



Growing Places
The Case for Gardening

www.growingplaces.org

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Introduction

Gardening as a Platform for Social Change

At Growing Places (GP), we believe in the power of gardening to improve lives. We help low-income individuals, families, and communities in North Central Massachusetts realize the many health, economic, and social benefits of growing their own produce by building food gardens and teaching the skills to maintain them. Each sustainable garden is designed to meet individual needs and built by a team of volunteers. Working in partnership with individuals, families, non-profit organizations, schools, and public agencies, we identify opportunities in which gardening can:

- Increase access, affordability, and consumption of fresh, healthy vegetables and fruits
- Increase physical, outdoor activity
- Improve mental and emotional well-being
- Promote pride in and enjoyment of neighborhoods
- Increase social and interpersonal connections
- Provide satisfying volunteer opportunities
- And enhance strategies to create a socially-just, regional food system for all.

Part of a network of organizations and agencies addressing related issues – such as hunger, nutrition, food security, and community health and wellness – we actively seek opportunities in which gardening can complement and enhance regional strategic initiatives.

History & Accomplishments

Growing Places, Growing

In 2001, Harvard, Massachusetts, residents Kate Deyst and Cindy Buhner heard the story of Dan Barker and were inspired to launch the Growing Places Garden Project. Dan Barker, founder of the Home Gardening Project Foundation, began donating raised-bed vegetable gardens to needy people in the Portland, Oregon, area in 1984. Kate and Cindy believed they could bring the power of gardening to communities in Central Massachusetts. In their first season, they built five gardens, using their own tools and hard work. Since that modest beginning, Growing Places has created more than 250 gardens and provided technical support to more than 1,000 low-income people in North Central Massachusetts. Organizationally, GP has successfully matured beyond its founding board and unpaid volunteer staff. In November, 2012, the GP board of directors approved its third generation of officers. The organization has a full-time director, a part-time program director, and two full-time AmeriCorps VISTAs.

Growing Places develops strong relationships and engages collaboratively with a number of institutions and community-based organizations in the region, which are engaged in related issues, such as hunger, nutrition, food security, and community health and wellness. We were very proud when our commitment to collaboration was recognized with an Excellence Award in Nonprofit Collaboration by the Massachusetts Nonprofit Network in 2010.

Partnerships have enabled GP to engage in institutional and community gardening, in addition to backyard gardens. These collaborations, along with the support of thousands of volunteers, have made it possible for us to build gardens and grow gardeners across the region. Some of our recent projects include:

- Schoolyards in Fitchburg—four school gardens in the city’s neediest neighborhoods provide nourishment for the minds and bodies of hundreds of school children.
- A senior center deck in Leominster—ten container gardens line the sun-drenched deck of the Leominster Senior Center. Partnering with MOC Elder Services, the gardens provide a healthy, community-building activity and access to fresh, healthy vegetables for ten low-income seniors.
- A veterans’ home in Gardner—at the edge of the parking lot of a residential home for 11 single, low-income vets, four raised-bed gardens offer fresh, affordable food and a healthy outlet for stress reduction and overall mental well-being.
- A reclaimed lot in Fitchburg—the Prichard Street Garden helped reclaim a vacant, trash-strewn lot in downtown Fitchburg. In partnership with the Twin Cities CDC, the community garden provides access to affordable, healthy fruits and vegetables to nine low-income households and has helped build a sense of pride and enjoyment in the Elm Street neighborhood.

Rationale & Approach

Gardening Makes a Difference

GP works to address the high levels of poverty, food insecurity, health-related problems, and limited access to fresh foods prevalent in North Central Massachusetts¹. Our work also responds to an ongoing demand for our garden and nutrition programs from low-income individuals and community partners, growing interest in promoting healthy activities in the region, and providing opportunities to build community.

GP staff and volunteers are passionate about gardening. Longtime gardeners themselves, they have a deep appreciation for the sense of accomplishment associated with growing their own food, gardening’s many physical and mental health benefits, and personal relationships built through gardening. While this visceral commitment to gardening is central to GP’s identity, our programs are grounded in evidence-based research and best practices. A review of scientific research on the benefits of gardening and evaluations conducted by gardening organizations across the country have helped us identify specific outcomes associated with the types of gardening GP promotes.²

¹ Sources: Community Health Assessment of North Central Massachusetts, 2011, Project Bread Status Report on Hunger, 2012, USDA Food Desert Map

² For a select reference review of the research literature please see list in appendix.

