut fresh food and/or horticultural products grown in home gardens, community gardens, and on land managed under a CSA model. [The Redevelopment Ordinance](#) establishes a land bank which manages community gardens.
- [Seattle, WA](#) allows community gardens, urban farms and farmers' markets in almost all zones; allows people to sell food that is grown on the lots where they live; and requires no permits if an urban farm is less than 4,000 square feet and accessory to the residential use.
- [Austin, TX](#) has definitions that including aquaponics, horticulture, and indoor crop production; its [Zoning Use Summary Table](#) clearly shows where urban agriculture is permitted.
- [Milwaukee, WI](#) allows community gardens in institutional and park spaces, and lays out the [requirements](#) for obtaining a [Community Garden Permit](#).
- [Minneapolis, MN](#) expanded urban agriculture to all zoning districts, and has a [Garden Lease Program](#) for community or market gardens to lease to grow food on city-owned vacant lots.
- [Madison, WI](#) permits growing and farming of edible landscapes on eligible city-owned land.
- [Baltimore, MD](#) includes new use categories and standards for community gardens and urban farms
- [Appleton, WI](#) establishes baseline requirements for community garden implementation, and describes requirements for the development of an Urban Farm.

Appendix 2: Zoning Definitions

- **Home garden**
 - A garden maintained by one or more individuals who reside in a dwelling unit located on the subject property. - [Kansas City, MO](#)
- **Community garden**
 - An area of land managed and maintained by a group of individuals to grow and harvest food and/or horticultural products for personal or group consumption or for sale or donation. A community garden area may be divided into separate garden plots for cultivation by one or more individuals or may be farmed collectively by members of the group. A community garden may include common areas (e.g., hand tool storage sheds) maintained and used by the group. - Kansas City, MO
 - A parcel of land where plants are grown and harvested by a non-profit organization or group of individuals. A community garden grows produce and ornamental plants for use by the non-profit and individuals who operate and maintain the garden. - [Milwaukee, WI](#)
 - An open-space area that is maintained by more than 1 household; and is used for traditional community-garden activities of planting, cultivating, harvesting, maintaining, and distributing fruits, flowers, vegetables, or ornamental plants. It may include accessory sheds, gazebos, and pergolas; temporary greenhouses and similar structures to extend the

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growing season; and the provision of space for related open-air recreation, active or passive, but not including playground equipment. - [Baltimore, MD](#)

- **Urban farm**

- A use in which plants, and products derived from them, are grown and sold on the same lot or off site. - Seattle, WA
- The use of a site that can consist of multiple contiguous parcels that is at least one acre in size cultivated primarily for the sustainable production of agricultural products to be sold for profit and may provide agricultural education activities, such as volunteer programs, farm tours, youth programs, and farming classes. - Austin, TX
- An establishment where food or ornamental crops are grown or processed to be sold or donated that includes, but is not limited to, outdoor and indoor growing operations, vertical farms, aquaponics, aquaculture, hydroponics and rooftop farms. - Minneapolis, MN
- An open-space area that is maintained by more than 1 household and, in addition to other uses permitted in a community garden, may include the keeping of livestock and animals; one temporary farm stands; and the receipt and free redistribution of organic waste material for composting. - Baltimore, MD

- **Market garden**

- The use of a site that is less than one acre in size cultivated primarily for the sustainable production of agricultural products to be sold for profit and may provide agricultural education activities. Agricultural education activities include volunteer programs, farm tours, youth programs and farming classes. - Austin, TX

Appendix 3: Community Garden Programs

- Seattle, WA's Department of Neighborhoods' manages its [P-Patch Program](#). The Office of Sustainability and Environment implements the 5-year [Food Action Plan](#).
- [Berkeley, CA's](#) General Plan encourages community gardens in its Open Space Element Policy OS-8 (Community Gardens) and Environmental Management Element Policy EM-34 (Local Food Systems); a Climate Action Plan goal is to increase access to healthy and affordable foods for the community by supporting efforts to build more complete and sustainable local food production and distribution system.
- Eau Claire, WI's [Community Parks Association](#) acts as the fiscal agent for the Forest Street community garden. Residents can [rent out plots](#) for some of the gardens.
- Madison, WI has about [half of its gardens on city-owned land](#) and works with the Gardens Network by providing funding and logistical support.