

Community Gardens Report

Winnipeg Food Council

2021

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Community Gardens

The benefits of community gardens are well known. Community gardens are linked with numerous healthy living behaviours such as community building, physical activity, and increased food security and vegetable intake (9)(24)(10). Community gardens have been used by governments and organizations for unemployment relief, educational opportunities, and food production in times of war. Community gardens also contribute to

beautifying cities, enhancing greenspace, and reinvigorating vacant city lots (10)(24). Many of these benefits contribute to the sustainable development goals (10), the same goals that orient OurWinnipeg. Due to their social, economic, and environmental benefits, cities around the world now recognize the importance of urban agriculture including community gardens, as a branch of planning for green infrastructure (24).

There are many different types of community gardens serving different purposes, including leisure gardens, horticultural gardens, therapeutic gardens, school gardens, kitchen gardens, and urban orchards. Because they are diverse, a consistent definition describing community gardens is difficult to find. Most include reference to the sharing of basic resources, growing of food and/or flowers, and being organized by a group such as a non-profit, school, or group of gardeners (25).

Whatever the case, successful community gardens require both strong community dedication as well as the support of local government, requiring a level of mutual trust and understanding between local government and resident-based gardening groups (24).

Community Gardens in Winnipeg

The City of Winnipeg has a Community Gardening Policy intended to foster a positive climate for community gardening in Winnipeg. The Community Garden Policy defines a community garden as "an open space that a group of citizens voluntarily manage where horticultural activities are practiced" (4). The Policy describes the policy intent in five categories, each of which are supplemented with potential implementation strategies. The policy states these potential implementation strategies are subject to clarification, adjustment or refinement from time to time to effectively implement the policy (4).

The Policy states the City of Winnipeg considers community gardens to be very beneficial in supporting healthy communities and improving the quality of life in neighbourhoods. These gardens serve as a tool to achieve desirable goals such as food security, neighbourhood stabilization and revitalization, reduction of crime, job training, recreation, therapy and community building (4). The policy acknowledges the importance of community direction to ensuring long term community garden success and commits the City of Winnipeg to working collaboratively with community groups to develop long term, affordable plans for development and sustainability of community gardens. Through an integrated, inter-departmental approach by the City, the policy commits to ensuring a coordinated, consistent, and easily accessible system for the management of community gardens, and a predictable environment for community garden development and support (4).

The policy lacks guidance in how garden sites are established, however conversations with community groups and the City of Winnipeg, Naturalist Services Branch suggest the following process is primarily used (11)(12)(13):

1) Indicate there is demand for garden plots where none currently exist. This can come from individuals, groups, Councillors, or any interested party.

2) The location of demand is viewed from a larger perspective of which lands may be available in the area, and what current or future land uses may be.
3) The interested party then works with the Naturalist Services Branch to narrow down the selection of sites.
4) Once a potential site is chosen, it is reviewed with the delegated authority from the City Department or Division responsible for managing that land. If it is considered a viable candidate for a garden site, the condition is evaluated based on factors such as any historic uses of the site, suitability of the soil, etc.
5) If the site is deemed appropriate for gardening, consultation with neighbouring residents, and any which may be affected by the gardens is required.
6) The results of the consultation and potential plans for the site are provided to the area Councillor and delegated authority responsible for managing the land. The decision to proceed is based on concurrence from the area Councillor and delegated authority responsible for managing the land.

Of all these steps, site selection is the biggest challenge (13)(24). In 2009 when there was significant community garden development in Winnipeg, the City had a template to guide residents through the process of developing a community garden on public land. This template no longer exists (24).

There are two types of community gardens on City owned land, 1) allotment gardens, and 2) community run gardens (2). There are also community gardens on privately owned land that largely fall outside the scope of this report.

Allotment gardens

Allotment gardens are City operated community garden sites where plots are available for rent. There are 11 different locations of allotment gardens throughout Winnipeg (2)(5). As of 2020, the City has 239 useable allotment plots (15), down from 234 plots in 2019. The number of plots can fluctuate by 5 to 10 each year based on plots having to be taken out of service due to weed issues, decommissioning or recommissioning plots. Staff from the Parks and Open Space Division of the Public Works Department are responsible for maintenance of the gardens, including tillage, and marking off plots in areas where there are multi-lot sites (3).

