

Urban Agricultural Districts

Urban agriculture is an increasingly popular and common sense way to grow more fresh food in cities and suburbs—closer to people who will buy and eat it. Urban agriculture includes community gardens, where individuals tend their own plots, as well as small farm operations that may have small fields. Many people are familiar with the idea of urban agriculture from the “victory gardens” that were numerous during World War II. Today, urban agriculture offers many benefits beyond the obvious benefit of producing more healthy fresh food, from education about where food comes from, to creating centers of community activity where residents to come together, to making productive use of vacant or under-used land that enhances neighborhoods.

Communities can encourage more urban agriculture by designating a zoning district in which standards apply for how the garden or farming areas are laid out and maintained. Unlike rural farms, urban farms and gardens have many neighbors. By setting out clear definitions and expectations, urban agriculture can fit well with its context. In fact, various studies show that many communities with urban agricultural districts have less crime, better economic development prospects, higher adjacent property values, significant health benefits, and improved food security.

DEFINITIONS

Many urban dwellers are unfamiliar with the structures and equipment used in farming. Therefore, zoning regulations for a good urban agriculture district should include some clear definitions of common urban agriculture items, such as:

Greenhouses: Buildings with large translucent roofs and walls in which plants are cultivated. Typically has a heating system.

Hoop houses: Temporary structures similar to greenhouses with a lightweight frame in a “half-round” or “hoop” shape that is covered with translucent plastic. May be heated.

Cold frames: Unheated outdoor wooden or concrete frames with top that is covered with glass or clear plastic, usually used to protect seedlings and extend seasons for leafy crops during cold months.



PERMITTED USES

It's important for a community to clearly understand the reasons why they want to have an urban agriculture district. Is it only to grow fresh food for home use of the gardeners or farmers—or should sales to the public be allowed? Is agriculture a desired permanent use in the district—or is it more of a transitional use until other development of the land becomes more viable and beneficial to the community? Will poultry or small livestock be allowed? What about large animals? Is education a component? What about space for community gatherings?

Answering these questions will help everyone decide what the principal uses should be in an urban agriculture district. Some typical principal uses include:

“Community gardens” typically less than 5 acres in size that may have occasional sales of items grown at the site only.

“Market gardens” which include the sale of crops produced on the site, as well as a defined percentage of supplemental products that may be brought in to meet demand.

“Urban Farming” which can be up to 10 acres, typically owned and operated by a nonprofit or community-based organization with professional farmers and support of members or volunteers.

ACCESSORY USES

Once the principal uses are established, the community needs to decide what supporting, or “accessory” uses need to be allowed so those uses can be fully realized. Typical accessory uses include:

- Greenhouses, hoop houses, cold frames, and similar structures used to extend the growing season
- Compost bins, fences, rain barrel systems, chicken coops, beehives, and other structures typically associated with growing and agriculture.
- Open space associated with and intended for use as gardens, staging and resting.
- Farm stands, usually seasonal only, with limited hours.
- Signs, typically limited to informational and directional.
- Benches, bike racks, shade shelters, picnic tables, and children’s play areas and other facilities for farmers and gardeners.
- Raised and accessible planting beds
- Rest-room facilities with composting toilets.
- Off-street parking and walkways.



STANDARDS FOR THE URBAN AGRICULTURE DISTRICT

Based on the principal and accessory uses, the community may then turn to some of the more specific details, or “standards,” for how the structures and lay out of farms and gardens in the Urban Agricultural District should be configure. Standards may vary, depending on the character and density of development in the district. Some typical standards include:

- **Setbacks:** Buildings should be no closer than five (5) feet from a residential property line.
- **Height:** No buildings or other structures should be higher than twenty-five (25) feet.
- **Building coverage:** The combined area of all buildings, excluding greenhouses and hoop houses, should not exceed fifteen percent (15%) of the total lot.
- **Parking and walkways:** Off-street parking should be allowed only for gardens or urban farms that are on lots larger than 15,000 square feet, and then should be no more than ten percent (10%) of the lot. It is also preferable that parking lots and roads on the site be either unpaved or surfaced with gravel to reduce stormwater runoff. Similarly, walkways should also be unpaved, except as necessary to meet the needs of people with disabilities.
- **Signs:** Should not exceed four (4) square feet in area per side and shall not exceed six (6) feet in height.
- **Seasonal Farm Stands.** Farm stands should be removed from the premises or stored in a building on the site during the off season when sales to the public are not available.
- **Fences:** Should not be higher than six (6) feet. If they are taller than four (4) feet, they should be at least fifty percent (50%) open (slatted) and should be made of wood, chain link, or ornamental metal.



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LINKS TO MORE INFORMATION

METROPOLITAN AREA PLANNING COUNCIL: ZONING FOR LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION

http://www.mapc.org/sites/default/files/Food_system_guide_3-18-14.pdf

ON THE GROUND: BOSTON URBAN AGRICULTURE ZONING AMENDMENT QUICK FACTS

<http://www.bostonredevelopmentauthority.org/getattachment/8a1e3014-d6c7-42ac-969f-c9bb12ccf955>

CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA URBAN AGRICULTURE POLICY PLAN

http://www.minneapolismn.gov/cped/planning/plans/cped_urban_ag_plan

POLICY LINK FACT SHEET: URBAN AGRICULTURE AND COMMUNITY GARDENS

<http://www.policylink.org/find-resources/library/urban-agriculture>

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT

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