

Neighborhood Fare



Tools for Connecting
Local Food Systems

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Community Gardens & Farms

PRODUCTION

In a food-forward neighborhood, community gardens are protected spaces for food production, community convening, and wealth-building.

Community gardens and farms are small, community-focused growing spaces that provide access to fresh, local food and build social cohesion. This briefing focuses on spaces that are open to the public and that anyone can join, rather than the traditional school or New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) gardens.



OBSERVATIONS

Community gardens are often small in size, but provide a wide range of community benefits.

New York City has hundreds of community gardens, accounting for over 100 acres of public open space. The community garden movement in New York City started in the 1970s when residents of disinvested neighborhoods began claiming vacant lots as growing spaces. Today, community groups determine how these spaces are used, and most grow food. These community-focused spaces can increase access to fresh, local, and culturally appropriate food in areas where legacies of disinvestment still heighten food insecurity.

Gardens offer plots for residents to grow food of their own choosing. Many also distribute through farm stands, nearby farmers markets, or donations of surplus food to community groups. Some community gardens and farms work with regional farms to supplement produce and bring value-added goods to their farmers markets and CSAs.

Gardens can meet just a small portion of a neighborhood's food needs. But the food grown on these sites represents only a fraction of the services these spaces provide the community. Community gardens and farms also beautify neighborhoods, build climate resilience, improve physical and mental health, build social cohesion, and create spaces for intergenerational knowledge exchange. At 138th Street Community Garden, located across the street from a supportive housing development in the South Bronx, volunteers host programming like an annual haunted house, barbecues, and children's activities. Community farms can also train young people and historically marginalized farmers in urban agriculture.

Community gardens vary in land tenure status, ranging from temporary license agreements on public lots to permanent protection in land trusts.

According to City data, 79% of community gardens are located on publicly-owned land. The Department of

Parks & Recreation (NYC Parks) has jurisdiction over the majority of garden lots, though some are on lots under other jurisdictions, including the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT), and NYCHA. Community member steward gardens on public land. Gardens operate on temporary (typically 4-year), renewable license agreements between the garden group and the respective agency. NYC Parks' GreenThumb program oversees licensing of over 370 gardens on Parks property and connects interested residents to underutilized lots to start new community gardens.

Gardens are also located on private land, primarily on lots held by community land trusts, with a fewer number of privately-owned gardens. Across the city, there are over 50 gardens on land owned by the New York Restoration Project (NYRP), 35 garden lots owned by the Brooklyn Queens Land Trust, 18 garden lots owned by the Bronx Land Trust, and 14 garden lots owned by the Manhattan Land Trust. Land trusts provide a vehicle for community ownership and protecting garden space.

Amidst the housing crisis, community gardens on private property face ongoing questions about land tenure due to pressure to develop privately-owned vacant lots for housing and concerns about the shade of nearby new construction impacting production capacity.

Through simple site infrastructure, gardens increase access to fresh, culturally appropriate produce.

Most gardens are the size of a single lot, but some are as large as a full acre. Some offer members individual plots or while others are home to communal growing space. Two gardens in the South Bronx exemplify these different models: La Finca del Sur has 20 production beds for its market and 39 member beds, while New Roots Community Farm has only communal beds, distributing about 150-300 bags of produce weekly, for a total of 6,000-10,000 pounds of food annually. These community-led spaces can grow culturally appropriate crops that may not be widely

available from other local producers. For example, New Roots has grown sugarcane, bissap, ginger, and turmeric.

Gardens rely on basic infrastructure like raised beds, greenhouses, high tunnels, rainwater harvesting systems, and sheds for production purposes, as well as seating areas, pathways, and gazebos to provide community gathering space.

Operationally, gardens require access to clean soil, safe growing conditions, and water. Because urban soils are often contaminated with heavy metals, gardens must either undertake soil testing or build raised beds to safely grow crops. Rat abatement is an enormous challenge. Access to water is not standardized. Many gardens opt to access the nearest fire hydrant, but can only apply for an access permit from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) if registered under GreenThumb. On-site water irrigation systems are costly to install. GreenThumb gardens under NYC Parks jurisdiction must secure funding for installation, then water use is free of charge. Gardens are rarely permitted to install electricity. Some gardens are considering solar infrastructure to meet specific energy needs, such as a greenhouse, mushroom chamber, or composting.

Gardens rely heavily on volunteer stewardship, with critical support from GreenThumb and an ecosystem of nonprofits.

Most gardens are volunteer-run operations, which means that the maintenance and productivity of the space can fluctuate with the capacity of its members. Garden membership can vary widely. The 138th Street Garden in the South Bronx, for example, is led by a core group of just five members, who ensure the space is accessible to the broader community.

Other gardens operate with labor support from local nonprofits. For example, East New York Farms! manages four farms and gardens with a paid 10-person staff and around 40 youth interns.

GreenThumb, a program led by NYC Parks, delivers material resources and technical assistance across New York's garden network. GreenThumb supports over 550

gardens and 20,000 garden members with tools and bulk garden materials, educational programming, group development, and garden infrastructure projects.

Although GreenThumb provides material resources like tools, clean soil, compost, mulch, and lumber for raised beds, gardeners report that the resources are not always available or delivered in a timely enough manner, due to resource, staff, and vehicle capacity limitations.

Numerous other organizations provide garden support throughout the city. Nonprofits like Green Guerrillas and GrowNYC function as community garden advocacy groups, supporting the development of community gardens and offering material support and technical assistance. GrowNYC, for instance, has built over 100 community gardens throughout the five boroughs. Cornell Cooperative Extension offers technical assistance and educational programming on topics ranging from vegetable production to mushroom cultivation to food safety. The Bronx Land Trust, Brooklyn Queens Land Trust, and NYRP provide gardens on their land with services like liability insurance, infrastructure repairs, labor and educational programming.

