



Catalyzing America's Most Efficient Civic Infrastructure

2026

Cities spend billions of dollars annually addressing food insecurity, public health challenges, social isolation, and climate adaptation — largely through siloed, high-cost interventions designed to solve one issue at a time.

Community gardens are a rare exception.

Community gardens are highly desirable, high-engagement, high-impact civic infrastructure that simultaneously address food insecurity, public health challenges, social isolation, and climate adaptation, with minimal financial investment. However, despite their proven impact and efficiency, the community garden movement is structurally fragmented, operationally underdeveloped and dramatically undercapitalized, massively limiting its ability to realize its potential.

The Urban Garden Project (The UGP) will change that.

The UGP will serve as the national backbone organization for the U.S. community garden movement — providing the infrastructure, coordination, operational training, advocacy, data systems, and capital pathways that have been sorely lacking.

We seek **\$10mn in catalytic capital over five years** to stand up the UGP as an independent nonprofit, to build a national platform, to implement a standardized Well-Being Index, to establish a comprehensive Community Garden Database, and to activate a coordinated Aligned-Action Network¹. This investment will ensure that the community garden movement realizes its extraordinary potential by building the back office support it desperately needs to survive and thrive so it can provide food, community, and climate resilience to over 10 million + Americans for generations to come.

This is not a pilot.

This is the deliberate scaling of a wildly effective, efficient, and proven civic intervention.

¹ The Bridgespan Group (2016). "[How to Scale Impact Faster: Replication or Aligned-Action Network?](#)"

About Community Gardens

We believe community gardens are critical infrastructure for thriving cities.

History



While community gardens in various forms exist all around the world, they were first recorded in the United States more than a century ago. The Detroit Potato Patch farms were established during the **1893 Depression**. Potato Patch farms included community gardens and market gardens and eventually covered 6,000 acres as they reduced Detroit poverty rolls by 60%. The successful model expanded to 34 cities around the country, providing food and income for the unemployed.

In March 1917, shortly before **World War I** began, the National War Garden Commission was established. Charles Lathrop Pack, a wealthy timberman, spearheaded efforts to aid with Europe's food shortage by organizing the National War Garden Commission to encourage Americans of all ages to grow their own produce with home gardens. War Gardens" or "Victory Gardens" were planted in backyards, public parks, and schoolyards. Schoolchildren, known as "Soldiers of the Soil," helped build 3 million new garden plots in 1917, expanding to over 5.2 million in 1918.²

During the **Great Depression** of the 1930s, 15 million Americans were unemployed. In response, the government sponsored Subsistence Gardens in 1934. 1.8 million "Thrift Gardens" were established across 43 states to combat hunger and poverty. Ultimately, 36% of all produce used for relief came from these gardens, providing food to over 2.4 million people.³

The Victory Garden program was reintroduced in 1942 during **World War II**. The goal this time was to reduce demand on commercial vegetable supplies so more would be

² [Victory Gardens in WWI](#). The National World War I Museum and Memorial.

³ R. Gottlieb. "[Earth Care: A History of Community Gardening from Schools to Prisons](#)." MIT Press Reader. 2022. must-haves, the Municipal must-haves, must-haves, Great Wars, .

available for American armed forces and lend-lease programs. Victory Gardens also eased the burden on over worked railroads transporting war munitions while supporting the vitality and morale of the American public. At its height, the Victory Garden program had over 5 million plots producing over eight million pounds of food, accounting for over half of the produce consumed in the US.^{4 5 6}

For decades following the great wars, the US experienced unrivaled growth, prosperity and scientific advancement, reducing reliance on food access programming and increasing reliance on big agriculture.

Then, in the **1970s**, the modern American community garden movement took root in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Denver as community groups began to “squat” on unused urban lots to grow food and flowers. Through the efforts of local governments, nonprofits and universities, there are now over 30,000 community gardens in nearly every city across the United States.⁷

Community gardens are, at their core, land for the landless. Spaces for city dwellers of all backgrounds, ages, socioeconomic statuses, cultural backgrounds, and gardening know-how to grow their own culturally relevant food, communally. Not unsurprisingly, community is both an essential input and output, making this form of agriculture unlike any other. Each and every community garden is designed, utilized, maintained by and infused with the community it serves while strengthening the very same community through the act of growing food.

