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EDIBLE COMMUNITIES: INSTITUTIONALIZING THE LAWN-TO-GARDEN MOVEMENT TO PROMOTE FOOD INDEPENDENCE FOR LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

by Chelsea Tu*

The concept of building local food systems for low-income communities has gained impressive momentum as part of the U.S. sustainability movement.¹ Local food systems help reduce environmental impacts from production to plate, increase availability and access to cheaper fresh fruits and vegetables in underserved communities, lower rates of obesity and diet-related diseases, and eliminate food deserts.² Notable existing local food initiatives serving low-income individuals include building grocery stores and community gardens in food deserts,³ and promoting the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits to purchase fresh produce⁴ as well as seeds and food-bearing plants.⁵ The local food movement arose in response to overarching political support for large-scale commercial agriculture at the federal and state levels, which still dominates the national food system.⁶ Beyond this, particular challenges for institutionalizing innovative food initiatives for low-income residents include a lack of sustained funding, zoning restrictions, insufficient training and institutional support, as well as locating and converting productive land in urban and suburban areas.⁷ Thus, despite the positive impact of local food systems, 14.9 % of U.S. households were still food insecure in 2011.⁸ Establishing lawn-to-garden programs for low-income individuals can solve land availability and conversion issues while achieving all of the health and environmental benefits local food initiatives bring.

The lawn-to-garden concept is not novel. During World War II more than twenty million “victory gardens” were planted on residential lawns and community plots across the country,⁹ yielding an estimated nine to ten million tons of fruits and vegetables.¹⁰ However, these gardens disappeared when improved and cheaper technologies led to a shift in federal food policy that encouraged large-scale commercial farming.¹¹ The lawn reverted back to its decorative role,¹² and the lawn-to-garden concept was all but abandoned until 2009 when Michelle Obama converted the White House South Lawn to a 1,110-square-foot vegetable garden.¹³

The case for converting lawns to gardens is simple: edible gardens will help alleviate the energy and health crises.¹⁴ Lawn-to-garden initiatives make use of productive agricultural space in residential yards and reduce input of fossil fuels and toxic products to maintain green carpets.¹⁵ This makes sense in low-income communities where many residents may not have sufficient income or time to maintain manicured lawns. The lawn-to-garden model also reduces reliance on processed foods that travel thousands of miles to consumers while increasing access to locally grown fresh foods.¹⁶ In effect, edible communities will better connect people, food, and the environment.¹⁷


Lawn-to-garden initiatives could be customized according to the size of available land, the number of participants, and the type of operation that participants desire. Similar to community garden projects and school farms,¹⁸ low-income single-unit homes and multi-unit affordable housing complexes could convert available lawn space to gardens where participating residents could grow what they wish or delegate gardening responsibilities in order to operate as a cooperative.¹⁹

Low-income individuals could also farm on someone else’s yard.²⁰ Low-income individuals could become “agripreneurs” and sell their produce directly to neighbors, farmer’s markets, and other outlets.²¹

The creation and institutionalization of lawns-to-gardens must overcome legal, pecuniary, institutional support, and cultural hurdles. Most urban and suburban municipal zoning laws limit commercial agricultural areas to certain parts of town.²² Residential zones typically do not allow for commercial gardens.²³ However, some municipalities, such as Seattle, have adjusted their zoning laws to promote growing and selling fresh produce in residential areas.²⁴ Another promising method for institutionalizing edible communities is incorporating them into municipal sustainability plans.²⁵

Like any farm, a successful lawn-to-garden may require sustained funding to retain full-time staff and to purchase seed, fertilizer, and equipment. This is especially relevant in the low-income context as economically disadvantaged individuals are unlikely to have sufficient time and money to maintain lawn-converted gardens. However, an increasing number of private investors,²⁶ local programs, and federal programs²⁷ provide local food project funding targeting underserved communities. There is also no paucity of knowledgeable gardeners themselves, as evidenced by AmeriCorps’ recent launch of the Food Corps program where over one thousand applicants competed for fifty openings in 2011.²⁸ The number of agripreneurs is also rising, notably in marginalized populations of Latinos and veterans.²⁹ Once participants convert lawns to gardens and establish local marketing outlets, this community of gardens has the potential to generate both food and income,³⁰ allowing underserved communities to be both food-secure and food-independent.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to institutionalizing lawn-to-garden initiatives is Americans’ longstanding belief that lawns promote the attractiveness and marketability of their property.³¹ Additionally, low-income residents may perceive gardening as a luxury and not a means of sustenance.³² These “perception gaps” can be overcome with grassroots support from programs like Food Corps, as well as education and media campaigns modeled on the success of the local foods revolution.³³ The objective should be to educate the public about the functional beauty of gardens and the potential avenues for entrepreneurship they create.

