



Growing Interest in Urban Agriculture

BY MINDY BRIDGES

Farmer or city slicker? It may be increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two as the farm-to-table movement grows. Urban agriculture—producing plants, such as vegetables, fruits and flowers, and raising animals, such as poultry and bees—is taking place in the hearts of cities and on the boundaries of urban areas. It can take many forms, including community or rooftop gardens, greenhouses, hydroponics, beekeeping and more.

As opportunities for and interest in urban agriculture increase, states are considering policy options to support its growth. States, along with federal and local governments, are creating food policy councils, task forces and other bodies to bring together the producers, processors, distributors, sellers and consumers on which local food systems rely. Through these efforts, urban producers can seek ways to partner with rural producers to learn

best practices and sell produce at mobile markets, farm stands and other venues.

A 2016 [Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future](#) report discusses the benefits and limitations of urban agriculture and reviews documented economic development, health, environmental and sociocultural outcomes. Benefits include encouraging social interaction, supporting community and economic development, and finding new purposes for unused land. The report also points out urban agriculture's multiple contexts and limitations, such as inefficient use of resources and unequal access and distribution of benefits.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service cites the trends in producer participation and consumer interest in local foods in a [2015 report](#). It shows that the number of farms, including urban producers, are responding to consumer interest in local foods by selling directly to consumers—for example, at farmers

Did You Know?

- The [American Community Gardening Association](#) estimates about 18,000 community gardens exist in the U.S. and Canada.
- According to the [2017 National Food Hub Survey](#), food hubs used an average of 78 producers and suppliers as sources.
- The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources awarded \$315,000 to nine urban agriculture projects and organizations for fiscal year 2019.

markets—as well as to institutions, restaurants and other buyers.

State Action

State policymakers have responded to interest in local food systems, innovative practices and urban needs by working to decrease barriers to urban agriculture and increase its potential for success. Challenges include access to resources—including land, water and funding—as well as zoning ordinances.

Some states are promoting urban agricultural practices by incorporating urban producers into more traditional views of agricultural production. For example, Missouri amended the statutory definition of agricultural and horticultural property to include urban and community gardens ([Senate Bill 627](#)) in 2018. Tennessee added beekeeping to the practices included in the Tennessee Community Gardening Act ([House Bill 278](#)) in 2018.

States also support urban agriculture through state agencies and food policy councils. The Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources established its [Urban Agriculture Program](#) in 2013 with funding and ongoing support from the legislature. The program provides funds to “promote strategies to address food insecurity and to increase access to fresh, local produce in urban neighborhoods with a high concentration of low-moderate income residents.” Projects may meet one funding priority by connecting rural and urban agriculture through training programs and other partnerships.

Other approaches to promoting urban agriculture include:

■ **Incentive Zones.** At least four states—California, Louisiana, Missouri and Nevada—allow the establishment of urban agricultural incentive zones (UAIzs). These bills allow local governments to offer landowners tax incentives to use their land for food production. This not only encourages the development of local food infrastructure, but also can help revitalize and repurpose blighted areas.

California enacted the Urban Agriculture Incentive Zones Act ([Assembly Bill 551](#)) in 2013 to authorize city and county governments to establish UAIzs for a minimum of five years. San Francisco became [the first city to implement this law](#). The California Legislature extended this authorization ([Assembly Bill 465](#)) in 2017.

Missouri passed similar legislation with the Urban Agriculture Act ([House Bill 542](#)) in 2013, which authorized municipal governments to establish urban agriculture zones (UAzs) in blighted areas such as vacant lots or abandoned buildings. This bill resulted from the work of the Joint Committee on

Urban Agriculture, which held multiple hearings across the state. The committee produced a report in 2012 to guide the legislature on encouraging urban agriculture. Nevada also allowed for the establishment of UAzs ([Senate Bill 429](#)) in 2017.

■ **Food Hubs.** To help market and sell local foods, some states support “food hubs,” which host a wide range of services for producers and often house multiple parts of the supply chain in a single facility. These spaces not only support producers in marketing, distribution, storage and processing, training and other services, they also include direct access to consumers and institutional buyers.

The Maryland General Assembly has provided multiple awards to support the development of food hubs, including a \$900,000 grant to construct one in Baltimore in 2017 (House Bill 151). Work training programs can provide added benefits to this policy approach, such as a [food hub in north-east Ohio](#) that works with people with intellectual and development disabilities and initially received funding from the legislature in 2014.

■ **Community Gardens.** While gardening in neighborhoods and shared plots have a long history, states continue to support them by removing barriers. Gardeners may face challenges in selling and donating produce, leveraging partnerships and accessing resources. Texas enacted legislation in 2015 ([House Bill 262](#)) to limit the liability of owners, lessees and occupants of community gardens. The Nebraska Legislature in 2015 created the Community Garden Task Force ([Bill 175](#)), which was charged with developing recommendations, including to encourage cooperation with and donations to food assistance programs.

Federal Action

The 2014 Farm Bill provides \$30 million annually to the USDA for the [Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program](#). The funds support the various outlets that comprise the local food supply chain and, along with the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, help farmers reach consumers.

The USDA released its [Urban Agriculture Toolkit](#) in 2016. This toolkit directs interested producers to multiple federal programs and resources from universities and other entities. Producers can learn more about soil quality, water, accessing capital and other topics.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has also supported urban agriculture, including community gardens, though its [work on brownfields](#).

Additional Resources

- NCSL’s [Harvesting Healthier Options report](#)
- University of Missouri’s [Urban Agriculture Policy resources](#)
- University of California’s [Urban Agriculture webpage](#)

NCSL Contact

Mindy Bridges
303-856-1560