

## Obtaining and then Working to Create a Sustainable Community Landscapes on Vacant Lots

### Vacant Lot Possibilities

- Landscaping - Small, low-maintenance patches of landscaping in a lot, or a larger-scale project.
- Food growing - community garden or urban agriculture.
- Extras - Paths, benches, outdoor art, dog area
- Mix and match – combine landscaping, food growing, art, etc.

### Steps to create a community garden on a vacant lot

1. Select and secure a lot
2. Organize, set goals, design space
3. Make a plan (costs, resources, timeline)
4. Implement the plan

### Who owns the lot?

1. Chicago City Owned Land Inventory. This is a list of 15,000+ properties owned by the City of Chicago. The list includes PIN number, address, and square footage for each property. A City disclaimer states that the list may not be 100% accurate. Verify property ownership online. And one more caveat: the online records listed in the next two items sometimes are incomplete or missing for a property. Maybe your alderman's office can help. You can also call 312-744-LAND (312-744-5263) to determine if a property is owned by the city.
2. Use the CookViewer website to visually confirm PIN number, address and location of a lot.
3. Look up a PIN number in Cook County Recorder of Deeds website to determine/verify the owner of a property. *1<sup>st</sup> Grantee* of the most recently dated record for the property is the current owner. When the City of Chicago is the owner then the *1<sup>st</sup> Grantee* is listed as 'Chicago'. If the lot is not city-owned, for \$2.50 you can download a deed document that lists the name and address of the property owner.

To request permission to use a city-owned lot, see the alderman. You may be required to provide: PIN number(s), garden organization board member names, bylaws, garden rules, garden design, \$1 million liability insurance. At best, expect a three-year lease, possibly renewable, from the city. If the lot is privately owned, contact the owner and discuss terms of use.

See the NeighborSpace website for additional information about determining a site owner, and for assistance with long term preservation of a community garden site. (neighbor-space.org, Join Us > Application Process)

### Water

Consider water needs when selecting a lot for a vacant lot project.

- Where is the nearest fire hydrant? Permission to use a fire hydrant for watering a community garden starts with the alderman. Allow a month or more for this process. If there is a tamper-proof cap on the hydrant, you will need to request that it be removed. Do you need to run a water hose across a street? If so, you may need a hose protection ramp for vehicles.
- Ask about hose hook up to water from a nearby building.
- A rainwater catchment system might be an alternative water source for your space.
- Calculate your water needs and water storage requirements. Rain barrels, used plastic drums and various sizes of cisterns have all been used for water storage. Determine the prior use of used items. Avoid containers with toxic chemicals or unknown prior use, especially for growing food. Used 275 gallon ICB Tote containers can sometime be purchased for about \$70. Water storage is necessary for a rainwater catchment system, but also is useful when the water source is a fire hydrant.
- Consider water pressure needs. A sprinkler irrigation system requires higher water pressure. A drip irrigation system usually requires less water pressure. A solar-powered water pump might meet your needs. 5 watt used solar panels are relatively inexpensive (\$40 or so). A used car battery may be adequate.
- For ornamentals, consider the use of draught tolerant plants to help conserve water usage.
- If necessary, adjust your garden design based on water constraints.

## **COMMUNITY Gardening**

- Starting out – get out the word, post signs, go door-to-door, leave a half-sheet flyer, announce a meeting.
- Keep it going – promote shared responsibility, cooperation, planned work days, conflict resolution process
- Keeping it fun:
  - weekly social hour - Sunday at 3pm is a good time
  - monthly event - for example, last Saturday of the month, 7pm, music and BBQ
  - end of season harvest celebration
  - kids events: learning gardens, outdoor art projects

## **Planning Process**

- The 'No-Plan' Plan. Schedule compost delivery and invite local residents to come out and 'start digging'. Design as you go.
- Bottom Up. Start with few or no constraints for the space. Invite local residents to create the goals, garden rules, garden design and the implementation plan.
- Top Down. The leadership team identifies a starter set of goals, garden rules, garden design, and an implementation plan. Present the plan to local residents. Get feedback, modify the plan as needed.

## **Community Garden Organization**

One source for samples of community garden start-up guidelines, garden rules etc. is the American Community Garden Association (ACGA). NeighborSpace also has guidelines.

## **Growing Food: Plot Assignments and Garden Rules**

- Allotment. Plots are individually 'owned' for a season. You work your own plot and you harvest from only your own plot. Often there is fee of \$5 to \$50 for the use of one plot for one season.
- Shared Effort and Shared Harvest. Much or all of the garden space is worked together, and those contributing to the effort harvest what they need for their family. No one 'owns' their own plot.
- Shared Effort and Food Pantry Harvest. The gardening effort is shared and the produce goes mostly to food pantries, etc.
- Mixed Use. Create a hybrid of some of the above.