Some allotment plots are tilled, and others are available ‘as-is’. In 2019 the City had 151 tilled plots, known as serviced sites, and 83 un-serviced plots (2)(13). The number of plots changes as full plot renters retire and new renters demand smaller plots (16). Serviced sites are either full or half size. Full size serviced sites cost $49.35 to rent annually, half size serviced sites cost $24.68, and un-serviced sites cost $32.55 (15). No water service is provided at any allotment garden locations (2)(13).

100% of allotment garden plots were occupied in 2018 (15); the 2019 occupancy rate was 94% (13). On average the City of Winnipeg allotment garden program reaches 100% capacity each year. Although the department does not hold a wait list, it turns away approximately 35-50 interested growers each year (15). According to the Parks

department staff, the greatest demand for plots is downtown – the city has no allotment plots downtown (16).

The size of allotment garden plots vary between and within the 11 allotment garden sites. The average size of a plot is 944 square feet (16). The most consistent plot sizes are half plots located at the Grant, St. Charles, and Alex Bridge allotment sites. Grant plots measure roughly 10’ by 12’, St. Charles plots measure 18’ by 40’, and Alex Bridge plots measure 20’ by 25’ (16).

Gardeners interested in renting a plot must apply for and obtain a permit, licensing them to use the garden plot (3). The license agreement is subject to cancellation upon thirty days notice by either party (8). Returning renters have an opportunity to renew their previous plot until March 31. In early April, remaining plots become available to the public (3)(2).

Several sites have composting bins available and composting of yard waste is encouraged (3). In 2018, upon request by individual garden sites, the City of Winnipeg provided community gardens with delivered compost at a cost of $500 per load (15). Gardeners are not allowed to use inorganic ground cover, inorganic soil amendments, chemical pesticides, herbicides, salts or other products that may risk public health or soil quality (8). Gardeners are expected to keep their plots in good order, controlling weeds, and cleaning up litter in and around the garden area. Gardens must be planted by June 15 and cleared by October 15 (8).

Vegetables may not be sold from allotment plots or community gardens on City owned property, however gardeners may choose to donate extra produce to local food banks and community kitchens. This practice is greatly encouraged and noted as a primary benefit of the garden allotment rental program (3).

Community Run Gardens

These community gardening sites are gardens on City property but managed and run by community groups and organizations under terms of obtaining a lease agreement from the City. In order to establish a community-run garden, there must be a group, which is a legal entity capable of entering into a lease agreement with the City. That legal entity must also have liability insurance, with the City listed as a co-insured (11).

While community run gardens require a lease agreement with the City, a lease from the City has been under construction for numerous years. In the interim, the Department has been allowing groups to begin gardening with permission subject to having them enter into a lease agreement in the future, once the lease is completed (11). At present, should a community garden fail, the group is responsible for restoring the property to its former state (12). In 2020 the City began to again make progress on lease agreements, sending contracts to three community gardens. Approximately 10 other community gardens remain without lease agreements (26).

Regulatory Context

The City has broad authority to deal with City-owned property, and does this through zoning by-laws, development plans, and land use policies that describe the permitted uses of land (10).

OurWinnipeg, the City's municipal development plan, recognizes that local food production is part of a vital and healthy neighbourhood (6). This plan directs the City to respond to food needs by working through community partnerships, and includes the following enabling strategies:

- Pursue opportunities to support local food production;
- Include food in planning for neighbourhood revitalization;
- Develop planning tools to manage the sustainability of existing community gardens and to enable the creation of new permanent or temporary gardens; and
- Maintain an inventory of city properties suitable for food production (6).

Zoning By-law 200/2006 defines community gardens as "a public use of land for the cultivation of fruits, flowers, vegetables, or ornamental plants by more than one person or family." Community gardens are permitted principal uses in all residential districts, all parks and recreation districts, as well as "C1" – Commercial Neighbourhood and "C2" – Commercial Community zoning districts. The above definition allows for public use of land by more than one person or group for cultivation (15).

