

Case Studies of Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture:

Portland, Oregon

By David Hess

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Since 1975 the city of Portland has supported community gardening through its Bureau of Parks and Recreation. As of 2005 the city had about thirty community gardens, of which fifteen were on the Parks and Recreation Bureau lands. The city supported community gardening with one, full-time staff person and a budget of about \$200,000. I interviewed Leslie Pohl-Kosbau, the director of the Community Gardens Program, and visited two community gardens. She founded the program in 1974 and organized Friends of Portland Community Gardens in 1985, and she has also served on the board of the American Community Gardening Association. There are a number of other urban agriculture groups and programs in the city and region; this study will focus on community gardens. However, I was also able to visit the Zenger Urban Agriculture Park and gardens assisted by the nonprofit organization Growing Gardens, so a brief description of their work will be included under the broader umbrella of urban agriculture in Portland.

Portland's thirty community gardens host about 1,000 plots, and collectively they generate a half million dollars in produce. Seven of the gardens are on private lands (churches, Reed College, etc.), fifteen are on the lands of the Bureau of Parks and Recreation, and eight are on other public lands, including schools. Notwithstanding the decades of support from the city government, demand for community gardens in this city of about 530,000 people has outstripped supply, and in 2001 the city's vision statement noted the shortage and the need for more gardens. As of 2005 about 300 families were on waiting lists to get a garden plot, and there was a three-year waiting list. The city was adding gardens, and had added three in 2004 and one in 2005.¹

When the citizens of the Sellwood neighborhood asked to create a community garden on land for a pump station, their request led city commissioner Dan Saltzman to propose a resolution to conduct an inventory of city land that could become community gardens. The city council passed the resolution and contracted with Portland State University to conduct the study. The study, called the "Diggable City," identified 289 potential locations, including areas east of Interstate 205, which the city's Food Policy Council had identified as food insecure.²

Pohl-Kosbau agreed that the area east of Interstate 205, where there is a large low-income population, would be a good area to develop. In addition, she noted several possible areas for possible expansion: "I would like to see some rooftop gardens, especially in highly desirable areas. For example, in the inner southeast, there is a huge gardening ethic, and that's where most of our waiting lists are. It looks like there are a lot of gardens there, but there's very little land. We're in schoolyards, too, and the next garden that we want to develop is in a schoolyard. The problem is funding. We have all the community development in place and the school on board, but we just don't have the

funds. The Friends of Portland Community Gardens has been able to raise about \$7,000, but we need at least \$50,000 to start a garden. A water meter costs \$10-12,000.”

Once schoolyard gardens are developed, there are resources available for curriculum development. For example, the Portland International Institute for Ecology, Culture, and Learning, which is a research group at Portland State University, has received a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency to develop environmental education in schoolyard gardens. The project, which is known as “Food-Based Ecological Education and Design” or FEED, will also integrate food produced in the gardens into the students’ cafeteria meals.³

Although there has been widespread support for community gardening in the city, in 2004-2005 budgetary pressures put the gardens at risk. By 2005 the city was facing a budget deficit of \$16 million, and the city underwent a zero-based budgeting process that required the departments to prioritize their spending. The Bureau of Parks and Recreation placed community gardens in its lowest priority group of programs, and it also raised garden fees by 28%. Other areas targeted were community centers and swimming pools. A campaign led by Friends of Portland Community Gardens mobilized widespread public support for the gardens. As Pohl-Kosbau explained, “The city council went through every bureau very carefully and said that they were not going to close community centers, pools, and gardens, and we had to find cuts elsewhere. The public spoke and we’re back in budget. I’m trying to do business a little differently by finding more partnerships and more outside sources, but I also want to keep the base in a municipal program.”⁴

Zenger Urban Agricultural Park

Ulrich Zenger, Jr., inherited a dairy farm in southeastern Portland, Oregon, from his father, Ulrich Zenger, Sr. The son ran the farm until 1954, when he stopped commercial dairy farming. He maintained the farm through the 1980s, and he was exploring ways of preserving the farm before his death in 1989. In 1994 the city’s Bureau of Environmental Services purchased the farm from the son’s cousins, who had inherited the land, as part of its plan for wetlands conservation. In the following year the city leased part of the land to Marc Boucher-Colbert, who developed the land as an educational site for local schools and Portland State University. Five years later Friends of Zenger Farm was created to develop a long-term master plan and hold a fifty-year lease on the land from the city. Its executive director is Wisteria Loeffler.⁵

