London Community Gardens Program

STRATEGIC PLAN 2015-2019
Community Gardens

2015 - 2019
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 London 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.
“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 other 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

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.
Oppunities

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 Gardens Program.

The primary opportunities include:

- Improve how the 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 by sharing best practices and by expanding 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 inform and participate in implementing 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.

“To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.”
Audrey Hepburn

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 is as follows:

1. **Oversight**
   - 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. **Capacity Building**
   - Act as a resource for the community through information sharing and by providing capacity building opportunities to current and future community gardens and gardeners.

3. **Funding**
   - Support the community to develop new community gardens on private land through sharing best practices and by funding opportunities such as the City’s SPARKS! Neighbourhood Matching Fund.

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.
The Community’s Role

A bold 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 sustainable when gardeners are empowered and committed.
3. Community gardens are successful when gardeners, the City of London, partners and neighbourhoods work together.
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 and, the London Community Gardens Program VISION are as follows:

MISSION

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

VISION

“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
   - Residents of all ages, cultures and backgrounds, speaking many languages, garden alongside one another.

3. Enhanced inter-generational and cross-cultural connections
   - LCGP will foster a sense of neighbourhood identity and spirit and build local capacity.

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
   - Set up an Annual Meeting process for LCGP with reporting protocols
   - Develop a community awareness / public relations plan, including a common identity for LCGP
   - Create linkages with food systems
   - Implement a strategy to mobilize multi-cultural and diverse groups into community gardening
   - Prioritize expansion into neighbourhoods that feature a high proportion of rental or high density housing
   - Develop 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.)

3. Attracting and retaining gardeners
   - Create a strategy to optimize relationship building between gardeners and key stakeholders
   - Implement a multi-faceted communication strategy (system-wide / garden level)
   - Develop a highly functional LCGP website and digital tools to cultivate learning and collaboration between gardeners, the community and city administrators
   - Establish a thorough garden site selection process for gardens on municipally owned lands, as well as design guidelines and a ‘new garden expansion’ process
   - Prioritize expansion into neighbourhoods that feature a high proportion of rental or high density housing

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, as well as design guidelines and a ‘new garden expansion’ process
   - Ensure proficient waitlist management process
   - Develop effective protocols for collaborative enforcement of LCGP guidelines

Capacity Goals and Supporting Objectives (Supporting our Gardens)
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 gardens 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 Gardens 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

“Learning to garden is a life skill and very productive. Teaching young people these skills is an investment in the future”

London Community Gardener
Resourcing Goals and Supporting Objectives (Nurturing our Gardens)
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 / or 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 from 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
### LONDON COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM VISION

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:

“A community garden in every London neighbourhood, initiated and led by local residents.”

### LONDON COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM MISSION

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

### 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 |

### WHAT OPERATIONS & PROCESSES MUST WE EXCEL AT?

| Administering garden guidelines and processes | Communication and collaboration | Building value-added partnerships | Attracting and retaining gardeners | Engaging neighbourhoods in community garden expansion |

### WHAT CAPACITY DOES THE LONDON COMMUNITY GARDENS PROGRAM NEED?

| Effective governance at garden and system level | Strong community gardens leadership |

### WHAT RESOURCES DO WE NEED?

| Access to natural resources needed for gardening | Garden plots to meet demand | Municipal support | Adequate funding |

### OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Our work is rooted in the following principles:

- 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.
Implementing Our Strategic Plan

This 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

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.