Winnipeg's Climate Change Action Plan includes a key direction 1.7 to increase opportunities to respond to food needs throughout Winnipeg and increase access to local and sustainable food. It directs the Office of Sustainability to work with the Winnipeg Food Council to support local food production and urban agriculture for green house gas emissions reductions. The Plan also lists City allotment garden rentals as a current initiative for community climate resiliency (7).

The benefits of community gardens for newcomers and low-income populations are further outlined in the Newcomer Welcome and Inclusion Strategy adopted by Council in February 2020 (28), and the draft Poverty Reduction Strategy presented at Executive Policy Committee in April 2020 (29).

Provincial laws and considerations

Soil in some communities or neighbourhoods in urban areas may contain contaminants, most often the result of previous land use activities in that area. The Province of Manitoba has produced a fact sheet on soil contaminants which states there is a very small risk of exposure to contaminants from eating vegetables grown in contaminated soil, provided risks are mitigated by washing vegetables before consumption. (14)

Community Gardens Survey Results

In spring, 2020, the Winnipeg Food Council undertook a rapid consultation period with community gardens in response to COVID-19, to identify the spread of community gardens in the city as well as their various characteristics and needs. Through the work of a volunteer, a short questionnaire was compiled and distributed to organizers of community run gardens across the city. The results represent only a high level starting point for data collection on community gardens in Winnipeg, intended to give a general overview of the various characteristics and amenities of gardens in Winnipeg. Data on 45 different garden sites was collected; these garden sites represent 895 gardeners. All survey questions were open ended, and respondents were able to respond as they felt appropriate.

Garden site locations

32 gardens stated they were located on City of Winnipeg property, 9 were located on private property, 2 were located at schools, and 2 were located on Manitoba Hydro lands. Almost all gardens surveyed operate by renting plots to community members who manage their own plot throughout the summer. Several gardens also include communal plots.

Water access

Respondents were asked about water access at community gardens. Of the 45 sites, only 4 said they had no on-site water access and relied on gardeners bringing their own water. 12 sites listed rain barrels as their only water source. These rain barrels were used to collect rainwater off of neighbouring buildings, and some were also filled with water from a hose when necessary. Several respondents reported that relying on rain barrels for water collection off of buildings alone was not adequate to meet garden water needs. Between gardens reporting no water access and those using only rain barrels, the number of gardens with inadequate water access rises to 16, or 38% of garden sites responding. In 4 incidences, rain barrels were also reported as supplementary water sources to other methods.

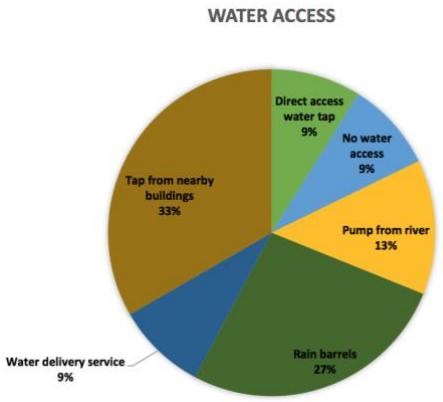


Figure 1: Reliable water access for community gardens remains a challenge. Primarily, gardens rely on taps from nearby buildings, or rain water collection.

6 sites stated they pumped water from adjacent rivers. 15 gardens listed taps from a nearby building to be their water source, and 4 gardens reported having direct access to a dedicated water line. 4 garden sites stated they relied on water truck service to haul in water and fill water totes.

While the placement of water totes at community garden sites could be a solution for water access, many garden organizers cited filling water totes to be time consuming and onerous, particularly for those depending on limited staff, and not having reliable access to a water tap or key. These issues would have to be addressed to make water totes a useful solution for water access at community gardens.

Gardener demographics

The survey asked garden organizers about gardener demographics in a short answer response question to get an idea of who gardens in Winnipeg. Primarily, respondents said gardens were used by the general public/neighbouring residents (n=21), followed by seniors (n=18) and newcomers (n=18). Other garden users included children/youth/students (n=6), Indigenous families (n=1), young families (n=1), single adults (n=1), and low income (n=1).