Characteristics

Physical and organizational characteristics vary wildly from site to site. Individual gardens can have five to 500 plots, be as small as a bathtub or as big as a football field, grow food, flowers, or perennials, be run by all volunteers or a paid staff, or run on a budget that is anywhere from \$0-\$5mn or more. Build costs also vary wildly, ranging anywhere from \$5,000-\$150,000, but still significantly lower than other forms of civic infrastructure such as parks, dog parks, sports courts, benches, and pools.^{8 9 10}

⁴ Bassett 1981 / see also <http://sidewalksprouts.wordpress.com/history/wwii/>

⁵ Pack, Charles Lathrop. “War Gardens Victorious.” (Philadelphia: JB Lippicott, 1919).

⁶ Eyle, Alexandra. Charles Lathrop Pack: Timberman, Forest Conservationist, and Pioneer in forest education (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994)

⁷ Trust for Public Land (2018). “[Here’s the dirt on park trends: Community gardens are growing.](#)”

⁸ Dog Park average cost = \$250,000. “[Dog Park Design & Development: Complete Guide to Building Successful Community Dog Parks.](#)” Wagbar.

⁹ Average cost of a multipurpose court = \$300k, a playground = \$450k and a park = \$5.5mn. Tyler Williams (2024). “[How Much Does it Cost to Build.](#)” Community Playmaker.

¹⁰ Average cost of a swimming pool = \$35mn. Nicolas Desranleu (2024). “[How Much Does it Cost to Build an Aquatics Facility?](#)” Sports Facilities Companiescommunity-based,.

Operating costs for community gardens are extraordinarily low. The land is typically free or licensed at very low cost by the landowner (typical landowners - cities, parks departments, school districts, housing authorities, community based organizations or houses of worship). They are led by and maintained by community-based volunteers who are often supported by a small central office that takes care of the land lease, water, insurance and gardener management.

Community Gardens are a Form of Urban Agriculture

People are often surprised to learn that community gardens are considered a form of agriculture by the USDA. The 2018 Farm Bill established the USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (OUAIP) with the mission to support urban, indoor, and other innovative farming practices, including community gardens, urban farms, rooftop and vertical farms, indoor farms and greenhouses, hydroponics, aeroponics, composting, and more.¹¹

School Gardens

We are often asked about school gardens and if they are part of The UGP. While a similar premise - community-supported agriculture on (typically) public land - school gardens are most often tied to a school, the school year and rolled up into that school's programming which might include growing for the cafeteria. They typically source their own funding and serve the school community only. The UGP considers school gardens an ally and sometimes partner, unless they are school-based community gardens found at Denver Urban Gardens in which case they are run as any other community garden.

Community Gardens Today

According to recent estimates, in the US there are:

- 30,000 community gardens, with at least one garden in most cities;
- A growing number of community gardens, with a 44% increase from 2012-2018 alone;¹²
- 3.6 million+ community gardeners;
- 98 million+ pounds of hyper-local, nutrient-dense, culturally-relevant food¹³ cultivated annually;
- 9.8 million + pounds of donated produce, assuming 10% donation rate.

Community Gardens Deliver Outsized Return

Minimal capital + volunteer labor + rent-free land = outsized return

¹¹ USDA 2018 Farm Bill. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45525>.

¹² Trust for Public Land (2018). "[Here's the dirt on park trends: Community gardens are growing.](#)"

¹³ Formulas - People: Assumes an average of 30 plots per garden, 4 people benefiting from each garden. Produce: Extrapolates DUG's 650,000 lbs of food across 200 gardens.

Outsized Return — Undo Learned Helplessness

Not only are the food, social, and environmental benefits of community gardens vast and varied — they build on and reinforce each other. Ultimately, community gardens help to undo learned helplessness, one of the most insidious social conditions facing our society today.

- Food System Benefits:
 - Increased fruit and vegetable consumption¹⁴
 - Re-establishment and strengthening of ancestral and culturally-specific foodways
 - Hyper-local, nutrient-dense production
- Hyper Local Climate & Environmental Benefits
 - 5-15 degree F reduction in heat island effect¹⁵
 - 50-75% reduction in water use vs turf¹⁶
 - Dramatically increased biodiversity in garden spaces and surrounding neighborhoods¹⁷
 - Soil regeneration
 - Stormwater absorption
 - No energy-intensive inputs
- Health & Social Benefits
 - Increased physical activity¹⁸
 - Increased fiber intake
 - Reduced stress and anxiety¹⁹
 - Improved chronic disease management
 - "Third Places" for belonging²⁰
 - Reduced social isolation²¹
 - Increased neighborhood safety²²
 - Stronger civic engagements²³

¹⁴ <https://civicwell.org/civic-resources/cultivating-community-gardens/> 2016.

