

Attachment E

The Community Gardens of Portland, Maine

Overview and Recommendations

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The city of Portland owns 10 active community gardens. All were built through the collaborative efforts of neighborhood associations, non-profit organizations, the city, and hundreds of volunteers. This essay will briefly outline some of the history, challenges and successes of the city gardens, then conclude with recommendations for ensuring these gardens continue to grow, thrive, and benefit the Portland community.

The Gardens

The first garden was built in 1995 on Valley Street at the base of the Western Promenade. It has 42 plots and is adjacent to a dog park. The eight plot Clark Street Community garden and 52 plot North Street Community Gardens were built in 1998. In 2000 the 33 plot Payson Park Community garden was formed. The 28 plot Riverton Garden, started by neighbors in 2009, was acquired by the City of Portland in 2014. The Brentwood Farms Community Garden, consisting of 65 individual and 20 communal plots, was formed by residents in 2010 and acquired by the City in 2014. In 2008 Peaks Island residents formed a 20 plot community garden also taken under management by the city in 2014. The 30 plot Boyd Street garden was formed in 2009 as a partnership between the residents of Kennedy Park, Cultivating Community and the City of Portland. The 60 plot Casco Bay garden was built in 2016 as a partnership between Resilience Hub, Cultivating Community and the City of Portland and a collectively run Common Share garden was complete along-side it the following year. These gardens were built using permaculture techniques and donated labor and materials. The Libbytown Community Garden was built in the fall of 2016. The 42 plot garden was constructed through a partnership between the Libbytown Neighborhood Association, the City of Portland, Cultivating Community, and the Resilience Hub.

The Garden Program

The city began to establish a vision and plan for a city-wide community garden program in 2013 through the Portland Urban Garden Task Force, a subcommittee of the [Mayor's Initiative for a Healthy and Sustainable Food System](#), Additional recommendations were made by the [Portland](#)

[Open Space Committee](#) in 2015 and 2016. Together they identified several challenges and needs facing gardens, along with specific recommendations to address them. They included:

- A long wait list for garden plots (two years or more).
- Need to identify space for additional gardens.
- Need for funding for maintenance and expansion.
- Challenge of providing equitable access.
- Need for clearer guidelines and policies.
- Need for more data “describing who in Portland, besides those on the waiting list for a community plot, would grow their own food if they had access to land.” ([11/8/13](#))
- A challenge of resolving the “discrepancy between city based and community-based gardening initiatives.” ([7/13/2013](#)).

Recommendations to address these needs and challenges included the following:

- Eliminate the wait list by adding more gardens (including the possible use of part of the Riverside Golf Course for “urban farming.” ([1/18/13](#)))
- Achieve equity of access by prioritizing locating of additional gardens in lower income neighborhoods and offering sliding scale fees ([3/15/2013](#))
- Increase accessibility by assuring there are community gardens within a 10-minute walk of all residents [5/6/201](#)
- Streamline garden management by hiring a “community garden coordinator.” (At the time Riverton School, Brentwood and Peaks Island gardens were managed by neighborhood organizations, while Valley Street, Clark Street, North Street, and Payson Park, were managed by the city).
- Find new ways of engaging residents in the creation and management of new gardens.
- Outreach and educational initiatives such as “gleaning/foraging tours,” “cultivating relationships through food,” and “combining art and growing food.” ([3/15/2013](#))
- Encourage multi-generational use.
- Increase self-growing in the city (backyard and container growing)
- Soil remediation programs and education ([11/8/13](#))
- Develop school garden education program
- Promote engaged citizen stewardship

Implementation of recommendations

In 2014 the Urban Agriculture Sub-Committee received a grant for \$15,000 from the Harvard Pilgrim Fund which financed the construction of the [Casco Bay and Common Share gardens](#) located on Portland’s Eastern Promenade. This grant was “intended for low-income and

moderate-income individuals.” \$2000 was set aside to establish a fund to subsidize membership fees for low-income residents ([7/25/2014](#))

In 2016 a [\\$13,500 Community Development Block Grant](#) was awarded to the City of Portland’s Department of Public Works Department. This grant, also intended for “low- and moderate-income individuals” and to “create strong, safe, accessible and vibrant neighborhoods,” funded the building of the [Libbytown Community Garden](#).

Rather than hire a garden coordinator, as recommended by the committees, the City of Portland contracted with the local nonprofit [Cultivating Community](#) to manage the gardens and the garden waiting list. (It is unclear how or why this decision was made as minutes of relevant meetings are missing from the City of Portland Website). Cultivating Community then hired a “Urban Agriculture Specialist ” who, in addition to managing the waiting list, organized educational workshops, community meetings, a fall and spring community potluck, and monthly garden newsletters.

Cultivating Community increased outreach to low-income and ethnic minority residents to inform them of the garden program. According to a 08/2020 Facebook posting by the organization “Low-income participation increased from 7% to 30% since 2014.” In addition, it asserted that “Everyone registered as low income was offered garden space (in 2020) (with the exception of those waiting for Boyd St.).

In 2015 Cultivating Community completed a survey of gardeners in which many gardeners “expressed interest in having more say in (their) gardens and wanted to make sure that each garden’s uniqueness and ownership remained.” (Mailander, 8/12/15). As a result, a Lift360 grant was awarded to the city to provide training for community garden leaders in order to “elevate each garden’s autonomy and sense of community” and assure that “gardeners play an active role in making decisions about how their gardens run and what programming will be available.” (ibid.)