Gardener Demographics	
General public/neighbouring residents	21
Seniors	18
Newcomers	18
Children/youth/students	6
Indigenous families	1
Young families	1
Single adults	1
Low income	1

Table 1: Beyond the use of community garden space for the general public, newcomers and seniors are most likely to use community gardens.

Size of garden space

Of the 45 garden sites represented in our survey, 42 provided garden dimensions. These gardens combined place 34,658 square metres or 3.47 hectares under food production in Winnipeg (373,059 square feet or 8.56 acres). There is a wide range of garden and plot sizes. The largest garden surveyed is 12,949.94 square metres and contains 111 plots. The smallest garden is 2.97 square metres and contains 2 communal plots. The largest plot size is 116.13 square metres, and the smallest plot size is 1.86 square metres.

2 gardens are very large with over 100 gardeners each, and more than 11,148.36 square metres of growing space. There are also 9 medium sized gardens ranging between 2,099.98 and 278.71 square metres of growing space, and 31 small gardens under 126.35 square metres.

Garden Size	
Large >11,148 m2	2
Medium 2,100 – 279 m2	9
Small <126 m2	31

Table 2: The majority of community garden sites are small, at less than 126 m2.

The vast majority of garden sites are small gardens. 25 of the 31 small garden sites are run by four different non-profit organizations operating in Winnipeg's inner city neighbourhoods, where there is less access to greenspace, and gardens are more likely to be located on vacant land/buildable lots. Indeed, GIS research into gardens in Winnipeg's inner city published by Osadic in 2020 found that inner city neighbourhoods contain approximately 5% of the city's green space, while having 21.5% of the population (24).

Occupancy rates and number of gardeners

37 of 45 garden sites responded to occupancy rate questions. The average occupancy rate was 86.9%. All medium and large sized gardens report having a 100% occupancy rate. Only small gardens have less than 100% occupancy for garden plots, however their occupancy rate is still high, at 83.8%. The most common deterrents listed to full occupancy were vandalism, theft, and poor water access.

The two largest gardens represent over 211 gardeners, medium size gardens account for 278 gardeners, and small gardens account for more than 403 gardeners.

Legal and Policy Barriers to Community Gardening

Research conducted in 2013 outlines several barriers to community gardening in Winnipeg. In conversation with City of Winnipeg, Naturalist Services Branch, it appears many of these barriers continue to exist (9), including land use policies, access to water, vague policy statements, and lack of integration of the community gardens policy into the City's overall policy framework.

Integration of community gardens policy

The community gardens policy is not well integrated into the City's overall policy framework. Conflict between competing land use interests can therefor put community gardens at a disadvantage. This is particularly an issue for those community gardens located on buildable lots highly suitable for development. Integrating community gardening into policy when new greenspace is developed or neighbourhoods go through revitalization could ease land use conflict (10).

Available public reserve lands in the inner city

The City can act more proactively to allocate land for public green spaces, and use the parks zoning designation to protect community gardens, particularly for community gardens in the inner city. The lack of available public reserve lands in the inner city remains a challenge. The City could introduce community gardens into available park space or use other types of government land for community gardening purposes, such as community centre or library property (10). Using parks zoning designation would also help protect existing gardens from the pressure of urban development.

Vague policy

While the Community Gardens Policy contains laudable goals, it is too vague to be effective and implemented consistently. It lacks clear lines of responsibility, leaving room for miscommunication and confusion between City departments. The potential implementation strategies, while encouraging, leave broad discretion for interpretation,

and ad hoc solutions from different departments – an issue that is further exacerbated by lack of proper integration into the City's overall development plans. This scenario has created a "shadow policy" resulting in uncertainties for all parties involved, and in some cases exacerbated tensions between neighbourhood organizations and municipal government departments (10).

Lease agreements

Community led gardens are required to enter into a lease agreement with the City, however in many cases no lease agreement has been finalized. As land security is a critical part of ensuring investments in a well-managed community garden, lack of lease agreements make it difficult to develop long-term community gardening plans. A lease agreement of five years, with one-year cancellation notice would allow community groups to make investments necessary to ensure sustainable garden projects (10)(1).