In addition to increasing the number of backyard gardens that many Americans have, we should look to expand gardens to front yard and courtyard gardens. Providing low-income communities easy access to fresh produce by converting lawns to gardens will connect urbanites and suburbanites to their food, improve environmental and human health, and increase community pride.³⁴ Lawns-to-gardens will give us the opportunity to show off the fruits of our labor, enjoy them ourselves, give them to our neighbors, and even sell them for profit. Lawn-to-garden initiatives can be a part of the local food system revolution that seeks to create food independent, healthy communities for millions of Americans. 

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- ¹ Steve Martinez et al., *Local Food Systems: Concepts, Impacts, and Issues*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC. (USDA) 2, 39-41 (2010), http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/122868/err97_1_.pdf (highlighting the 2009 launch of the USDA's "Know your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative that includes funding and various programs that connect consumers with local producers); see also *The People's Garden Grant Program*, USDA.GOV, http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=GARDEN_RT5&parentnav=PEOPLES_GARDEN&navtype=RT (summarizing various federally-funded local garden initiatives targeting low income groups) (last visited Nov. 13, 2012).
- ² See, e.g., Megan Galey and A. Bryan Endres, *Locating the Boundaries of Sustainable Agriculture*, 17 NEXUS: CHAP. J. L. & POL'Y 3, 10-11 (2012); but see *Access to Affordable and Nutritious Food: Measuring and Understanding Food Deserts and Their Consequences*, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC., 57 (2009) (stating that a review of relevant empirical literature shows that "[i]ncreased access to healthy foods alone, without decreased consumption of all other foods, will likely have little impact on obesity among subpopulations of concern."). The 2008 Farm Bill defined the term "food desert" as "area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities." Food, Conservation, and Energy Act, Pub. L. No. 110-234 § 7527, 122 Stat. 923, 1277 (2008).
- ³ See, e.g. *The People's Garden Grant Program*, *supra* note 1; Clare Trapasso, *Bringing Farmers' Markets and CSAs into Low-Income Neighborhoods*, CITYSPONFUL.COM (May 11, 2011), <http://www.cityspoonful.com/csas/>; see also *Community Food Projects Competitive Grants Program*, NAT'L INST. OF FOOD & AGRIC., <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/fo/fundview.cfm?fonum=1080> (last updated Oct. 24, 2012); *2011 Health Food Financing Initiatives Grantee List*, U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH & HUMAN SER.V., <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ocs/resource/2011-ced-hffi-grantees> (last visited Nov. 19, 2012).
- ⁴ See *NYC Expands Health Bucks Program to Make Produce More Affordable*, MIKEBLOOMBERG.COM (July 2, 2012), <http://www.mikebloomberg.com/index.cfm?objectId=48D7CFFC-2C9C-7CA2-F65154EBA1C1C971>.
- ⁵ See generally Daniel Bowman Simon, *Food Stamps Grow Urban Gardens*, 5 CITIES AND ENV'T VOL. 1, 1 (2012); See also *Snap Gardens History*, SNAP-GARDENS.ORG, <http://www.snapgardens.org/> (last visited Nov. 12, 2012).
- ⁶ Robert Hoppe & David Banker, *Structure and Finances of U.S. Farms*, U.S. DEPT. OF AGRIC. iv (2010), http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/184479/eib66_1_.pdf (noting that "[l]arge-scale farms made up only 12 % of U.S. farms in 2007 but accounted for 84 % of the value of U.S. production."); see also John Antle, *Agriculture and the Food System: Adaptation to Climate Change*, RES. FOR THE FUTURE 2-3 (2009), <http://www.rff.org/rff/documents/rff-rpt-adaptation-antle.pdf>.
- ⁷ Nina Mukherji & Alfonso Morales, *Zoning for Urban Agriculture*, AMER. PLANNING ASS'N, 3 Practice Urban Agric. 1, 7 (2010), <http://www.planning.org/zoningpractice/2010/pdf/mar.pdf>.
- ⁸ Alisha Coleman-Jensen et al., *Household Food Security in the United States in 2011*, U.S. DEPT. OF AGRIC. 4 (Sept. 2012), <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/884525/err141.pdf> (defining "food security as "all household members ha[ve] at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.").
- ⁹ JULIAN CONRAD JUERGENSMEYER & THOMAS E. ROBERTS, LAND USE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT REGULATION LAW § 13:16 I (3d ed. 2012).
- ¹⁰ A figure that equals the commercial production of fresh vegetables at that time. *Id.*
- ¹¹ MARTINEZ ET AL., *supra* note 1; see also Anne B. W. Effland, *U.S. Farm Policy: The First 200 Years*, ECON. RES. SERV./U.S. DEPT. OF AGRIC. 24-25 (Mar. 2000), http://www.ucema.edu.ar/udm/CAPITULO_1/POLITICA_EE.UU./US_Farm_Policy_the_First_200_Years.pdf.