The Zenger Urban Agricultural Park, as it is now known, sits on six acres of the former Zenger Farm, and it provides a model of the variety of functions that a nonprofit urban agricultural site can serve. The heart of the farm is its youth education program. The Grow Wise program serves K-12 students, who learn about farming during field trips to the farm. The nonprofit organization provides a working farm by contracting with a local farmer who runs the 47th Avenue Farm, a somewhat larger farm. The farmer cultivates a few acres of the Zenger land without charge and adds the produce to her CSA (community-supported agriculture) subscriptions.⁶

The vision for the Zenger Urban Agricultural Park includes rehabilitating the former farmhouse by utilizing various sustainable building technologies. Construction work was in progress during 2005, and it included certified sustainable lumber, photovoltaic panels, and rainwater harvesting. Although Portland is known as a city that

has a lot of rain, there is a dry season during the summer months, and rainwater harvesting can help supply the fields with water. The farm will also be connected to the ten acres of wetlands through a system of trails. New programs will include a demonstration garden and orchard, seasonal farm stand, and adult education. As a result, the urban agricultural park hopes to become a destination point for people in the city, and it hopes also to become a national model of what a nonprofit, urban farm can achieve.⁷

Equity and Sustainability

As Pohl-Kosbau explained, one of the benefits of keeping community gardens as a municipal program is that the gardens are accessible to all people. “If people move from one part of the city to another, they can transfer. It’s the kind of ideal that you would want if you were a citizen. We don’t have one group in one place that has its set of rules, and another group somewhere else that has its rules. It’s an open process and it’s accountable. I’m not saying that nonprofits are not accountable, but there can be programs that are run for certain people and may not be open to all people. Our commitment is to be accessible to everyone. That’s what a municipal program is all about.” Although there are no distinctions among income levels for gardens and gardeners, Pohl-Kosbau does make efforts to assist low-income gardeners. As she added, “I try to raise money outside the program for scholarships, and that’s been successful so far.” She is also looking at a sliding scale of fees for plots that is based on income.

Portland’s community gardens also help low-income residents through the nonprofit organization Produce for People. The program helps gardens to food assistance organizations, and the gardens generate an estimated six tons per year of food donations. The city’s community gardens program and Friends of Portland Community gardens also cosponsor Children’s Gardening Program, an after-school and summer program for low-income children aged six through twelve. The educational program also donates its proceeds to low-income families. Another way that low-income residents benefit from community gardening occurs when gardens open in their neighborhoods. For example, a new community garden that is being added in 2005 will be part of the new McCoy Park, which is affiliated with a Hope VI project.⁸

On the issue of organic gardening techniques and immigrant or low-income gardeners, Pohl-Kosbau answered that she sometimes experienced the issues found in other cities with immigrant gardeners. “I’ve found slug-bait boxes in some of the gardens and wonder how I can help this. There are language and culture barriers, and I noticed that there’s not a lot of interaction between the immigrant gardeners and the organic trends, which are dominant here. When most people come to a community garden, they know that they want organic. One garden manager has been able to bridge that gap, but she really had to be there a lot of the time.”

Pohl-Kosbau gave one example of how a garden had been transformative for a neighborhood. “At Pier Garden the manager is a fantastic guy. He found some kids who were throwing rocks and breaking windows, and he asked them if they would be interested in the garden. He asked the garden, and they gave a plot to the boys. The manager started working with them and established a relationship with them. So these gang members started working in the garden. It was all because of him: his leadership, his personality, and his ability to know how to engage other people. That’s exactly what I want to see happen, and I try to support it at every turn.”

A related development in Portland has been work to support the development of home gardens for low-income residents. The nonprofit organization Growing Gardens, was founded in 1996 as the Portland Home Garden Project with the goal of assisting low-income gardeners to develop their own gardens. Since its founding, the organization has supported about 350 home gardeners by providing technical assistance, mentors, and workshops. It has also worked with schools and low-income apartment building residents to build about 35 larger gardens, and the organization also runs after-school “garden clubs” at elementary schools that serve low-income children. In 2003 Growing Gardens built thirty-eight new home gardens and worked with other organizations to help develop five community gardens. The organization has also assisted schools to develop on-site gardens.⁹

The Zenger Farm has several programs oriented toward low-income residents. The farm makes an effort to ensure that its program for school field trips reaches out to low-income youth in the southeastern section of Portland. Likewise, the CSA subscriptions associated with the farm include some scholarship shares. The farm also sponsors plots for recent immigrants, who are encouraged to grow food from their native countries that is not readily available. It is hoped that some of them may eventually start their own farms, and a training program is underway.