A scan of community assets and needs (and extensive interviews with our stakeholders) has heightened our sensitivity to issues of particular concern to our partners, peer organizations, our gardeners and the communities we serve. The knowledge we've gained has led us to embrace several key organizing principles:

- Gardening contributes to: the mental and physical health and well-being of individuals and families; the development of social relationships and connections that can lead to more vibrant communities; and the creation of a socially-just food system.
- Responsible stewardship of our resources requires us to concentrate our efforts in communities of greatest need. We prioritize opportunities to work in Clinton, Fitchburg, Leominster, Gardner, and Shirley, but also consider other towns on a case-by-case basis.
- Gardening “takes root” in situations where prospective gardeners understand and are prepared for the commitment it takes to sustain a garden and where partner organizations work with us to build logistically and financially sustainable programs.
- Gardening is not a “one size fits all” proposition; our models must be adaptable to meet the needs of the individuals, families, and communities we work with. Similarly, for each project we undertake, we must identify clear, measurable outcomes and hold ourselves accountable to them.
- GP does not just build gardens; we build the capacity to garden. This entails mentoring new gardeners until they can succeed independently, through one-on-one support and ongoing education, building cohorts of gardeners who can support each other, and nurturing local champions of gardening.
- Volunteers are one of our greatest assets; their satisfaction is a significant outcome. We provide volunteer opportunities that are programmatically effective and personally rewarding.
- GP is part of a network of organizations and agencies that work collaboratively to address related issues, such as hunger, nutrition, obesity, food security, and socially-just food systems. GP should strive to offer programs that complement and enhance comprehensive regional strategies and promote the inclusion of gardening in their conceptualization.

Programs

Building Gardens, Growing Gardeners

GP engages in three types of programs:

1. Building Gardens: installing food gardens in backyards, community and institutional settings
2. Growing Gardeners: providing education, technical support and encouragement to gardeners and garden partners
3. Growing a Community of Gardeners: working to build a network of support for GP gardeners across the region

GP targets our program to the following beneficiaries:

- Low-income residents and communities, where we can build upon our previous garden efforts and those of other partners
- Individuals who demonstrate an interest in gardening and the capacity to sustain their gardens
- Partners (community based nonprofits, municipalities, schools, etc.) whose mission is compatible with GP's and who have the commitment and the capacity to engage with the project/gardeners for the long-term

Growing Places focuses on a long-term approach to gardening, which includes "growing gardeners." Each year, Growing Places offers raised-bed or container food gardens to low-income households, community groups, institutions and nonprofit groups working in low-income communities. We make a commitment of at least two years to our gardeners, establishing complete gardens at the gardener's residence, school or community garden site. We provide encouragement and educational support until the gardener feels confident to advance on their own. Program outcomes are measured utilizing participant surveys that are distributed at the end of the growing season for five years, staff and volunteer mentor observations, and through partner observations.

Building Gardens

Growing Places (GP) supports three types of gardens:

- Backyard Gardens: Growing Places installs raised-bed or container gardens for individuals at the gardener's home or apartment.
- Community Gardens: Growing Places installs raised-bed or container gardens in community sites to be managed by a partner organization for use by low-income individuals from the targeted community.
- Institutional Gardens: GP installs raised-bed or container gardens on site at a partner's service location, where the garden will be used to benefit the partner's clients and/or as part of its service provision, and where the garden and associated programs support GP's

mission. Examples of targeted populations include school children, seniors at a senior center, veterans, health center clients, etc.

GP recruits and trains more than 100 volunteers to help build frames and install gardens at our various sites. All gardens are designed to meet the gardener's needs and for sustainability. GP provides all garden beds and/or containers, soil and amendments, seeds and seedlings and educational materials at no cost for two years to all GP Gardeners. After the second year, GP gardeners are invited to purchase materials at discounted prices through the GP Gardener Club.

Growing Gardeners

All GP Gardeners and garden sites receive:

- Educational materials, including a comprehensive Growing Guide, seasonal newsletters, handouts and occasional workshops on planting, harvesting, healthy eating and using food from the garden.
- Trained garden mentors for two years. GP's Garden Mentors are the key to our gardeners' success. Mentors serve as our key volunteers, encouraging our gardeners throughout the growing year and providing one-on-one gardening coaching and advice. Mentors work with GP Gardeners for up to two years or until gardeners feels confident to advance on their own.
- Nutrition Education. GP offers information and education to teach people of all ages how to utilize their garden produce and to encourage the consumption of fresh produce throughout the year. We provide nutrition and cooking classes directly and in partnership with Cooking Matters® (of Share Our Strength).
- Youth Education. We offer gardening workshops for our school and childcare-based garden sites aimed at helping young people understand how food transforms, from the garden to table, and to inspire future food gardeners.
- Adult Education. We offer periodic workshops regarding planting and harvesting, along with our annual Gardeners' Gathering, in partnership with the Trustees of Reservations – a regional educational and community building event in March, which offers educational workshops on vegetable gardening targeted to mentors, seasoned GP gardeners and potential volunteers.

