

DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN: LONDON COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM

(community gardens on municipally owned land)

INTRODUCTION

Community gardens accomplish many purposes including food production, enhancing healthy living and contributing to active neighbourhoods. Accordingly, the residents of London and City Council have recognized these benefits and the significance of community gardens and have expressed support for their continued development and sustainability.

Community Gardens flourish because of the commitment and efforts of many groups and individuals. In London, we have 14 community gardens on land owned by the city but there are many more 'community gardens' on land that is not municipally owned. We can find community driven gardens spread across the city, from roof tops, to schools and universities, to churches and other private properties.

This strategic roadmap is focused only on the London Community Gardens Program, gardens sitting on municipally owned land. The plan is the result of the commitment and collective effort of many. We are grateful to over 150 Londoners who participated in the consultative processes to develop our first-ever London Community Gardens Program Vision and Strategic Plan. At this time, the plan does not address urban agriculture or the broader London food security needs and opportunities.

OUR ROOTS

Community gardening originated in London in 1993 and was operated by several different organizations over the years, including the Middlesex London Health Unit. In 2002, the London Community Resource Centre (LCRC) took over and has been managing the gardens, located on city land, ever since. Since 2006, the City of London has provided core funding to support the management of London's Community Gardens Program. The City of London's Parks & Recreation Division also provides in-kind contributions, including assistance with community garden openings, maintenance and seasonal closures, watering and composting services and ongoing liaison with gardeners and the LCRC related to garden issues in parks. In addition, the City of London's Parks Planning Division works with the community to select sites for newly proposed gardens on public land; and to facilitate consultation and any necessary public processes. In 2013, following extensive public consultation, City staff completed the development of London Community Gardens Program Operational Guidelines and Procedures which laid the foundation for the consistent operations across all gardens.

Today, London is home to 14 gardens (on municipally owned land) encompassing 600 plots where gardeners grow vegetables, fruit and plants. The gardens are part of the London Community Gardens Program (LCGP) as they sit on city owned land in various London neighbourhoods. The majority of gardens are at full plot capacity and some have waiting lists due to the growing popularity of community gardening.

All gardens are grown organically which means no chemical pesticides or herbicides are used. Compost, mulching, crop rotation and companion planting are employed to obtain maximum yield. The community garden plots are approximately 10' by 10', 10' by 20' or 20' by 20' depending on the needs of the gardeners. Additional space is set aside for a composting area and for storing supplies.

The Benefits Of Community Gardening

“Community gardens build and nurture community capacity, which is defined as the sum total of commitment, resources, and skills that a community can mobilize and deploy to address community problems and strengthen community assets and strong community capacity increases the effectiveness and quality of community health interventions.”¹ Research also shows that community gardens promote healthy communities and if done properly will contribute to food security for low-income families.

For London, the benefits of community gardens are diverse and bountiful.

- Our community gardens provide delicious, healthy, culturally appropriate food and can be an important source of fresh produce, increasing dietary quality and food security. This is especially important in low-income neighbourhoods and in areas with poor access to healthy foods.
- Community Gardens are vital to the active living of London residents, providing access to a source of recreation and connecting people to nature and the outdoors.
- London’s gardens extend beyond a garden’s harvest; to community building where neighbours come together around a shared passion and community identity and spirit.
- Community gardens enhance mental health and provide stress relief.
- Community gardens can be a foundation for revitalization, beautifying areas and environmental stewardship.
- Community gardens contribute to creating an environment for a resilient, diversified and inclusive economy.
- Community gardens are unique sites for skill building and learning for gardeners, including newcomers, the underemployed, and youth

Over the last two decades, it has been proven that community gardens are **vital to the larger neighbourhood system** within London, and accordingly, are part of the City of London’s Draft Official Plan. Gardens are seen as essential to the public health and quality of life of London residents and are deemed as just as important social gathering spaces within neighbourhoods as community centres, cafés and recreational facilities.