Policy Issues and Recommendations

Pohl-Kosbau noted several advantages of a public community gardens system beyond those already described. One advantage was that the public system can better handle the insurance problem: “Another good reason to have a municipal system is for insurance purpose. For a private organization, it would be millions of dollars to insure all these sites. We are self-insured, and our volunteers are somewhat protected under our program.” The city also tests land in new gardens to make sure that it exceeds federal standards of soil safety.

Another advantage of a public community gardens system is that land tenure is relatively secure for community gardening in Portland. However, there are land tenure issues in the gardens held on private lands. As Pohl-Kosbau explained, “In Portland we have an urban growth boundary, so people want to develop every piece of land. It is difficult to keep our green spaces, and even the school districts are selling off their property.” She added that foundation assistance and other partnerships with nonprofit organizations will be critical for community gardens on private sites. In addition to foundation support, federal block grants could be made available. However, unlike some cities, where some block grant funding is used for community gardens, in Portland the city government has allocated all block grants to housing.

The city of Portland has a comprehensive plan, and its vision statement recognized the value of community gardening, but the city’s plan does not include targets for community gardens. Pohl-Kosbau explained, “I know that Seattle has goals, and I think Portland should also have gardens in its plan. There have been neighborhood plans in the past, and we’ve utilized them to site gardens. The citizens wanted community gardens, and we have been able to put that in our grant requests. They haven’t been doing neighborhood-by-neighborhood planning for some time, and I’m a little disappointed, because I think it helps a lot. I hope they’ll do it again.”

In some cities, such as Seattle and Cleveland, the community gardens programs are housed in the city department of neighborhoods rather than the department of parks and recreation, and the location in a department of neighborhoods seems to have been a positive development for the program. I asked Pohl-Kosbau about this issue and Portland's experience, and she noted that the Bureau of Neighborhood Involvement is not a particularly strong department in Portland. The answer was interesting, because it pointed to the strength of the department as well as its mission as a factor in the success of city community gardens programs. As Pohl-Kosbau explained, "I'm not opposed to moving the community gardens program anywhere as long as it is supported. Right now there is some discussion of possible cross-support from the Office of Sustainable Development, and that would be fine. The Food Policy Council is under the Office of Sustainable Development, so it would be a shame to have something going on there and not coordinated with our program. So I think both bureaus would benefit from cross-support."

Portland is among the few American cities that has a Food Policy Council, which is an organization that integrates a wide range of food-related issues, from local agricultural networks to urban agriculture to food security or anti-hunger work. Yet, even as food policy and food security have made it onto the agenda of the city government through its Office of Sustainable Development, the parks bureau has asked Pohl-Kosbau to reframe the mission of the community gardens program from an anti-hunger or food-related message to a broader message of health because a health-related mission would be aligned with the bureau's motto of "Healthy Parks, Healthy Portland." The point is interesting for a general understanding of community gardens and their public and private support. In some cases private organizations associated with community gardens have emphasized the food security dimensions of community gardens, probably because there is more private funding for food security work than a general mission of community building. Although the mission of food security may work well for private, nonprofit organizations that assist community gardens, it is not part of the mission of a parks and recreation department, and as a result the rubric of food security can be used as a reason for eliminating or marginalizing a community gardens program that is housed in a parks and recreation department. Yet, community gardens do provide multiple health benefits, including outdoor exercise. Furthermore, by aligning the mission of the community gardens program with the broader mission of health, Pohl-Kosbau noted that the new opportunities for private sector partnerships could emerge, such as with local health maintenance organizations.

The flexibility in defining what a community garden means to a city points to its many benefits. Community gardens are not just about growing food; rather, they are green spaces where the social relationships of a neighborhood can be built and the quality of life, including issues of health and opportunities for young people, can be improved for the city as a whole.

Based on an interview with Leslie Pohl-Kosbau, June 8, 2005, and a tour of gardens and the Zenger Urban Agricultural Park on June 9, 2005, led by Marc Boucher-Colbert, the founder of the Zenger farm; Wisteria Loeffler, its director; and Rodney Bender, the gardens coordinator of Growing Gardens.

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