Building a Community of Gardeners

All of our models demonstrate a strong commitment to building individual and community capacity to garden independently, through the development of mentors and supportive networks. Over the coming years, GP will pilot programs to build a network of gardeners in our target communities.

We aim to:

- Identify, train and support Garden Ambassadors. We will select Ambassadors from our most experienced and enthusiastic gardeners, drawing from all of our backyard and community gardeners. The Ambassadors will aid GP's mission of growing gardeners by modeling successful raised-bed garden techniques, and showcasing their gardens to others.
- Build a network connecting food gardeners in the neighborhoods, communities, towns and cities we serve. Working with our mentors and garden Ambassadors, GP will organize gardeners in a few pilot communities, connecting all current and past GP gardeners, private vegetable gardeners and gardeners working in existing community gardens. Eventually, we hope to build a regional network for food gardeners that will serve as a sustainable model for communities to engage in food gardening, and to realize the numerous social, health and economic benefits associated with growing your own food.

Strategic Goals

Seeds for the Future

As a result of an extensive research and planning process conducted in 2012, GP identified its key strategic goals and programming priorities for FY 2013:

- Implementation of impact assessment metrics and tools aligned with the new GP logic model (see attached).
- Implementation of a new project viability assessment tool (see attached) to determine which opportunities have the highest potential to respond to clearly-defined needs, achieve results, and achieve logistical and financial sustainability over time.
- Recruitment and training of mentors, who will provide the support and encouragement to ensure each gardener can succeed.
- Development of programs and activities that will build a network of gardeners who can support each other, and help sustain gardening in the region.
- Strategic participation in regional collaborations addressing socially-just food systems.
- Development and implementation of a comprehensive volunteer recruitment, retention and evaluation strategy.
- Building of program and project models that are adaptable and meet the needs of our targeted individuals, families, and communities.
- Creation and implementation of a resource development plan that will support our strategic goals and build a sustainable future for GP.

Appendices

Evaluation Logic Model

Project Viability Tool

Research references

Growing Places

PROJECT VIABILITY ASSESSMENT TOOL-DRAFT 11/18/12

INITIAL REVIEW QUESTIONS (These are make or break)

	Yes	No	Unclear/more information needed	N/A	NOTES
Falls within GP's geographic priorities.					
-area of need -can build upon existing garden projects -partners and infrastructure in place					
Partnership supports missions of both GP and partner organization(s).					
Has/have an established presence and/or relationships in the community.					
The capacity to garden has the potential to improve the social, health, community or financial outcomes of one or more families or a community.					
Intended impact and outcomes are clearly defined. (See impact indicators list.)					
GP has a gardening model (e.g., container gardening, raised bed) that suits the identified need.					
A suitable location is available, including land, infrastructure (water), and permission for garden construction.					
Individual, family, families, or community meet GP's income/economic criteria.					
The individual, family, families, or community are <i>interested</i> in gardening.					

AS PROJECT DETAILS PROGRESS PROJECT/ENGAGEMENT	Yes	No	Unclear/more information needed	N/A	NOTES
By-laws or other rules for participation have been established.					
GP has the capacity, (e.g., volunteers, transportation) to implement the project.					
GP has capacity to meet gardeners' language needs.					
GP is the best-suited, or among the best-suited, organizations to undertake this project in this community.					
VOLUNTEERS					
Volunteers are available to work on this project					
Volunteers' role and responsibilities are clearly defined.					
Volunteers can be networked with other GP volunteers					
GARDENERS					
The individual, family, families, or community are interested in gardening.					
The individual, family, families, or community understand the responsibilities and activities associated with gardening.					
The family, families, or community have time to garden.					
The family, families, or community have the potential to sustain their gardening.					
PARTNERS					
Committed to long-term engagement with project/gardeners.					
Roles and responsibilities of partner(s) and GP are defined and complementary.					
Evaluation roles and responsibilities are clearly defined.					
Funding has been secured, or is likely to be secured, in collaboration with the partner(s).					
Long-term responsibility for the management of the garden has been assigned, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Retaining and exercising authority and control over the land. * Managing and maintaining all the personal and political relationships associated with the project. * Managing relationships with garden participants, including the recruitment of new gardeners as needed. * Land management, including weeding, watering, mowing, seasonal preparation. 					