A Garden Coordinator Committee was formed in 2016 comprised of representatives of each garden. The committee was designated as the “advisory committee” and “governing body” of the community gardens by Cultivating Community. It was recognized that “each garden is different” and that “the level/form of communication” should be left to individual gardens to decide. (Meeting minutes 2/28/2017).

Accomplishments of the committee (in conjunction with staff from Cultivating Community) included writing and revising garden guidelines and applications, establishing a garden gleaning initiative, and developing a community garden mission statement. The Garden Leadership

Committee met every 6 months until September 10th, 2019, when Cultivating Community stopped scheduling them.

The urban agriculture specialist and the Executive Director of Cultivating Community left their positions in early 2019. As a result of these changes the garden program took a lower priority and has come to a near halt. Staff at Cultivating Community stated that they were stepping back re-evaluate its approach to the garden program. Oversight of the gardens was placed under a new director at the Parks and recreation Department.

Current challenges and needs

While some progress was made in increasing the total number of plots there continues to be a long waiting list for garden plots (Currently over 700 families are waiting an average 2 years for a plot). Yet despite the continued high demand for them many plots have gone unassigned or untended. Like abandoned property, this appeared to lead to an increase in thefts and rodents and resulted in a decrease in morale among gardeners and complaints from local residents.

While additional gardens have been contemplated, including on City land on Commercial Street near the old “Million Dollar Bridge,” the Deering Oaks Park near I-295, and the Riverside Golf Course, no new projects have moved forward since 2016.

There are ongoing issues with lack of communication among gardeners and with garden management. Cultivating Community adopted a policy in which it no longer provides a member list or contact information of garden members to each other. For a garden leader to contact a fellow gardener or schedule an event they are required to first contact Cultivating Community which is then supposed to relay the information back to the fellow gardener. In practice this has caused significant delays in communication, and often messages are not relayed at all. Not providing the member contact list has proved to be disempowering to the garden community by disrupting their ability to communicate.

Recommendations¹

Research [shows](#) that the most successful community gardens are self-governed. Therefore, any garden program should encourage and prioritize autonomy and self-governance. The City could empower the gardens by providing stipends to each garden to collectively purchase seeds, seedlings, compost and hay etc. An additional stipend could be provided to garden managers.

¹ Recommendations may not reflect the views of all Portland Community Agriculture Planning Stakeholders.

In order to self-govern community gardens require a means to communicate and to know who their fellow members are. A community garden member list (with preferred method of contact) is essential for self-organization, initiatives, and gardener to gardener support. When people sign up for a publicly owned community garden they are choosing to be part of a community. It should be understood that they are "opting in" to a certain level of shared responsibility, which includes being available to be contacted by other community members.

While the autonomy of individual gardens should be nurtured there should also be a means by which gardens share information and resources with each other and the wider community.

This can continue to be accomplished by restarting the garden coordinator meetings, or by establishing a "Friends of the Community Gardens" group, such as the community garden [friends group](#) in Portland, Oregon. Many cities have garden committees which follow standard committee rules and bylaws. Establishing a Portland Garden Committee would allow more oversight and integration into the city government.

The city might reconsider its prior recommendation to hire a garden coordinator to maintain the waiting list, provide garden management, work with individual garden leaders and community organizations, and organize and promote garden and food security related events.

Portland could place the community gardens under the oversight of another department such as the Department of Health and Human Services and/or the library. Emphasizing the health aspects of gardening would increase funding resources and promote the health aspects of gardening, while the library could provide information and organizational resources.

The city could create a health and sustainability resource Hub, featuring resources and events related to the production and distribution of healthy food. Such a website can also serve the broader goal of leveraging social capital by facilitating opportunities for community engagement and bridging and bonding community members. Portland's existing [community webpage](#) could build out from the current community webpage, or it could originate from or link to the Portland Citizen [Self Serve page](#).

As a web page example, the city of Burlington, Vermont maintains a robust [community support hub](#) on its city website featuring an array of community engagement activities promoting both individual and community health and well-being. Burlington maintains a separate [community gardens web page](#) offering a host of activities and resources for gardeners. The City funds a full-time Garden Coordinator to organize garden activities and administer the garden program.

The city of Seattle maintains a [community resource hub](#) with information and links to a verity of civic, cultural and recreational opportunities and events in the city. The city also features it's neighborhood based “[P-Patch Gardens](#),” in which each garden has its own unique guidelines and leadership structure, rather than being managed in a “top-down” hierarchical structure as in Burlington.

Thriving community gardens are indicators of a healthy and vibrant city. Research shows that their presence benefits a community in [multiple ways](#), including reducing crime, enhancing safety and security, raising property values, and increasing community engagement and interaction. Community gardens are places that facilitate both individual and community [health and well-being](#), the recovery of individual agency, and the construction of new forms of knowledge and [social participation and social inclusion](#). Community gardens can serve as common spaces where people of different demographics can come together as stewards of the land.

Recommendations Review

- Reduce the garden wait list and assure that all plots are assigned and active.
- Increase garden access and accessibility so that all residents are within a 10-minute walk and so that there are handicapped accessible and ADA compliant options.
- Promote equity by providing scholarships and outreach to low-income and disadvantaged residents. Prioritize building new gardens in low-income neighborhoods.
- Maintain an urban agriculture, health and sustainability resource hub
- Provide a platform for communication while assuring [digital equity](#).
- Nurture civic engagement and stewardship.
- Provide educational outreach and events promoting gardening
- Promote community and the arts through events, performances and installations.
- Promote diversity and multi-generational use
- Maintain data on demand and use of growing spaces
- Establish benchmarks towards achieving goals of increasing access and stewardship of growing spaces.