



Integrating Urban Farms into the Social Landscape of Cities

*Recommendations for Strengthening the Relationship
Between Urban Farms and Local Communities*

Melissa N. Poulsen, MPH & Marie L. Spiker, MSPH, RD
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

With illustrations by Alex Winch

July 2014

Report Summary

In cities across the U.S., urban farming is gaining traction as a way of productively using degraded vacant land while increasing access to fresh produce within cities. As urban farming continues to be promoted by municipal governments and others, it is important to understand how to ensure these projects are viable. One consideration for urban farms located in populated areas of a city is the reaction of residents who live in neighborhoods surrounding farms. Urban farms include both community and commercial-focused models, but the defining characteristic of urban farming is its emphasis on income-generating agricultural activity. As such, urban farms can challenge traditional images residents might have for how land is used in city neighborhoods. Urban farming projects are most likely to survive and thrive if they have local support, but how can these projects gain community buy-in?

Through interviews with urban farmers, neighborhood leaders, community residents, and other key stakeholders in Baltimore City, we sought to understand the processes that are most effective for gaining the acceptance of city residents for urban farming. Toward this end, our research explored the following questions:

- Why is it important for urban farming projects to have community buy-in?
- What are the main barriers to achieving community buy-in for urban farming projects?
- What strategies or processes do farmers and others use to gain community buy-in for urban farming projects, and are these perceived to be effective?

Importance of community buy-in for urban farms

Findings from our research demonstrate that urban farms are not simply farms located in the city. Key distinctions between urban farms and their peri-urban and rural counterparts include the unconventional roles of an urban farmer and the range of services – both tangible and intangible – that urban farms can provide to surrounding neighborhoods. The individuals that choose to farm in such an environment are often motivated by a desire to make a positive contribution to the neighborhoods where their farms are located. Defined by a mission to positively influence neighborhoods, urban community farmers build social goals into their farm's model, but even commercial farmers recognize the myriad benefits that urban farms bring to neighborhoods. These perceived benefits – including the potential to increase access to fresh produce, clean up vacant lots, provide employment and educational opportunities, create community centers, and promote community revitalization – drive much of the enthusiasm for urban farming and facilitate community buy-in.

Yet in order to survive and thrive, urban farms require local buy-in, the importance of which was confirmed by our interviewees. Justifying the need for community support, interviewees highlighted the vulnerability of urban farms to vandalism and the importance of having the respect of the community so as to avoid being “sabotaged.” Additionally, interviewees emphasized that in order to make a meaningful contribution to the community, it is important to align the services an urban farm provides to a neighborhood with local residents' needs and desires.

Barriers to achieving community buy-in for urban farming

A range of barriers can negatively affect community acceptance for urban farming. Through our research, we identified several common barriers:

- Unfamiliarity with urban farming can result in misconceptions about potential negative impacts of urban farming, as well as a lack of awareness of the benefits an urban farm can bring to a neighborhood.
- Residents worry that urban farms will appear messy and ultimately not improve a vacant lot, resulting in higher aesthetic standards for farms in cities.
- Residents fear that the use of city space to grow food will draw more pests – particularly rats – to neighborhoods.
- Concern that urban farms will fall victim to vandalism engender doubt a farm’s potential success.
- With concerns about soil contamination, exposure of produce to urban pollution, and the presence of pests and trash, residents may question the safety or purity of food that is grown on urban farms.
- Some residents worry that urban farms will replace other types of development that they might prefer.
- A perception of urban farmers as “outsiders” – particularly when urban farmers are not from the neighborhood or are a different race from the majority of residents – can breed resistance or distrust of urban farms, as well as fear that such projects are unsustainable.

Strategies urban farmers use to gain community buy-in

Urban farmers overcome these barriers and garner support for their urban farming projects by employing a range of strategies. We classify these strategies in three main phases:

1. **Gaining entry into a neighborhood** – strategies aimed at gaining familiarity with a neighborhood and building relationships
2. **Introducing the idea for an urban farm to a neighborhood** – the way in which a farm is framed as the idea is introduced to the neighborhood
3. **Engaging the neighborhood** – an ongoing process to encourage local residents to be involved with the farm

Recommendations for gaining community-buy in for urban farms

Drawing upon these strategies, we present recommendations for urban farmers, city planners, and others who support urban farming to assist them in creating urban farming projects that are accepted and embraced by communities. While community buy-in is essential for all urban farms located in residential areas, the degree to which urban farmers engage local communities will differ based on the goals they have for their farm. Therefore these recommendations are not intended to be a checklist that is applied to every urban farming project, but rather a full spectrum of actions to consider when creating a strategy to gain community buy-in.

Summary of recommendations:

Phase 1: Gaining entry into a neighborhood
A. Ensure the site selected for an urban farm is not actively used for other purposes (e.g. family gatherings, parking, playfields) and provides an opportunity to improve blighted land
B. Take steps to gain an understanding of the neighborhood context (including the history of the neighborhood and potential farm site, and neighborhood challenges and assets)
C. Avoid assumptions about what local residents desire and take steps to identify ways the urban farm can provide services that they value
D. Forge relationships with community leaders or groups that can champion the idea for the urban farm and assist urban farmers to incorporate goals into their project that are meaningful for neighborhood residents
E. Avoid perceptions that an urban farm is an “outsider project” by demonstrating dedication to the neighborhood through active community involvement
Phase 2: Introducing the idea for an urban farm
F. Include local residents in the process of planning the urban farm
G. De-mystify urban farming to overcome a lack of familiarity with the concept by sharing examples of other urban farms via photographs and tours
H. Proactively address common concerns about urban farming and explain potential benefits for the local neighborhood
I. Use multiple forums to present the idea for the urban farm, including community meetings and engaging residents who live in direct proximity to the potential farm site
Phase 3: Engaging the neighborhood
J. Create a welcoming environment at the urban farm site
K. Create opportunities for residents to be involved with the urban farm
L. Provide opportunities for local residents to access farm produce; for farms with a mission of providing food for the neighborhood, consult residents to determine the types of food they want to eat and convenient times/locations for distribution, and ensure food is affordable
M. Communicate with residents to maintain a positive and active relationship
N. Maintain and beautify the urban farm to meet residents’ expectations for their neighborhood’s appearance, including creating a sense of permanence in the space in the off-season