¹ J. Twiss and L. Rilveria, *Community Gardens: Lessons Learned From California Healthy Cities and Communities*, *American Journal of Public Health*, September 2003

CHARTING A COURSE FOR LONDON'S COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM (COMMUNITY GARDENS ON MUNICIPALLY OWNED LAND)

In 2011, the City undertook a review of the London Community Gardens Program, which resulted in eight recommendations. Most of the recommendations have been accomplished, including the development of the Community Garden Guidelines & Procedures for gardens on municipally owned land.

In October 2013, the City of London embarked on a comprehensive strategic planning process in order to identify the overall vision for community gardens and more specifically, the strategic priorities for the London Community Gardens Program (community gardens on municipally owned land) for the next five years. Our process involved a series of consultations (through focus groups and surveys) with key stakeholder groups, including current community gardeners, community members who are interested in community gardening and staff from the City of London and London Community Resource Centre (LCRC). We also conducted a thorough review of community gardens statistics, information, trends and best practices from around the world.

Based on the surveys, which captured the voices of 75 existing community gardeners and 80 Londoners who do not currently participate in community gardening, we obtained critical learnings that shape the strategic plan.

LEARNINGS

- 55% of current community gardeners are very satisfied with their London Community Gardens Program experience and 39% are somewhat satisfied.
- Community Gardeners chose to join the program because they wanted to grow their own food (92%) and secondly, because they desire to spend time outdoors doing something they love. Many also enjoy the physical activity that is associated with gardening. Non-community gardeners also identified these same reasons for wanting to join a garden but also felt that community building and healthy eating would be significant benefits.
- 90% of gardeners feel they receive effective support from the City of London and LCRC.
- A majority of gardeners enjoy socializing with one another, however some gardeners prefer the solitude of tending their plot.
- About 32% of gardeners are willing to take on volunteer roles at the local community garden level, however an equal percentage have no interest in volunteering. Similar trends were found with respondents who are not part of the program at the current time.
- The majority of respondents who are not community gardeners but are interested in having a plot feel they would need varying levels of support from the City of London and other gardeners in order to be successful with their garden.

OPPORTUNITIES

Based on the survey and six focus groups with interested Londoners and City of London staff, we also identified a range of ideas and opportunities to significantly improve the London Community Garden Program. The primary opportunities include:

- Improve how London Community Gardens program is aligned to and linked with other citywide programs and initiatives.
- Broaden the garden governance models at the local level:
 - Established gardens could employ a bottom-up management model whereby a garden is volunteer-managed and maintained, with nominal supports (i.e. maintenance, insurance, resource access) from the City of London.
 - New gardens could employ a top-down model as greater support may be required by the City of London at the outset, and over time the garden may transition to a volunteer-led garden, which would reduce demand for city resources.
 - Hybrid models could be developed by different gardens, based on their needs.
- Ensure accessibility is a priority in all gardens, including providing raised beds for seniors and people with physical challenges.
- Expand the development of community gardens located on municipal lands into neighbourhoods across the city.
- Provide start-up funding from the City of London to support the development of a new community garden led by volunteers.
- Encourage and support communities to establish a garden to spruce up empty lots, deserted spaces, etc.
- Increase promotion and communication efforts about community gardens, their benefits and how to start / maintain a community garden.
- Set up an advisory committee comprised of gardeners and city staff.
- Develop a plan to support new gardeners so they can be successful thus reducing the number of abandoned plots (i.e. peer mentor program; community garden orientation program)
- Measure, document and report on the outcomes and successes of community gardens for City of London and its residents.
- Assign a Community Gardens staff person at the City of London to oversee the Community Gardens Program and to serve as the primary liaison between the City, gardeners and volunteer led gardening groups.

MOVING FORWARD

Over the next five years, the London Community Gardens Program foundational strengths and the opportunities for improvement will serve as a catalyst, propelling us forward to build an even stronger and more successful program that is recognized as ‘best in class’ across Canada.

