



By Linda K. Breggin

Urban Agriculture Initiatives Grow

Cities and states across the country are experimenting with ways to encourage urban agriculture and the myriad benefits it provides. Definitions vary, but Columbia University's Urban Design Lab defines it simply as "growing food within cities."

Who participates can include governmental entities that provide land and other support, community groups, non-profit organizations, businesses, property owners, schools and even so-called "guerrilla gardeners," who use land without owner approval. What constitutes urban agriculture ranges from large for-profit farms to small volunteer-run community gardens. Where urban agriculture occurs can be a creative endeavor — vacant lots, walls, rooftops, and even median strips. Buildings also house urban agriculture and currently under development are "vertical farms" consisting of stacked greenhouses. When urban agriculture occurs depends on climate and approach, but greenhouses, hoop houses, and other structures allow for year-round production using soil, hydroponics, and other cultivation methods.

Why there is a plethora of state and local urban agriculture initiatives — including laws, regulations, and policies — is due to the array of policy objectives that can be realized. These include: improving environmental quality, providing healthy food to communities in need, utilizing vacant properties, meet-

ing demand for locally grown food, affording educational and recreational activities, and facilitating a more secure food supply.

The environmental benefits of urban agriculture are notable. Serving as green infrastructure, it reduces the amount of runoff and water pollution. Urban agriculture also can enhance wildlife habitat and, in some cases, encourage cleanup and redevelopment of contaminated properties.

In addition, urban agriculture can reduce energy consumption and associated carbon emissions in a variety of ways by, for example, lessening the need to transport and refrigerate food. In addition, rooftop agriculture may reduce building heating and cooling costs. Urban farms and gardens also may reduce smog and energy consumption associated with heat islands.

According to the National Council of State Legislators, a dozen states have legislation that fosters urban agriculture. In some cases, the legislation establishes formal programs. For example, Texas legislation creates an Urban Farm Microenterprise Support Program that provides financial assistance to small businesses engaged in research and production of agriculture technology intended for urban use. And, a New York law establishes the Community Gardens Program, which identifies vacant public lands and facilitates their use as gardens.

In addition to dedicated programs, in states such as New Jersey and Utah there are incentives for urban agriculture through reduced property taxes. Furthermore, numerous states, including Colorado, Illinois, Louisiana, and North Carolina, have established multi-stakeholder groups charged with examining local food production, including urban farms and gardens.

At the local level, governmental efforts often focus on reducing barriers, particularly through zoning changes, as ordinances historically were designed to prevent agricultural uses in urban areas.

For example, the Chicago city council recently amended its zoning ordinance to encourage urban gardens and farms. Similarly, Cleveland's Urban Garden District allows the city to reserve land for urban agriculture and requires a public hearing to build on property used for farms and gardens. Milwaukee, New York, and Boston are among other cities that encourage urban agriculture through zoning regulations.

Cities also promote urban agriculture in their land use, climate change, and sustainability plans. Additional ways in which cities are fostering urban agriculture include developing inventories of available land and conducting education and outreach. Some cities, such as Sacramento and Philadelphia, have used federal brownfields grants for urban gardens on previously contaminated properties.

Despite the benefits, some warn that too much urban agriculture ultimately could harm the environment. Harvard professor Edward L. Glaeser asserts in a *Boston Globe* op-ed that "it is a mis-

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take to think that metropolitan areas could or should try to significantly satisfy their own food needs." He explains that increasing the amount of agricultural lands in

urban areas reduces population density and "carbon emissions rise dramatically as density falls."

To be sure, more work is needed to understand fully the environmental impacts of various types of urban agriculture. At least for now, however, many cities appear enthusiastic about agriculture on underutilized land. For example, the Detroit mayor recently lauded a city council decision to approve the sale of over 140 acres of city-owned land for an urban farm, primarily because the deal puts vacant land into productive use.

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