

Urban Agriculture

In a Nutshell

Urban agriculture is an innovative method of growing food crops and raising animals to cultivate locally produced fruit, vegetables, dairy and meat. The product of these farms is meant to be sold to others. If you want information on how to grow produce for your own consumption, please see our [Community Gardens page](#).

The “How To”

There are several community gardens or urban farms in the region which are always looking for more volunteers. Links to several of these farms can be found under the “Discover More” tab. The [University of Illinois Extension](#) and [University of Missouri Extension](#) are great resources for information on the region and for general gardening/farming techniques and practices. The Missouri Extension office has a great [toolkit](#) for community gardening best practices.

If you are looking to start your own urban farm, here are a few things to think about.

- Does your local municipality have ordinances governing urban farms? This information can be accessed by looking through city ordinances or contacting the city clerk. You should also ask if your city has land banks or land trusts set aside for urban farming.
- Water is one of the biggest barriers and expenditures to urban agriculture. Some municipalities offer discounted or free water. Call your city hall to find out. If there is no water line, be prepared to spend \$1,000-3,000 to install one. Add monthly water costs to your budget if you are unable to procure a free source.

If you’re looking to raise animals for harvest- i.e. bees, chickens, etc.- you need to consult your local municipality’s ordinances concerning livestock. You should also contact either the [Missouri](#) or [Illinois](#) extension offices for information on raising these animals.

The OneSTL tool [Community Gardens](#) maybe helpful if you are looking to start your own community garden.

Planning & Zoning

A few communities in the region have ordinances drawn up concerning urban agriculture. For instance, the [City of O’Fallon, MO](#) gives a very succinct definition of what agricultural is and what constitutes proper land use for agriculture. The [City of Alton, IL](#) has very specific language as to which farm animals are allowed within the city (in section 7-1-1), and another ordinance that specifically regulates chickens as pets (7-1-9).

Dollars & Cents

Individuals and communities wanting to invest in urban agriculture can really invest as much money as they

need and/or want to. Some of the cost that they will need to consider is the purchasing of land, equipment (including soil, fertilizer, tools, etc.), seeds/plants and water supply. [Missouri Extension](#) has a plethora of information related to garden size and specific amounts of tools and supplies needed.

There are many benefits to investing in an urban farm. An obvious benefit of a farm is that you no longer have to buy as many fruits and vegetables at the grocery store. Studies have shown that urban agricultural has numerous benefits ranging from increased social interaction to health benefits. For instance, one study found that over half of community gardeners met national recommendations for consumption of fruits and vegetables compared to only 25 % of non-gardeners. These and other benefits can be found in this study done by at the [University of California-Berkley](#). Another study from Fresno County, CA cites numerous other benefits, including the independence and self-reliance of growing your own produce.

A study by UMSL and Seed STL assesses the benefits of community gardens in the St. Louis region. The study showed substantial increases in property values in property bordering a community garden.

Measuring Success

[Sustainable South Sound](#) is a nonprofit focused on sustainability in the South Puget Sound region. One of the indicators on their [indicator research paper](#) is a measurement of locally-produced food (please reference page 4). The measurement is limited to sales from a local food market which has locally grown produce. This indicator could be used to measure the success of urban farms.

Discover More

The [MU Extension Community Gardening Toolkit](#) provides tools, templates and guidelines to get started.

The MU Extension [Urban Agriculture – Best Practices and Possibilities](#) report lays out an overview of urban agriculture best practices from across the country, with an emphasis on resources for Missouri communities.

Below are links to various urban farms in the region.

St. Louis City:

[Seed St. Louis](#) has information about several gardens in the City.

St. Louis County:

Community Action Agency of St. Louis County, Inc. manages [Seeds of Hope Farm and CSA](#).

Case Studies

City Seeds Urban Farm, Gateway Greening

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Description

Gateway Greening Inc. (GGI) is a St. Louis non-profit founded in 1984 to increase sources of affordable fresh food for inner city residents while addressing the increasing number of vacant lots. Over the past 29 years, GGI has expanded its efforts to achieve its mission of educating and empowering people to improve their communities through gardening and urban agriculture. GGI's programs rely on building partnerships to provide resources for citizen-managed open spaces in underserved neighborhoods and encourage better land use and healthier, safer communities. GGI programs are divided into four areas: Community Garden Program, Youth Garden Program, Urban Roots and City Seeds Urban Farm (CSUF).

Gateway Greening started City Seeds Urban Farm in 2005 with a Community Food Project Grant from the USDA. CSUF is an urban agriculture initiative providing job training and therapeutic horticulture to individuals who are homeless and underserved. A collaboration of several local organizations, CSUF produces and distributes affordable, healthy, locally grown produce. Now, a national model in job training for the green industry, the City Seeds program trains up to 100 unemployed veterans and individuals that may be dealing with homelessness, substance abuse, mental illness and recent-prison release in job skills, food production, therapeutic horticulture and life skills essential for self-sufficiency.