OUR VISION

During our consultation process, we asked participants what their vision was for community gardens. The resounding response was ‘a community garden in every London neighbourhood.’ This vision makes perfect sense. However, upon reflection, this vision is not the sole responsibility of the City of London. To achieve this lofty dream, will require the efforts of many groups, working together to establish gardens on both public and private lands in London’s neighbourhoods.

Accordingly, we have crafted a bold five-year plan for our London Community Gardens Program, **in support** of this broad-based vision for community gardens. Some of what we envision is already exemplified in London’s current community gardens, and these elements will be fostered and strengthened. Other ideas are aspirations for the future.

When crafting the strategic plan for the London Community Gardens program, we were guided by **five key principles** that resonated throughout our community consultation process and that were reinforced in our research and from experience. Our guiding principles are:

1. Community gardens on municipally-owned land are most viable when they are **neighbourhood** initiated, organized and led.
2. Community gardens are successful when gardeners, the City of London, partners and neighbourhoods work together.
3. Community gardens are sustainable when gardeners are empowered and committed.
4. Community gardens are vibrant places when they mirror the diversity of the neighbourhoods they serve.
5. Community gardens are vital to environmental stewardship.

Based on these principles, our London Community Gardens Program **MISSION** is to:

Provide Londoners with the opportunity to enhance their wellness and quality of life through involvement in the community gardens program.

And, our **VISION** for the London Community Gardens Program is:

To support in a shared effort with other London partners, such as community groups and associations, schools, businesses, religious and public sector organizations and more, to establish “a community garden in every London neighbourhood, initiated and led by local residents.”

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LONDONERS OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?

We envision the following outcomes for London Community Garden Program (LCGP) gardeners and London residents:

1. **Healthier lifestyles** - Londoners connect with the land and the environment through gardening, enhancing their spiritual, mental and physical well-being.
2. **Stronger neighbourhoods** – LCGP Gardens foster a sense of neighborhood identity and spirit and build local capacity.
3. **Enhanced inter-generational and cross-cultural connections** - Residents of all ages, cultures and backgrounds, speaking many languages, garden alongside one another.
4. **Beautiful urban areas** – LCGP community gardens enhance urban environments by creating natural, green landscapes.
5. **Greater access to produce** - Community gardens provide a source of fresh and healthy food for gardeners, food that may be a critical supplement to a family's resources.

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR GARDENS ON MUNICIPALLY OWNED LAND

Our vision and strategic outcomes are lofty. And, our goals and objectives are equally compelling.

Operational Goals and Supporting Objectives

Over the next five years, the London Community Gardens Program (community gardens on municipally owned land) will excel at:

1. Administering garden guidelines and processes

- Efficient, coherent policies that meet London Community Gardens Program stakeholder needs
- Thorough garden site selection process for gardens on municipally owned lands, design guidelines and 'new garden expansion' process
- Proficient waitlist management procedures
- Effective protocols for collaborative enforcement of LCGP guidelines

2. Communication and collaboration

- Highly functional LCGP website and digital tools that cultivate learning and collaboration between gardeners, the community and city administrators
- Multi-faceted communication strategy (system-wide / garden level)
- Strategy to optimize relationship building between gardeners and key stakeholders

3. Building value-added partnerships

- Inclusive partnership strategy with schools, community agencies, local businesses, seniors' residences, etc.
- Prioritized expansion into neighbourhoods that feature a high proportion of rental or attached housing
- Strategy to mobilize multi-cultural and diverse communities into community gardening
- Linkages with food systems

4. Attracting and retaining gardeners

- Training / support strategy for new or inexperienced gardeners: buddying system; orientation program and ongoing education curriculum
- Tiered garden plot membership: demonstration gardens; ½ plot; shared plot; own plot
- Gardener skills inventory to share expertise

5. Engaging neighbourhoods in community garden expansion

- Far-reaching community awareness / public relations plan
- Common identity for LCGP
- 'Expansion Blueprint' for Community Gardens, including co-locating gardens with community facilities, parks or services, and rooftop gardens
- Annual Meeting for LCGP, with reporting protocols
- Ongoing community outreach
- Broad advocacy strategy