¹⁵ Okvat, Heather & Zautra, Alex. (2011). "Community Gardening: A Parsimonious Path to Individual, Community, and Environmental Resilience." *American journal of community psychology*. 47. 374-87. DOI: 10.1007/s10464-010-9404-z

¹⁶ Denver Water (2024). "[Don't put grass where it doesn't work: State law to ban future nonfunctional turf a good first step.](#)"

¹⁷ Soga, M., et al. (2019). "Gardening is Beneficial for Health: A Meta-Analysis". *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 16, 100975.

¹⁸ Litt, J. S., Schmiede, S. J., Hale, J. W., Buchenau, M., & Sancar, F. (2015). Exploring ecological, emotional and social levers of self-rated health for urban gardeners and non-gardeners: A path analysis. *Social science & medicine* (1982), 144, 1-8.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.09.004>

¹⁹ Litt, et al. "Effects of a community gardening intervention on diet, physical activity, and anthropometry outcomes in the USA (CAPS): an observer-blind, randomised controlled trial." *The Lancet Planetary Health*. January 2023; Vol 7, Issue 1: E23-E32.

²⁰ Dolley, J. (2020). "Community gardens as third places." *Geographical research*, 58(2), 141-153.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12395>

²¹ Wesener, A., Fox-Kaemper, R., Sondermann, M., & Muenderlein, D. (2020). Placemaking in Action: Factors That Support or Obstruct the Development of Urban Community Gardens. *Sustainability* (Basel, Switzerland), 12(2), 657.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/su12020657>

²² Branas, C. C., Cheney, R. A., MacDonald, J. M., Tam, V. W., Jackson, T. D., & Ten Have, T. R. (2011). A difference-in-differences analysis of health, safety, and greening vacant urban space. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 174(11), 1296-1306.

²³ "Community Gardens - Healthy Yards." Healthy Yards, <https://www.healthyyards.org/community-gardens/>

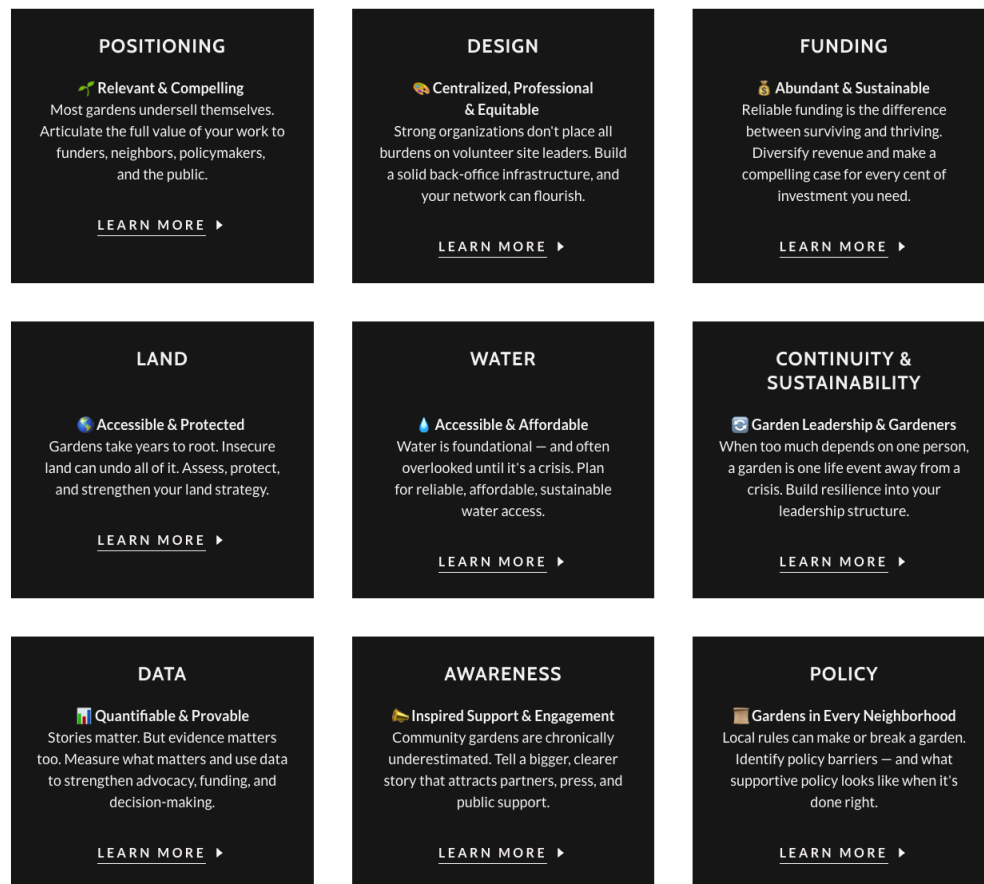
- Management of chronic diseases
- Enhanced and improved spirituality and personal growth while helping others.²⁴

