

LONDON COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM STRATEGIC PLAN (2015 – 2019)

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.

The community gardens strategic plan provides the overall vision and direction for community gardens across London. This includes gardens both on municipal and private 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 the broader subject of urban agriculture or the broader desire for London food security.

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 Environmental and Parks Planning 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 the London Community Gardens Program Operational Guidelines and Procedures which laid the foundation for consistent operations across all gardens.

Today, London is home to 14 gardens (on municipally owned land) encompassing 40 plots where gardeners grow vegetables, fruit and other 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 used 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. 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. (2)

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

- 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 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 revitalizing and 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 are a priority within The London Plan (draft). Gardens are seen as essential to the public health and quality of life of London residents and are deemed as important social gathering spaces within neighbourhoods, on par with community centres, cafés and recreational facilities.

CHARTING A COURSE FOR LONDON’S COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM

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 for the next five years. The process involved 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). A thorough review of community gardens statistics, information, trends and best practices from around the world was also conducted.

Based on the surveys, which captured the voices of 75 existing community gardeners and 80 Londoners who do not currently participate in community gardening, critical information was obtained

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

(2) Kantor, L. S. 2001. Community Food Security Programs Improve Food Access. Food Review 24(1), 20-26.

that shaped 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, a range of ideas and opportunities were identified 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.
- Work towards improving accessibility in all gardens for older adults and people with physical or mobility challenges. Opportunities include, providing raised beds and accessible pathways to and within community gardens.
- Work towards aligning community garden design to the 'Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act' standards.
- Expand the development of community gardens located on municipal and / or private lands into neighbourhoods across the city as required/requested.
- Support the capacity of local groups and organizations to develop new community gardens on private land through sharing best practices and funding opportunities through grant programs such as the SPARKS! Neighbourhood Matching Fund.
- Explore alternate locations for community gardens on city owned land.

- Increase promotion and communication efforts about community gardens, their benefits and how to start / maintain a community garden.
- Set up a committee comprised of gardeners and city staff to help inform and participate in the implementation of the strategic plan
- 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 the City of London and its residents.
- Assign a Community Gardens staff person at the City of London to oversee the Community Gardens Program and act as a liaison between the City of London, gardeners, the coordinating agency and volunteer led gardening groups.

Moving Forward

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

OUR COMMUNITY VISION FOR LONDON COMMUNITY GARDENS

During our consultation process, participants were asked 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 in order to establish gardens on both public and private lands in London's neighbourhoods.

The City's Role

The City of London's role in achieving this vision for community gardens sitting on municipally owned land are as follows:

1. Responsible for day-to-day oversight of all community gardens on municipally owned land and the development of new community gardens on public land.
2. Act as a resource for the community through information sharing and providing capacity building opportunities to current and future community gardens and gardeners.
3. Support the community to develop new community gardens on private land through sharing best practices and funding opportunities such as the City's SPARKS! Neighbourhood Matching Fund.

The Community's Role

A bold vision and five-year plan for London Community Gardens Program has been crafted *in support* of this broad-based vision for community gardens. Some of what is envisioned 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, work was guided by *five key principles* that resonated throughout the community consultation process and that were reinforced through experience and research undertaken.

The 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 and needs of the neighbourhoods they serve.
5. Community gardens are vital to environmental stewardship.

Based on these principles, the 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, the London Community Gardens Program Vision is:

*To support in a **shared effort** with London partners, such as residents, community groups and associations, schools, businesses, faith-based 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?

Below are the **OUTCOMES** for London Community Gardens 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 will 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. **Beautified urban areas** – LCGP has the power to 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.

THE PLAN FOR GETTING THERE: STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS FOR GARDENS ON MUNICIPALLY OWNED LAND

The vision and strategic outcomes are lofty. The goals and objectives are equally compelling.

Operational Goals and Supporting Objectives (Growing our Gardens Through)

Over the next five years, the London Community Gardens Program will excel at:

1. Communication and collaboration
 - Develop a highly functional LCGP website and digital tools to cultivate learning and collaboration between gardeners, the community and city administrators
 - Implement a multi-faceted communication strategy (system-wide / garden level)
 - Create a strategy to optimize relationship building between gardeners and key stakeholders
2. Building value-added partnerships
 - Develop an inclusive partnership strategy with schools, community agencies, local businesses, seniors' residences, and committees (Accessibility Advisory Committee and Age Friendly London's Outdoor Spaces & Building Working Group, etc.)
 - Prioritize expansion into neighbourhoods that feature a high proportion of rental or high density housing
 - Implement a strategy to mobilize multi-cultural and diverse groups into community gardening
 - Create linkages with food systems
3. Attracting and retaining gardeners
 - Create a training / support strategy for new or inexperienced gardeners: buddy system; orientation program and ongoing education curriculum

- Establish a tiered garden plot membership model: demonstration gardens; ½ plot; shared plot; own plot
 - Create a gardener skills inventory to share expertise
 - Improve accessibility at gardens identified by the community, including raised beds, solid surface, wide pathways into gardens, easy water access, available seating nearby, etc. This work is to be accomplished in partnership with gardeners, key stakeholders and possible funders.
4. Engaging neighbourhoods in community garden expansion
 - Develop a community awareness / public relations plan, including a common identity for LCGP
 - Establish an 'Expansion Blueprint' for Community Gardens, including co-locating gardens with community facilities, parks or services, and rooftop gardens
 - Set up an Annual Meeting process for LCGP with reporting protocols
 - Conduct ongoing community outreach, including a broad advocacy strategy
 5. Administering garden guidelines and processes
 - Maintain efficient, coherent policies/guidelines that meet London Community Gardens Program stakeholder needs
 - Establish a thorough garden site selection process for gardens on municipally owned lands, design guidelines and 'new garden expansion' process
 - Ensure proficient waitlist management process
 - Develop effective protocols for collaborative enforcement of LCGP guidelines