Gardens turn to a variety of funding sources, but regulations limit commercial activity as a source of income for gardeners.

Community growing spaces rely on a variety of funding models to cover operational and infrastructure costs. Some take a DIY approach, with individual members covering shared costs and taking responsibility for their own plots. Others are fully supported by nonprofits.

Gardens can receive discretionary funding from City Council, private funding through foundation grants, and individual and corporate donations. Gardeners report that the process for allocating Council discretionary funding is challenging for their volunteer-led, small-scale operations. Funding allocated to garden groups is routed through city agencies. Discretionary funding allocated directly to organizations is reimbursement-based, meaning that awardees must spend out of pocket before receiving reimbursement from the City, which can have a lengthy turnaround time.

Some gardeners are also engaged in commercial activities. For example, Bronx Canasta is a collective effort by several community gardens, along with New York Botanical Garden's Bronx Green-Up program, to turn garden produce into value-added products for sale, starting with bottled hot sauce. However, wealth generation opportunities are limited for garden members at GreenThumb gardens. The primary purpose of gardens on NYC Parks property is open space and community development, so any direct sales of produce must be reinvested back in the garden to support operation and maintenance.





Case Study

La Finca del Sur

Site Size

33,000 sq ft

Site & History

La Finca del Sur is a community farm located in Mott Haven, The Bronx. It was founded in 2009 by Latinx and Black women who had the vision of turning a vacant lot in their neighborhood into a community-led farm. La Finca del Sur means “Farm of the South” in Spanish and pays homage to the Latinx heritage of many of their members. The farm’s name is also a reflection of the South Bronx, whose residents have ties to the American South and the Global South.

Operation

La Finca del Sur incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 2010, with the mission of advancing food access, environmental justice, and community empowerment for women of color in the South Bronx and their allies. Although supported by a nonprofit, La Finca del Sur is collectively run by member farmers. They are a registered GreenThumb garden.

Activities

La Finca del Sur grows culturally relevant foods and increases access to fresh and healthy foods in a neighborhood experiencing food apartheid. They run a farmers market on-site where they sell food grown on the farm. Their production space includes a mix of raised beds, fruit trees, and a greenhouse. They have 20 raised beds that are dedicated to production for farmers market and 40 raised beds that are individual plots stewarded by members and their families. They experiment with growing tropical plants, in addition to managing beehives, composting, and harvesting rainwater. The site has shipping container sheds and compost bins.

Funding Sources

La Finca del Sur sells their produce at the South Bronx Farmers Market, receives grant funding, and has launched crowdfunding campaigns.

Products

Produce, herbs, flowers

Produce Grown

1,200 lbs

Food System Connections

La Fina del Sur members organize food equity initiatives with other community farms and gardens in the Bronx. One example of this is the South Bronx Food Hub, an emergency food initiative that began during the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with three other local farms, they aggregate their produce to distribute to the community at community gardens, public housing developments, and community-based organizations.



Case Study

La Finca del Sur

Site Size

33,000 sq ft



RECOMMENDATIONS

→ **Support long-term community garden land tenure.**

NYC Parks should provide longer-term licensing agreements to bolster land tenure security, which would ensure community gardens can continue to flourish as community assets. The City should support the development of land trusts on small and irregularly-shaped City-owned lots, as well as on privately-owned vacant lots, to promote equitable community control. The City should provide legal assistance for structuring land trusts and negotiating with private landowners to transfer ownership, as well as assessing suitable City-owned lots to make available for purchase to community garden groups and community farms.

→ **Support sustainable infrastructure and relieve operations costs.**

The City should subsidize infrastructure investments that meet water and energy needs through rainwater harvesting and solar panels. The City could also expand subsidies for investments in flexible operational space like storage sheds and cold storage design for gardens and farms, like CoolBot. Gardens should have access to cost-free on-site water. These infrastructural and operations investments would enable community gardens to better fulfill their mission of growing food and providing vibrant community space.

→ **Offer greater flexibility for economic development in community-run spaces on public land.**

NYC Parks should institute a concession process, allowing gardeners to conduct revenue-generating activities from commercial agriculture on land under the jurisdiction of NYC Parks. GreenThumb could then also provide one-on-one technical assistance to community garden members interested in scaling up to commercial operations, whether that requires

building a hoop house, connecting with a commercial kitchen, or other support. Scaling up operations would expand gardens' production capacity and increase access to local food beyond garden members. NYCHA should also examine relaxing regulations to enable concessions for food businesses connected to gardens on NYCHA properties.

→ **Strengthen funding pipelines to meet garden needs that range widely in scale and purpose.**

NYC Parks should create a participatory budgeting process that would allow community growers to collaboratively and democratically decide how best to allocate GreenThumb funding for community gardens. Through GreenThumb, the City could also provide technical assistance to community gardeners to apply for state and federal funding for large scale capital and infrastructure improvements. The City should expand funding to GreenThumb to manage participatory budgeting and technical assistance.

→ **Support democratic governance through a Community Gardener Council.**

Community gardens are led by a diverse cohort of New Yorkers and located within distinct neighborhood contexts, with many different needs, priorities, and resources needed for their gardens to thrive. In order to ensure that policies and programs respond to this wide array of voices, the City should convene an elected or appointed Community Gardener Council that would serve as a representative body of community gardeners across the five boroughs. This Council would work closely with city agencies to advise policy and funding decisions impacting community gardens and farms.



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