The Structural Gap

Yet, despite their impact, community gardens are persistently seen as quaint, homey, “nice-to-haves” instead of “must-have” civic infrastructure by governments, city planners, land owners, and the population at large.

Why?

Following years of conversations with organizational leaders, we distilled down the 9 Factors to Thrive for community gardens. These are the things that, if fully supported, would result in strong, sturdy, thriving garden networks. The UGP will support organizations as they gain mastery over each of the factors.²⁵



²⁴ Beavers, A. W., Atkinson, A., Varvatos, L. M., Connolly, M., & Alaimo, K. (2022). How Gardening in Detroit Influences Physical and Mental Health. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 19(13), 7899. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19137899>.

²⁵ The 9 Factors to Thrive are distilled from interviews with hundreds of community garden organizational leaders who participated in quarterly UGP Forums since December 2021,.

With shared infrastructure, language, and measurement, the movement can, at last, begin to attract the level of capital and policy recognition required to fulfill its potential.

The Urban Garden Project will fill this gap.

The Solution: The Urban Garden Project

The Urban Garden Project will function as the backbone organization for a distributed national system through an Aligned-Action Network.

The UGP will:

1. Educate: Hold virtual workshops to strengthen organizational capacity
2. Equip: Provide a clearinghouse of templates and tools, group buying of back office services, and fractional leadership and support roles
3. Connect: Convene annual national conference, quarterly forums, and a MightyNetwork digital community
4. Consult: Pair high-capacity with emerging organizations to build skills
5. Measure: Design the Well-Being Index (WBI), Community Garden database, and Literature Database
6. Fund: Pursue collaborative funding opportunities for network partners

With adequate support from the UGP, we estimate the community garden system could increase threefold:

- 100,000 community gardens
- 10 million community gardeners
- 300 million pounds of food produced
- 30 million pounds of food donated

The constraint on community gardens delivering this impact is not demand.

The constraint is coordination and capital.