In-kind support and dedicated budget for community gardening

The Community Gardens Policy fails to provide direction regarding any low cost and in-kind services and supports the City could offer to help community gardens with sustainability and longevity. Creating new, or improving access to existing grant programs can help with access to financial capital. Low cost supports that tap into existing City services and systems could also greatly support community gardens, such as proving bulk materials at cost, or making water trucks available to fill garden water totes on a cost recover basis and helping gardens with stormwater collection (10)(1). There is no dedicated budget for a community gardens coordinator. Lack of stable funding and resourcing makes it difficult to ensure community gardens are feasible over the long-term (24). The City could also provide property tax incentives for land owners allowing for community growing (24).

Other barriers to community gardening

Two core challenges to establishing community gardens include sustaining the level of engagement required of community partners to take on the responsibility for long-term up keep, and scarce funding and resourcing from the public and private sector (24).

Conclusion

Community gardening is a popular activity in Winnipeg. Food gardens are cultivated for cultural and recreational purposes. They increase access to fresh food and help connect community members for health and wellbeing. Community gardens enhance greenspace and the health benefits associated with green infrastructure. Gardening offers opportunities for environmental education, lessons about how food is produced, and exposes urban dwellers to natural processes.

Community gardens serve a variety of purposes and thus are used differently. Seniors, newcomers, and children are the primary users of community gardens in Winnipeg. There

are a high number of smaller community gardens commonly found downtown that face different challenges than gardens in larger greenspaces. Adequate water access during the growing season continues to be a primary challenge for many gardens. These are all important considerations when deciding how the city can support and enhance the benefit of community gardens for Winnipeggers.

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Possible Recommendations / Considerations for the City of Winnipeg

Strengthen the community gardens policy:

- Expand and define the current policy to include clear goals and actionable items to better enact the policy intent.
- Direct the public service to establish and promote a template process for the development of new garden sites that includes considerations for water access, in consultation with the Winnipeg Food Council, and other city departments including the Parks Department, Office of Sustainability, Community Services, and Property Planning and Development.
- Adopt a five year lease agreement with one year cancellation notice, written in plain language with clearly defined terms and conditions
- Integrate community gardening into overall municipal development, complete communities, and environmental planning frameworks. Develop a process to unify City departments responsible for community gardens.

Enhance service provision for community run gardens:

- Resource a full time permanent staff position to support community gardens development, water solutions, tilling services, and compost application using an equity lens.
- Support soil testing and remediation or raised bed garden initiatives on contaminated sites.

Financially support community gardens:

- Establish a community garden infrastructure small grants program for the establishment of new community gardens and infrastructure needs of existing community gardens; consider partnering with an organization to deliver.
- Remove sewer charges for community gardens through amendments to the "Adjustment of Sewer Charges" program.
- Increase the Parks Department budget through savings from freezing the Winnipeg Police Service budget for one 4 year budget cycle.

Encourage the development of new community gardens:

- The City could become involved in supporting community gardens on private lands, participating at minimal cost in various ways:
    - Create an online database that connects gardeners with interested private landowners
    - Developing template lease agreements between gardeners and owners
- Promote the development of "edible school yards" shared between school and community use
- Establish more allotment gardens, particularly downtown
- Develop an application process for developing new community gardens that includes criteria on site selection, guidance on establishing community interest, garden operational guidelines, etc.

- Direct the public service to establish and maintain an inventory of land suitable for food production – which includes urban agriculture and community gardens – including in new developments, with an eye toward increasing community food assets (in line with OurWinnipeg section 03-2 Direction 8, p. 82).

Support community gardening through zoning:

- Develop land use zoning by-laws to protect long-term sustainability for community gardens.

Possible Recommendations / Considerations for the Winnipeg Food Council

In partnership with community organizations, develop a community gardens network:

- Establish and maintain a community gardens network platform to facilitate communication and learning opportunities for garden organizers, link organizers to resources, and develop partnerships between community gardens.

Collect data on community gardens to enable advocacy:

- Collect annual data on community gardens via a survey.
- Partner with the Parks Department to extend the Winnipeg Food Council led survey of community gardens to City of Winnipeg allotment garden plot users.