## **Urban Ag Ordinance**

There is a City of Chicago ordinance regarding urban agriculture and community gardens. The maximum size allowed for a community garden is 25,000 sq. ft. (equivalent of 100' x 250'). Also:

### **What is the difference between a community garden and an urban farm?**

Community gardens are typically owned or managed by public entities, civic organizations or community-based organizations and maintained by volunteers. Plants grown on site are intended for personal use, for charity, or for community beautification purposes. Urban farms grow food that is intended to be sold, either on a nonprofit or for-profit basis. Due to their commercial purpose, urban farms require a business license.

### **Can produce from a community garden be sold?**

Yes. A community garden is allowed to sell surplus produce that was grown on site if the sales are accessory or subordinate to the garden's primary purpose described above.

Source: [http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp\\_info/urban\\_agriculturefaq.html](http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/urban_agriculturefaq.html)

## **Soil and Compost**

Many vacant lots have rubble from a previous building, under a top layer of several inches of soil. Probe the ground of the lot. Check for rubble below. Maybe some sections of the lot can be used as is to grow ornamentals.

Fruits & Vegetables. Be careful about growing fruits and vegetables in existing city soil. Univ. of Massachusetts Amherst has a reasonably priced soil test, reporting on levels of plant nutrients and heavy metals. Avoid trucking in soil (dirt). If you do, you probably should soil test every load. Instead, the use of compost in raised beds, pots and/or planters is recommended. 12" of compost is fine for many vegetables. 24" is ideal, but more costly. Expect yearly decomposition

and settling of the compost. Consider using weed barrier fabric to separate the compost from the existing soil. Dwarf apple trees can grow in 12” to 24” of compost, but need staking. You may be able grow raspberry and blackberry in 5 gallon containers, porous on the bottom.

Ornamentals. Options include raised beds, pots, planters, berms, and ‘rubble holes’. For a ‘rubble hole’, use a pick axe to make a 12” diameter by 12” deep hole, and add a quality growing material. Experiment with what grows in the hole.

Soil test: plant nutrients, lead, other heavy metals.

Univ. Mass. Amhurst - \$10 for basic test, plant nutrient and lead  
 StatAnalysis (local) - \$25 for lead test

**Raised Beds**

The Rebuilding Exchange on Webster has used lumber. Hardwood and ‘old growth’ wood last longer. 2”x 12” boards work well. Avoid treated wood and plywood for food growing! To delay rotting of wood sides of a raised bed: use brick footings, 6 mil black plastic stapled on the inside walls, overlap the top, extend inside on the bottom 8 inches, and add top rail (2x4, etc.) to finish.

**Resources for a Vacant Lot Project**

- Connecting Chicago Community Gardens (CCCG)
- Neighborhood gardening organization
- Openlands
- NeighborSpace
- Chicago Cares
- University community service programs

**Community Greening/Art Projects**

<b>Where</b>	Vacant lot (city or private), school, park, residential block, business block.
<b>What</b>	Grow food, landscaping, paths, benches, pergola, topiary, pots, planters, raised beds, tool shed, water cistern, irrigation system, compost bins, barbecue/fire pit, outdoor art (DIY wood, concrete, mosaics, murals, blacktop painting – map/art/line games)
<b>Who</b>	Block club, church group, school, social services organization (ex-offender program, juveniles-at-risk, etc.), FOTP, business sponsor

**Parkway Planters**

A great example of volunteers maintaining business street planters on 5600-5900 N. Ridge and 1300 W. Devon in Edgewater is the work that the Edgewater Triangle Neighbors Association (ETNA) is doing. If interested in volunteering contact Susan Darnall, ssd1454 -at- aol -dot- com.

**Links From the Workshop Links Document**

<b>15. Community Garden Funding &amp; Volunteers &amp; Advice - Continued Education</b> <a href="#">Connecting Community Gardens</a> <a href="#">Open Lands</a> <a href="#">Neighbor Space</a> <a href="#">Chicago Cares</a> <a href="#">University Community Services</a> <a href="#">Chicago Park District Community Gardens in the Parks</a> <a href="#">Friends of the Parks for Chicago's Park's Gardens</a> <a href="#">Northwestern Settlement</a> <a href="#">Speak with your Alderman for City Gardens and Request Support</a> <a href="#">TIF Funds</a> <a href="#">Special Service Area Funding</a>	<b>CONTINUED EDUCATION</b> <a href="#">Chicago Botanic Garden</a> <a href="#">Chicago Master Gardeners</a> <a href="#">Open Lands</a> <a href="#">Garfield Park Conservatory</a> <a href="#">Tree Keepers</a> <a href="#">Chicago Center For Green Technology – Advice and Classes</a>
---	--

Also, Bill Morrisett will post some additional resources at <http://growwoodlawn.org/resources/>.