Capacity Goals and Supporting Objectives

Over the next five years, the London Community Gardens Program will build capabilities in the following key areas:

1. Effective governance at garden and system level
 - Develop a local community garden structure for gardens on **municipally-owned land** that is self-managing and enables leadership and participation among gardeners
 - Create governance models that reflect the unique needs of a community garden
 - Top-down approach or bottom-up model
 - Day-to-day management of gardens
 - System oversight
 - Establish a LCGP Committee to guide the development of a Garden Management Plan, advocate for the LCGP and support our community gardeners
 - Implement conflict management process
 - Review the City of London oversight structure for LCGP
2. Strong community gardens leadership
 - Generate a comprehensive strategy to attract and retain LCGP volunteers to fill leadership roles at the local garden level
 - Engage the municipal government and wider community through inclusiveness in the ongoing development of the London Community Gardens Program
 - Set up a 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 will invest and allocate the following resources:

1. Access to natural resources needed for gardening (such as water, fertile soil, etc.)
 - Ensure LCGP sites have access to needed natural resources
 - Create guidelines that address accountabilities and responsibilities of City of London, London Community Gardens Program Committee, garden leaders, and gardeners
2. Garden plots to meet demand and expansion requirements
 - Identify / designate public lands / co-location lands / surplus lands for LCGP
 - Work closely with developers to identify potential land for community gardens
 - Support community gardens on private land. For example, through assistance provided through the SPARKS! Neighbourhood Matching fund
3. Municipal support
 - Ensure community gardens is weaved into the Strategic Plan for the City of London and the City is committed to providing critical services to support the gardens.
 - Assign sufficient staffing to support current and expanded LCGP program including maintenance and administration (noting any growth to the current program could be addressed as resources become available).
 - Link LCGP program to city priorities (i.e. The London Plan, Child & Youth Agenda, London Strengthening Neighbourhoods Strategy, Age Friendly London, Parks & Recreation Master Plan)
4. Adequate funding
 - Develop a plan to identify and leverage sponsorship opportunities to fund the LCGP
 - Create a multi-pronged funding approach, including a LCGP membership pricing model

Strategic Roadmap: London Community Gardens Program



Thus, achieving our MISSION AND VISION	London Community Gardens Program Vision				
	<p><i>London Community Gardens Program will work with London partners, such as community groups and associations, schools, businesses, faith-based and public sector organizations and more, to support the community's vision of:</i></p> <p><i>“A community garden in every London neighbourhood, initiated and led by local residents.”</i></p>				
	London Community Gardens Program Mission				
Providing Londoners with the opportunity to enhance their wellness and quality of life through involvement in the community garden program.					
And, MEET the NEEDS of London Residents and Neighbourhoods	What Are The Outcomes the London Community Garden Program Will Contribute To?				
	Healthier lifestyles for individuals and families	Stronger London neighbourhoods	Enhanced inter-generational and cross-cultural connections	Beautified urban areas	Greater access to produce
So we can operate with EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY	What Operations & Processes We Must Excel At?				
	Administering garden guidelines and processes	Communication and collaboration	Building value-added partnerships	Attracting and retaining gardeners	Engaging neighbourhoods in community garden expansion
We will build our CAPACITY	What Capacity Does the London Community Gardens Program Need?				
	Effective governance at garden and system level		Strong community gardens leadership		
We will use our RESOURCES wisely, and	What Resources Do We Need?				
	Access to natural resources needed for gardening	Garden plots to meet demand	Municipal support	Adequate funding	
We are rooted in the following GUIDING PRINCIPLES	OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES				
	<p>Our work is rooted in the following principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community gardens on municipally-owned land are most viable when they are neighbourhood initiated, organized and led. • Community gardens are successful when gardeners, the City of London, partners and neighbourhoods work together. • Community gardens are sustainable when gardeners are empowered and committed. • Community gardens are vibrant places when they mirror the diversity and needs of the neighbourhoods they serve. • Community gardens are vital to environmental stewardship. 				

NEXT STEPS

IMPLEMENTING OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

The thoughtful and bold Strategic Plan provides a renewed direction over the next 5 years, and in the months ahead, the community will shift attention to implementation. At the beginning of each fiscal year, top action priorities will be identified to continue to move the plan forward. Project teams, made up of a diverse group of stakeholders will be assigned to those priorities with the necessary resources to support the work and achieve the desired 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, this new Strategic Plan raises the bar and inspires our community to do and achieve more.

In 2016, Civic Administration will create a LCGP ‘Balanced Scorecard’ which will measure, report and communicate LCGP’s progress, success and improvement efforts across the four pillars of our Strategic Roadmap. The scorecard will ensure we are on track to accomplish the vision and goals and will allow our community to share performance results with Londoners.

Examples of indicators of success will include:

- Community garden growth in more neighbourhoods
- 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 has been shaped 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.