

URBAN AGRICULTURE

Science Facts and Analysis from Science for Georgia

Recultivating the concrete jungle

Low-income urban communities lack access to healthy food and greenspace, adding to a cycle of poor-health and limited economic opportunity. The implementation of Urban Agriculture programs is one solution to increase access. Read on to learn about Urban Ag, its benefits, and how it can grow.

What is Urban Agriculture?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, urban agriculture is defined as **gardens in cities** which can take the form of backyard, roof-top and balcony gardening, community gardening in vacant lots and parks (sometimes spanning several city blocks), roadside urban fringe agriculture, livestock grazing in open spaces, and intensive indoor hydroponic or aquaculture facilities.¹

Urban agriculture is a great way to supply fresh produce to communities where access to healthy food is limited. These gardens add beauty to local landscapes, creating more green space (which in and of itself is good for people's health). They also create opportunities for communities to involve their members with the creation of agricultural programs. The effect of these programs can be two-fold: help reduce healthy food disparities among low-income, minority communities in the U.S.², and teach about the importance of incorporating healthy food into one's diet and the skills (agriculture, garden maintenance, cooking advice) needed to apply that knowledge.

A growing population means a growing demand for food. Existing literature suggests deep paradigmatic changes are needed to address this situation, such as large-scale dietary changes on the consumption side, and structural changes towards more efficient food supply chains on the production side.³ While Urban Agriculture offers positives in learning experiences and fresh, healthy food for communities, as it is currently designed, it does not solve the problem of food insecurity in extreme food deserts. Laws differing from city to city can hinder the development of larger-scale community gardens or restrict the type of food that can be grown in the garden^{4,5}. In Georgia, the ruling concerning gardens differs depending on its location in a residential or non-residential area. In residential areas, gardens are permitted as an accessory use to any structure and as a principal use on underdeveloped lots with a special administrative permit (SAP). In non-residential areas, they are permitted as a principal or accessory use without permit.

In Georgia, a few entities are already implementing Urban Agriculture programs. The Center for Urban Agriculture at the University of Georgia helps school and community gardens through a gardening blog, access to expertise from the UGA Extension, and other resource such as garden guides and recipes⁶. The Natural Resources Conservation Service of Georgia (NRCS Georgia) offers resources for urban conservation, incentive programs, and technical assistance for urban producers⁷. Other entities such as Truly Living Well have training programs in Urban Agriculture, and AgLanta has resources to find policy surrounding the topic, as well as local garden programs.

Facts and Analysis- FAQ

What communities are in most need of urban agriculture?

- Low-income and minority communities, compared to middle/high-income and predominantly white communities, tend to lack greenspaces in general⁸, and have more convenience stores, which sell predominately highly processed, energy-dense foods with little fresh produce.²

Why are urban agriculture gardens important?

- They are a source of fresh food that serves to teach each about the importance of consuming fresh, healthy foods and equips the community with transferable skills.
- They create opportunities for the development of community programs that engage and benefit its disadvantaged members.
- They serve as greenspaces reducing urban heat islands, increasing air quality, and improving the health of the surrounding community⁹.
- They reduce shipping traffic (which adds to CO2 and further destabilizes food production).

How does this impact Georgia?

- Approximately 13% of the population in Georgia is food insecure. Decreasing food insecurity by the generation and management of community gardens help strengthen the community, improve performance at school and in jobs, as well as, reduce the healthcare burden by lowering the incidence of health conditions linked to poor diet.

Policy Recommendations

Allow space for local farmers to collaborate and utilize resources most efficiently

- Small farmers can work together, sharing trucks, tools, refrigeration, and other farming needs. Pooling resources allows them to reach new markets, such as those that often require liability insurance, trucks, refrigeration, and sorting and distribution systems.¹⁰

Ensure that local zoning laws do not hinder Urban Agriculture projects.

- Local zoning laws could be modified to ease restrictions on using spaces for local gardens in residential zones. Additionally, laws could be set in place to give priority to Urban Agriculture programs when considering re-zoning or re-distribution of empty or abandoned lots.

Support investment in Urban Agriculture spaces by local groups

- Increase funding for small business training
- Fund educational programs to involve the community and train employees by professional gardeners

Ease restrictions on purchasing food from Urban Agriculture program locations

- Ensure that SNAP and WIC funds can be used for purchases



About Science for Georgia

Science for Georgia is a 501c3 dedicated to bridging the gap between scientists and the public through training, outreach opportunities, and direct contact with the public, policymakers, and the press. Science for Georgia highlights how science can impact people's lives and advocates for the responsible use of science in public policy.

Please reach out with any questions or comments info@sci4ga.org

Resources

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About the Author

Jennifer McFaline-Figueroa is a biochemist with a passion for science communication. A native Puerto Rican, she earned her BS in Chemistry from the University of Puerto Rico-Mayaguez before starting her Georgia adventure. Since moving to the Peach state in 2014, she has worked as a research technician at the Georgia Institute of Technology and earned her Master's from Georgia State University. Most recently, she earned her Ph.D. in Integrative Physiology and Pharmacology from the University of Georgia, where she studied and developed therapies for traumatic muscle injuries. Her interests include mitochondrial bioenergetics, orthopedics, and dogs. Outside of lab, Jen enjoys reading, listening to true crime podcasts, and griping about the cold. You can reach her on Twitter @jey_at_lab.

