

The Multiple Benefits of Community Gardening

1. Municipal Costs

Community Gardens are economically beneficial to local governance:

- Developing and maintaining garden space is less expensive than parkland area, in part because gardens require little land and 80% of their cost is in labor (Saylor, 2005)
- Composting saves on land fill space, which saves the city and tax payers money
- Community gardens provide a place to retreat from the noise and commotion of urban environments, they attract people (including the 'creative class' of the new economy and small businesses) .
- Community gardens have been shown to actually increase property values in the immediate vicinity where they are located. In Milwaukee properties within 250 of gardens experienced a decline of \$24.77 with every foot and the average garden was estimated to add approximately \$9,000 a year to the city tax revenue (Bremer et al, 2003,p. 20; Chicago, 2003, p. 10; Sherer, 2006).
- Been and Voicu estimate that New York's "gross tax benefit generated by all community gardens over a 20-year period amounts to about \$563 million. Under the scenario in which the local government would have fully subsidized the garden provision [which is rarely the case], the city's total investment would have amounted to about \$83.5 million. Thus, the estimated net tax benefit would be, in the aggregate, about \$480 million or, per garden over \$750,000"(2006, p. 28).

2. "Pocket Parks"

- Community gardens add beauty to the community and heighten people's awareness and appreciation for living things. In Chicago survey this was the #1 reason given for the importance of community gardens – mentioned by 14.3% of respondents) while 83% of respondents felt that the garden has enhanced the beauty of the community (Chicago, 2003, p. 34)
- "A 1995 Regional Plan Association poll of individuals nationwide found that the major components of a satisfactory quality of life are safe streets and access to greenery and open spaces. In another survey, owners of small companies ranked recreation, parks, and open space as their highest priority in choosing a new location for a business"(Sherer, 2006, p.5).
- However, urban green spaces are unevenly distributed and access is extremely limited near low-income neighborhoods populated by minorities (including recent immigrants). For example, in "Los Angeles, white neighborhoods enjoy 31.8 acres of park space for every 1,000 people, compared with 1.7 acres in African-America neighborhoods and 0.6 in Latino neighborhoods" (Sherer, 2006, p.6).

3. Exercise

Gardens can be areas for recreation and exercise. According to the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, the "creation of or enhanced access to places for physical activity combined with informational outreach" produced a 48.4 percent increase in frequency of physical activity in addition to a 5.1 percent median increase in aerobic capacity, reduced body fat, weight loss, improved flexibility and an increase in perceived energy (as referenced in Sherer, 2006).

4. Improved Diets

- Studies (like the one conducted by Lackey and Associates) have shown that community gardeners and their children eat healthier, more nutrient rich diets than do non-gardening families (Bremer et al, 2003, p.54).
- Eating locally produced food reduces asthma rates, because children are able to consume manageable amounts of local pollen and develop immunities.
- Increasing the consumption of fresh local produce is one of the best ways to address childhood lead poisoning as well as their exposure to chemical fertilizers and pesticides (Bremer et al, 2003,p. 54; <http://www.cce.ufl.edu/past/commgardens/>).

5. Food Production

- Community gardens provide access to traditional produce or nutritionally rich foods that may otherwise be unavailable to low-income families and individuals
- Community gardens allow families and individuals without land of their own the opportunity to produce food. Oftentimes gardeners take advantage of the experiential knowledge of elders to produce a significant amount of food for the household.
- Urban agriculture is 3-5 times more productive per acre than traditional large-scale farming.
- Local agriculture conserves resources by shortening the commodity chain, saving on fuel demanding transportation and packaging (Bremer et al, 2003, p.23).
- From 1978-1989 \$8.9 million worth of produce was grown in Milwaukee community gardens (Bremer et al, 2003, p.22, 56).
- "In 1999, the fifteen New York gardens organized as the City Farms program of the organization Just Food grew close to 11,000 pounds of fresh vegetables and fruits. Nearly 50 percent was donated to nearby soup kitchens and food pantries (Just Food 1999 Summary Report, as cited by Englander, 2001, p. 14). The Fancy Flowers Community Association in the South Bronx alone produced 200 pounds of tomatoes and about 75 pounds of green and red peppers in 1999 (City Farmers: Tales from the Field, as cited by Englander, 2001, p. 14).