Capacity Goals and Supporting Objectives

Over the next five years, the London Community Gardens Program (community gardens on municipally owned land) will build our capacity in the following key areas:

1. Effective governance at garden and system level

- A local community garden structure for gardens on **municipally-owned land** that is self-managing and enables leadership from within and participation of gardeners.
- Governance models that reflect the needs of a garden
 - Top-down approach or bottom-up model
 - Day-to-day management of gardens
 - System oversight
- LCGP Steering Council to guide the development of a Garden Management Plan, advocate for the LCGP and support our community gardeners
- Conflict management process
- Renewed City of London oversight structure

2. Strong community gardens leadership

- Comprehensive strategy to attract and retain LCGP volunteers to fill leadership roles at the local garden level
- Engagement of municipal government and wider community through inclusiveness in the ongoing development of the LCGP
- Formalized community gardening forum with regular contact between all community gardeners to share experiences and ideas

Resourcing Goals and Supporting Objectives

Over the next five years, the London Community Gardens Program (community gardens on municipally owned land) will invest and allocate the following resources:

1. Access to natural resources needed for gardening

- LCGP sites have access to needed natural resources
- Creation of a memorandum of understanding which defines accountabilities and duties of City of London, a steering council, garden leaders and gardeners

2. Garden plots to meet demand and expansion requirements

- Identified / or designated public lands / co-location lands / surplus lands for LCGP
- Work with developers to designate land for community gardens
- Support community gardens on private land

3. Municipal support

- A municipal administration that weaves community gardens into the city's development plans and is committed to providing critical services to support the gardens.
- Sufficient staff capacity assigned to support current and expanded LCGP program (maintenance, administration)
- LCGP program is linked to other city priorities (i.e. London Plan, Child & Youth Agenda, London Strengthening Neighbourhoods Strategy, Age Friendly London, Parks & Recreation Master Plan)