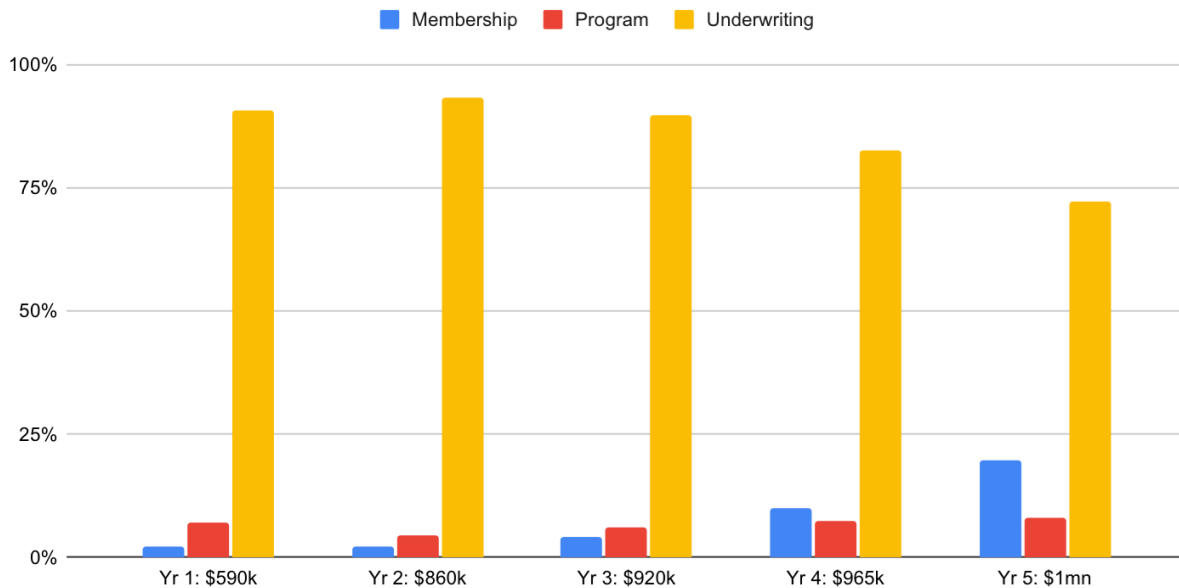
The Urban Garden Project Revenue Model

The UGP will operate through a blended revenue model with decreasing reliance on underwriting after the first three years.

Revenue Streams:

1. Membership
2. Program Fees
3. Underwriting from philanthropy, government, and corporate

The UGP Revenue Sources: Years 1-5



Use of \$10mn Catalytic Capital (Five-Year Deployment)

- Executive Director (FT)
- Development, Program (1-5), Communications, Data, Membership (PT→FT, depending on timing of funding)
- Finance, legal (contract)
- Annual scholarship fund for affiliate upskilling (x3)
- Technology and software infrastructure
- WBI development and implementation
- Database build-out
- Travel and field engagement
- Conference and convening support
- Marketing and promotion

This capital builds permanent field infrastructure - not temporary programming.

Why The Urban Garden Project Will Succeed

✓ The UGP was born at Denver Urban Gardens (DUG), one of the largest and most sophisticated community garden organizations globally:

- 40-year track record
- Proven, centralized support model

- 2.5x growth (2020-2025)
- Sophisticated funding, governance, and operations

✓ The concept has been validated and enhanced by deep collaboration with other leading community garden organizations, who now make up The Urban Garden Project board of directors:

- NYC GreenThumb
- Pennsylvania Horticultural Society
- P-Patch Seattle
- SEED St Louis
- The Nashville Food Project
- The City of Alpharetta Parks & Recreation
- The LA Community Garden Council
- Honolulu Parks & Recreation
- Community Gardens Australia

✓ The UGP was founded by a successful entrepreneur who has built and scaled several commercial and nonprofit businesses

✓ Validated by Deloitte, Fidelity Foundation, CoBank, Samsung Ads, and academic partners

✓ 50+ organizations have expressed enthusiastic interest — “We’ve been waiting for something like this!”

✓ An existing Board of Directors and Advisory Board comprised of global leaders

✓ Quarterly UGP forums have been held since 2021 with over 150 unique attendees

✓ 2025 Inaugural national conference was wildly successful - held in partnership with NYC GreenThumb and the ACG and underwritten by the USDA: 450 attendees, 100 speakers. The 2026 conference will be held May 1-2 in NYC

The UGP is not inventing something new.

It is scaling what already works.

The Invitation

The Urban Garden Project offers funders a rare opportunity to strengthen a national system that already delivers extraordinary results—quietly, efficiently, and at scale.

This \$10mn investment transforms community gardens from an undervalued grassroots effort into recognized, sturdy, and enduring civic infrastructure for food, community, and climate resilience.

We invite you to help unlock the next chapter of one of the most efficient resilience strategies cities have ever had.

Thank You,

A handwritten signature in light gray ink, appearing to read 'Linda'.

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APPENDIX

How are Community Gardens Different From Urban Farms?

1. Community gardens and urban farms are both important forms of agriculture that enhance local food systems by bringing food production close to where it is consumed while engaging and empowering local residents. Commercial production and distribution more typically happen on farms, while community gardens depend on community members to co-create, care for, and cultivate each site, growing food for themselves, their families, and their broader community through donation.
2. Indoor hydroponic and aquaponic farms are proliferating, producing food indoors under grow lights with other engineered elements. While indoor farms can produce food in proximity to cities, they have significant drawbacks: their produce is often exported beyond their neighborhoods, they require significant energy, provide no ecosystem benefits, and tend to produce expensive leafy greens. Community gardens require no energy or agrochemicals and produce a cornucopia of produce.
3. While farm production is primarily driven by market forces, community garden production rests in the hands of the gardeners. Farms produce a narrow assortment to create economies of scale and optimize profit, limiting speciality and culturally-relevant crops. Furthermore, chemical pesticides and fertilizers are often used to optimize yield while damaging the soil, the environment, and the people growing and eating the food. Most community gardens demand organic practices.