6. The Urban Ecosystem

Gardens help to improve the health of the city ecosystem by:

- Filter rainwater and helping to keep lakes, rivers, and groundwater clean (“Plants and the micro-organisms with which they symbiotically co-exist help to clean and filter water as it percolates through the soil”)
- Reduce soil erosion and runoff, which lessens flooding and saves the city money (Bremer et al, 2003, p. 50, 56; Sherer, 2006; tpl, 2004).
- Restore oxygen to the air and help reduce air pollution (Chicago, 2003, p.14; Sherer, 2006)), through the gas exchange systems of leaves and soils.
- By reducing the “heat island” effect, gardens lessen the need for air conditioning and lower electric bills (Bremer et al, 2003, p. 50)

7. Youth Education

- Community gardens can serve as an outdoor classroom where youth can learn valuable skills, like those involving practical math, communication, responsibility and cooperation. They also provide the opportunity to learn about the importance of community, stewardship and environmental responsibility.
- In California, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners has a program in Alemany, a community with an unemployment rate of %84, which employs 20-25 local youth during the school year and about 60 during the summer. They are trained in gardening, landscaping, habitat restoration, work skills and leadership development (Feenstra et al, 1999 p.40).

8. Cultural Opportunities

- Community gardens offer unique opportunities to establish relationships within and across physical and social barriers. (Bremer et al, 2003; Tranel & Handlin, 2004). In places like the Twin Cities, where there are large communities of first and second generation immigrants, community gardens have provided a space for:
 - Inter-generational exposure to cultural traditions,
 - Cultural exchange with other gardeners
 - Access to non-English speaking communities.
- In gardens across New York that are supported by the city’s community garden association, GreenThumb, there are gardeners from 45 different countries and many regions of the U.S.
- A recent study found that compared to residents living near barren areas, those closer to green common spaces, are more likely to use them and as a result more likely to interact with neighbors (Kuo et al,1998,p.26).

9. Horticultural Therapy

- The benefits of Horticulture Therapy (Sherer, 2006) can be and are used to great advantage in community gardens.
- Exposure to green space reduces stress and increases a sense of wellness and belonging (Bremer et al, 2003, p. 55).
 - “A ten percent increase in nearby greenspace was found to decrease a person’s health complaints in an amount equivalent to a five year reduction in that person’s age” (Sherer, 2006, p. 16).
- In Brentwood California, the Vets Garden employs 35 patients, many of whom have not been able to hold down a job since the Vietnam War. Since the garden program started inpatient stays have been significantly reduced and the gardeners have been making progress at faster rates and are better able to “participate more fully in the world and move on to jobs outside the hospital”. Employment opportunities such as gardening and landscaping throughout the city have become available to Vet gardeners and several program participants have even gone back to school. (Feenstra et al,1999, p. 52).

10. Crime Prevention

- Community gardens increase a sense of community ownership and stewardship. They foster the development of a community identity and spirit.
- Community gardens offer a focal point for community organizing, and can lead to community-based efforts to deal with other social concerns.
- Community gardens give youth a safe place to interact with peers and can involve them in beneficial activities (Sherer, 2006).
- Community gardens build block clubs and increase eyes on the street (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001b).
- Scientific studies show that crime decreases in neighborhoods as the amount of green space increases and that vegetation has been seen to alleviate mental fatigue, one of the precursors to violent behavior (Kuo and Sullivan, 2001).
- Community gardening is recognized by many police departments as an effective community crime prevention strategy.
 - “In Philadelphia, burglaries and thefts in one precinct dropped by 90 percent after police helped residents clean up vacant lots and plant gardens” (“Healing America’s cities” p. 5-6, as cited in Englander, 2001).

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