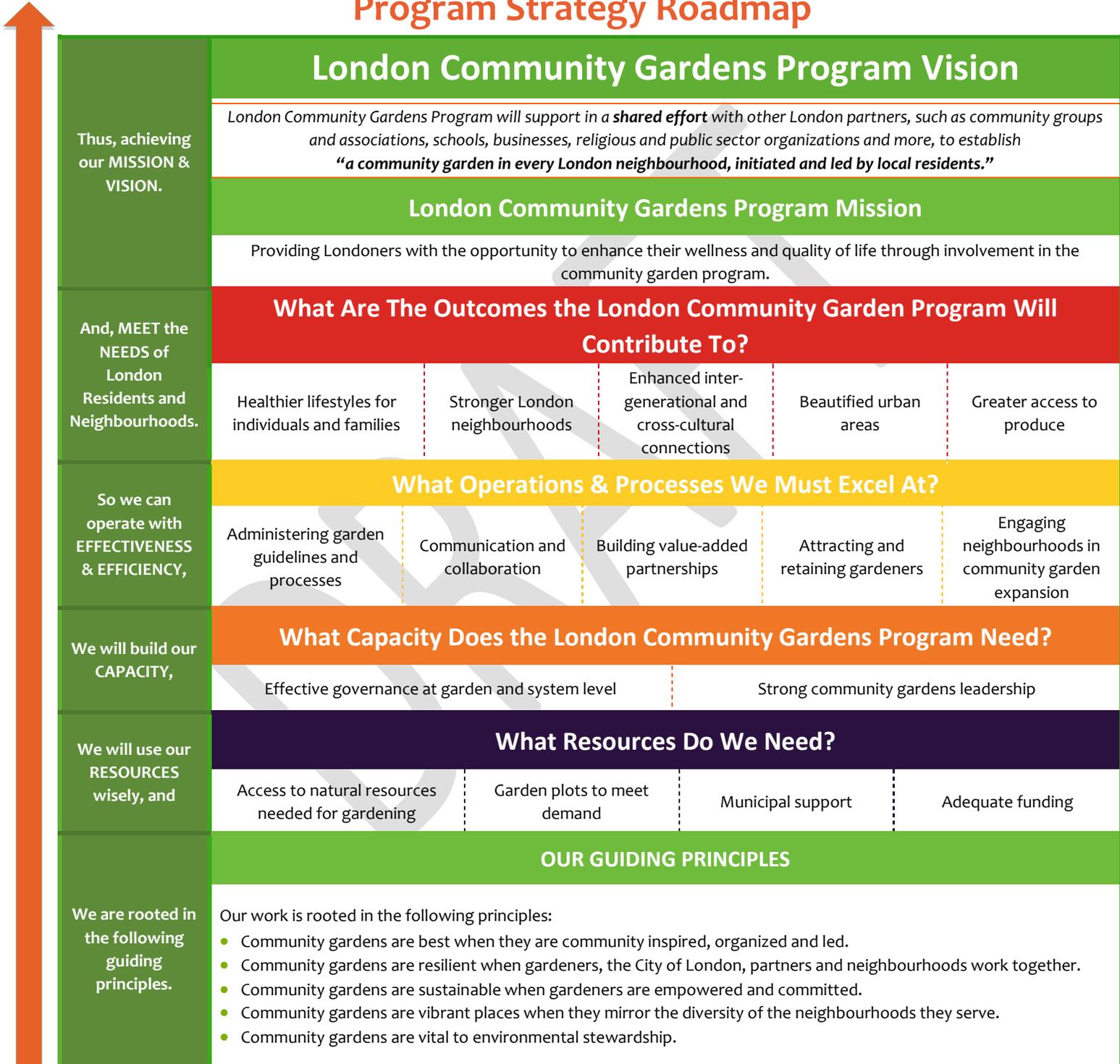
4. Adequate funding

- Plan to identify and leverage sponsorship opportunities to fund the LCGP
- Multi-pronged funding approach and processes, including a LCGP membership pricing model

STRATEGIC ROADMAP – LONDON COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM – GARDENS ON MUNICIPALLY OWNED LAND

Our London Community Gardens Program Strategic Roadmap follows:

Program Strategy Roadmap



NEXT STEPS

IMPLEMENTING OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

Our thoughtful and bold Strategic Roadmap provides us with our plan, and in the months ahead, we will shift our attention to implementation of the plan, through prioritized work plans. We will deploy the available resources to the critical projects and tasks that will move us forward. In each year of the plan's implementation, we will identify our top project priorities and actively engage key stakeholders to take action and translate those projects into results.

MEASURING OUR STRATEGIC ROADMAP – OUR SCORECARD

Over the last 21 years, community gardens in our city have demonstrated amazing accomplishments and positive outcomes for gardeners and residents of London. However, our new strategic roadmap raises the bar for all of us and inspires us to do and achieve more. We will measure these efforts and our progress across each of our strategic directions and goals. Examples of indicators of success will include:

- Community garden growth and neighbourhood penetration
- Improved gardener satisfaction rates with the program
- Higher neighbourhood interest in implementing a community garden
- Increased rates of consumption of local and organic produce by garden members
- Increased knowledge, skills and behaviours of gardeners
- More community gardens in partnership with schools, associations, agencies, etc.
- Increased physical activity and enjoyment of the outdoors by gardeners
- Improved friendships and connections to the community for garden members
- Increased sense of ownership and examples of leadership among garden members
- Enhanced community awareness about the community gardens program

CLOSING WORDS

Proudly, the strategic plan for the London Community Gardens Program (community gardens on municipally owned land) has been molded by the input, ideas and feedback of gardeners, Londoners and staff associated with the program. We are pleased with the program's accomplishments to date but we will now turn our attention to the next segment of our evolving journey. Our strategic plan challenges all of us to work together to achieve more and realize even greater benefits for Londoners, neighbourhoods and the city as a whole.