Homelessness, mental illness, addiction and recent prison release present a unique set of hurdles to overcome in order to reenter the competitive jobs market and society at large. This population is the most vulnerable even in the best of times. Unemployed veterans often face many of these obstacles as well. Job opportunities that nurture self-esteem, offer spiritual healing as well as the soft skills desired by employers are rarely found within a short distance of emergency shelters and service providers. Further, job training opportunities that are of relatively short duration for those of limited literacy, communication and math skills are also difficult to find. Of 1,460 persons estimated to be homeless in St. Louis, 66% report mental health or problems with substance abuse and 26% have acute illness (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, pneumonia or STDs)¹. These illnesses and addictions can significantly hinder one's ability to get and keep a job.

Today, City Seeds focuses on two programs, job training and therapeutic horticulture. Three 10-week employment (Go Green!) sessions operate each growing season serving 20-30 clients per class (April-October). This program focuses on teaching entry-level skills for the green industry to unemployed veterans while simultaneously maintaining farm production. Participants learn growing techniques in conjunction with lawn care, irrigation, hardscape, annuals & perennials, composting, pests & disease, etc. Employers are involved in hands-on field demonstrations, field trips and classroom instruction. A 200+ page manual, complete with pre/post tests and homework complement day-to-day work on the farm and field competencies. Each farm day, participants attend an hour outdoor class on one of the 24 topics covered.

CSUF is an outdoor learning laboratory, complete with 48 raised vegetable beds, multiple ornamental plantings, a dwarf fruit-tree orchard, rain garden, 4 beehives, native plantings, rainwater catch cistern, multiple hardscape and irrigation examples, herbs, educational lawn (native & conventional grasses), trees, shrubs,

berries, hawk platform, and harvest station. Additional training is provided on commercial mowing machinery, recycling and waste management and invasive species removal. Working field trips occur in each session at a municipal park, the Missouri Botanical Garden and GGI greenhouses to further diversify participant learning and exposing them to potential types of employment.

The therapeutic horticulture program serves clients overcoming homelessness, mental illness, chronic addiction and/or prison release. Two, 15- week therapeutic horticulture sessions teach these clients (10 individuals/session) how to grow food, improving the nutrition literacy of clients and build a strong connection to clients' recovery goals. The "12 Steps of Gardening," (similar to the 12 steps in Alcoholics Anonymous) nature journaling, field trips, therapeutic horticulture classes, maintaining personal beds and working collectively at City Seeds Urban Farm all contribute to each client's experience. These individuals also work at CSUF's booth at the Tower Grove Farmer's market, learning customer service and retail skills while selling the food they have worked hard to produce. Seeing the fruits of their labor firsthand at the market while also leading volunteers on-site further contributes to the transformative effect. Monthly cooking demonstrations teach nutrition and fresh food preparation while instilling a sense of community through a shared meal.

Both programs work toward food security in the greater St. Louis region and educate participants on our food system. An important reason these programs have been so successful is the sense of altruism that participants feel simply by being a participating individual in a program with such impact in the community. Annually,

CSUF produces over 10,000 lbs. of fresh, organic, local produce. Over 5,000 lbs. are provided to Food Outreach, another St. Louis non-profit providing nutritional support to individuals dealing with HIV/AIDS or cancer. 2,000 lbs. of produce are donated annually to local food banks, shelters and transitional housing facilities. 3,000 lbs. of produce are distributed via the City Seeds farmer's market booth, which provides an excellent training ground and outreach opportunity for therapeutic clients. Likewise, community education on workforce development, food production and the issues addressed at CSUF are a main focus of GGI's outreach efforts. Annually, GGI provides presentations, tours, and field trips to hundreds of individuals through CSUF.

An important aspect of both programs is volunteer involvement. Whether an individual or a large group, clients lead volunteers on-site. This leadership opportunity further solidifies client confidence and knowledge of the subject matter while improving the soft skills so important for employment success. Since 2006, almost 400 clients have benefitted from the program in the form of sobriety, sound mental health, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, housing or jobs. Over 50,000 lbs. of food has been distributed, and volunteers have contributed over 8500 hours of service. Since August of 2009, when the employment and therapeutic tracks were separated, 85% of employment graduates have been successfully placed in jobs.

Collaborative partnerships have made this project successful. Gateway Greening leads the project, directs all management and training at CSUF and program evaluation. St. Patrick Center facilitates client recruitment, case management and job placement efforts. Horstmann Brothers Landscaping provides specialized training in the form of hardscape, irrigation and equipment. Operation Food Search provides monthly cooking classes and food demos to educate clients on nutrition and fresh food preparation. Missouri Department of Transportation provides the land at no cost. Food Outreach purchases CSUF produce at wholesale cost and provides educational field trips to participants. St. Louis Master Gardeners provide volunteer help.

Cost \$0

Lessons Learned

- Identify a long term secure site
- Establishing a water line and irrigation system at the start would have greatly increased productivity
- Put extensive effort into client recruitment, always maintain a waiting list (as client turnover is consistently a challenge)
- Providing a client stipend is essential to attract clients and hold participants accountable
- Getting employers involved in the curriculum and training is key for quality and potential hiring of clients
- Paid staff is important, cannot rely solely on volunteers
- Good communication among project partners is essential
- In-kind donations are key
- Volunteers are vital