- ¹² Michael Pollan, *Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns*, N.Y. TIMES MAGAZINE (May 28, 1989), <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archieve/why-mow-the-case-against-lawns/> (hereinafter *Why Mow?*).
- ¹³ Jane Black, *Vegetable Garden Will Be Installed on White House Grounds*, WASHINGTONPOST.COM (Mar. 20, 2009), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/19/AR2009031902886.html>.
- ¹⁴ Michael Pollan, *Wendell Berry's Wisdom*, THE NATION (Sept. 2, 2009), <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archieve/the-nation-magazine-wendell-berrys-wisdom/>.
- ¹⁵ Since lawn-to-garden initiatives operate on a concept very similar to community gardens, they arguably also bring very similar benefits. See Kathryn A. Peters, *Creating a Sustainable Urban Agriculture Revolution*, 25 J. ENVTL. L. & LITIG. 203, 221-230 (2010), <http://www.law.uoregon.edu/org/jell/docs/251/peters.pdf> (explaining the benefits of community gardens).
- ¹⁶ Mukherji & Morales, *supra* note 7, at 6.
- ¹⁷ Heather A. Okvat & Alex J. Zautra, *Comty. Gardening: A Parsimonious Path to Individual, Cmty. and Env't Resilience*, 47 AM. J. COMTY. PSYCHOLOGY 374, 378-381 (2011).
- ¹⁸ See, e.g., *Fifty-two Schools Win "Farm-to-School" Grants to Plant On-site Fruit and Vegetable Gardens*, SOUTH CAROLINA STATE DEPT. EDUCATION (May 31, 2011), <http://ed.sc.gov/agency/news/?nid=1759>.
- ¹⁹ Laurel Kallenbach, *Cultivating Community: Community-Supported Agriculture*, MOTHEREARTHLIVING.COM (Apr. 2009), <http://www.motherearthliving.com/vegetable-gardening/cultivating-community-supported-agriculture.aspx>.
- ²⁰ For instance, West Virginia Sustainable Agriculture Entrepreneurs (WV SAGE) recently began in 2012 on a one-eight acre donated apartment complex backyard in West Charleston, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city and will be teaching farming and marketing skills to twenty individuals from West Charleston who were selected based on low-income, minority, or single-parent status. Phone Interview with Cullen Naumoff, Vision 2030 Project Manager, CHARLESTON AREA ALLIANCE (Dec. 8, 2012).
- ²¹ Mukherji & Morales, *supra* note 7, at 6.
- ²² JUERGENSMEYER & ROBERTS, *supra* note 9, at 1.
- ²³ *Id.*
- ²⁴ Seattle's 2010 zoning amendments allow produce to be grown and sold either on-site or off-site in commercial zones. Additionally, the new code also allows urban farms and community gardens in all zones (with limitations in industrial zones), and residents can sell food grown on their properties. See *Seattle City Council Approves Urban Farm and Community Garden Legislation Improving Access to Locally Grown Food*, SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL (Aug. 16, 2010), <http://www.seattle.gov/council/newsdetail.asp?ID=10996&Dept=28>; see generally Mukherji & Morales, *supra* note 7, for examples of other municipal codes that have expanded zoning allowance for urban agriculture.
- ²⁵ For instance, edible communities could be incorporated into the Sustainable DC initiative, which is underway as of the writing of this article and includes a food desert reduction program. See *Sustainable DC: Food Working Group*, DC.GOV, <http://sustainable.dc.gov/page/food-working-group-background-documents> (last visited Dec. 10, 2012).
- ²⁶ See Kirk Johnson, *Small Farmers Creating a New Business Model as Agriculture Goes Local*, N.Y. TIMES (July 1, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/02/us/small-scale-farmers-creating-a-new-profit-model.html?_r=0; see also Slow Money, SLOWMONEY.ORG (last visited Nov. 29, 2012).
- ²⁷ Low-income residents could, for instance, participate in USDA's local food initiatives and the SNAP Gardens program that provide monetary and gardening support to establish and maintain viable gardens. See *The People's Garden Grant Program*, *supra* note 1; see also other local and federal urban agriculture finance and education programs, *supra* notes 2 and 3.
- ²⁸ Michael Pollan, *How Change is Going to Come in the Food System*, THE NATION (Sept. 11, 2011), <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archieve/how-change-is-going-to-come-in-the-food-system/> (hereinafter *How Change is Going to Come in the Food System*).
- ²⁹ Kirk Johnson, *Small Farmers Creating a New Business Model as Agriculture Goes Local*, N.Y. TIMES (July 1st, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/02/us/small-scale-farmers-creating-a-new-profit-model.html?_r=1&.
- ³⁰ See Kallenbach, *supra* note 19.
- ³¹ Pollan, *Why Mow?*, *supra* note 12.
- ³² Phone Interview with Elise Golan, Director, SUSTAINABLE DEV. PROGRAM, OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ECONOMIST, U.S. DEP'T OF AGRIC. (Nov. 29, 2012).
- ³³ See Pollan, *How Change is Going to Come in the Food System*, *supra* note 28; See also Simon, *supra* note 5.
- ³⁴ Peters, *supra* note 15, at 227; see also Heather A. Okvat & Alex J. Zautra, *supra* note 17.