



Urban Agriculture

The City of Tucson is in a position to promote healthy eating and active living, while also making Tucson a more attractive, livable place. “Urban agriculture” has emerged in cities across the United States as a way to increase access to affordable food and provide more green and active space for residents. “Agriculture” has traditionally been associated with “rural” areas; however,

the increase in attention to locally grown food has led to many cities updating urban policies involving land and water use, waste removal, development standards, and human service programs to account for and improve a changing urban “food system.”

There are several ways in which the City of Tucson can play a direct role in the future of urban agriculture within its boundaries. One is through land use decisions and the other is through land provision. Through its Sustainable Land Use Code Integration Project in 2012, the City began addressing barriers faced by individuals and groups to starting

their own gardens and selling locally produced food. As a first step, the Project included recommendations supportive of urban agriculture, such as allowing the onsite sale of food grown in community or backyard gardens in residential zones and allowing community gardens to be counted toward open space requirements for new development.¹

In keeping with a national trend of repurposing vacant and underutilized public lands for urban agriculture, the City has made available some public land for community gardens. For example, in 2012 the City oversaw the construction of the Blue Moon Community Garden on an underutilized parking lot adjacent to a public housing complex in an area of the city that was identified as a food desert—that is, an area with limited access to fresh, affordable food. Additionally, some public schools and churches within the City have located community gardens on their sites both as an educational opportunity and to provide fresh food for the community.

Urban agriculture takes a number of forms, including home and backyard gardens, community gardens, and small-scale farms and commercial gardens producing a vast range of edible produce and decorative plants. These spaces may also involve the raising of animals for purposes of personal consumption and/or sale or donation. When done at an

The Blue Moon Community Garden, an accessible public garden constructed on City property to increase availability of fresh produce.



¹City of Tucson Sustainable Land Use Code Integration Project: Phase 1 Diagnostic Report, City of Tucson Planning and Development Services, 2011.



appropriate scale, raising animals in urban settings can provide many benefits including fresh eggs, milk, and honey.

Home and backyard gardening are widespread and the number of community gardens in Tucson has more than doubled in the past five years; in 2012 there were 43 community gardens available to the public. These gardens are communal spaces where individuals or groups rent garden plots for the purpose of growing edible and decorative plants. Additionally, there are many school gardens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, community gardens provide mental and physical health benefits beyond access to healthy fresh fruits and vegetables, including opportunities to:

- Engage in physical activity, skill building, and creating green space
- Beautify vacant lots
- Revive and beautify public parks
- Decrease violence in some neighborhoods and improve social wellbeing through strengthening social connections
- Revitalize communities in industrialized areas²

Access to affordable healthy food and recreational facilities is important to public health. A study conducted by the University of Arizona found that 81 percent of Pima County residents have access to healthy foods and recreational facilities compared to just 72 percent statewide, although Tucson

A “food system” is a collaborative effort to integrate agricultural production with food distribution to enhance the economic, environmental, and social well-being of a particular place—that is, a neighborhood, city, county, or region.



Middle school students plant a raised bed in the community garden at Doolen Global Academy.

²“Community Gardens,” Healthy Places, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010. (Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/healthyfood/community.htm>.)



and Pima County still perform below the national benchmark of 92 percent for this category.³ Studies have shown a 10x10 meter garden plot with favorable growing conditions can provide most of a household's total yearly vegetable needs at a fraction of the cost of produce purchased from retail food outlets, at the same time providing opportunities for physical activity and positive social interactions with fellow gardeners.⁴ In addition to these sorts of individual physical and mental health benefits, urban agriculture provides benefits to the built and natural environments.

Open vegetated spaces, such as community gardens and small-scale urban farms, reduce the impact of the "urban heat island effect." This type of green space often replaces unused areas of pavement, which absorb sunlight throughout the day and radiate heat in the evening. Gardens also help

water evaporate during the day, further lowering the temperatures around them.⁵ Vegetated spaces also improve stormwater and watershed management by providing more pervious surfaces.

A more localized food system would increase Tucson's resiliency to emergency food shortages, and would reduce the environmental impacts associated with transporting food long distances. Such a system would also support local businesses involved in growing, processing, and distributing food, and make the community more self-sufficient in the event of an emergency that prevents food from being imported.

The following policies provide direction that would increase the access of affordable, healthy food, while providing the many other benefits of urban agriculture.

Children learning about gardening at the Tucson Botanical Gardens.



³Pima County Health Needs Assessment, University of Arizona Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health, prepared on behalf of Carondelet Health Network, Tucson Medical Center, and the University of Arizona Medical Center, March 2012.

⁴"Health Benefits of Urban Agriculture," A.C. Bellow, K. Brown, and J. Smit, Community Food Security Coalition's North American Initiative on Urban Agriculture, 2004.

⁵"As Temps Rise, Cities Combat 'Heat Island' Effect, R. Harris, Wisconsin Public Radio News, 2012



POLICIES

Urban Agriculture (AG)

- AG1** Reduce barriers to food production and to food distribution, including home and community gardens, and facilitate access to new markets for small-scale farmers and gardeners.
- AG2** Adopt zoning and land use regulations that promote and facilitate the safe, equitable growth and distribution of locally produced food.
- AG3** Facilitate community food security by fostering an equitable, healthy local and regional food system that is environmentally and economically sustainable and accessible to all.
- AG4** Collaborate with key partners to facilitate new opportunities for urban-scale gardens, farms, gleaning, and distribution systems.

Other Related Policies

ELEMENT	POLICY #	PAGE #
Housing	H1	3.11
Public Safety	PS5, PS9	3.15
Parks & Recreation	PR6, PR9	3.20
Arts & Culture	AC3, AC9	3.27
Public Health	PH1, PH2	3.31
Urban Agriculture		3.35
Education	E2, E6, E7	3.40
Governance & Participation	—	3.46
Jobs & Workforce Development	JW1, JW7	3.56
Business Climate	BC3, BC4	3.66
Regional & Global Positioning	—	3.70
Tourism & Quality of Life	TQ7	3.76
Energy & Climate Readiness	EC3, EC6, EC7	3.86
Water Resources	WR2, WR3, WR5	3.91
Green Infrastructure	GI2	3.97
Environmental Quality	EQ1	3.103
Historic Preservation	—	3.113
Public Infrastructure, Facilities, & Cost of Development	—	3.121
Redevelopment & Revitalization	RR3, RR5, RR6	3.128
Land Use, Transportation, & Urban Design	LT1, LT4, LT10, LT27	3.148