Illinois STAR Urban Agriculture Field Form FAQs

Why was this form created?

At its origin, the idea to launch the Illinois STAR Urban Agriculture Field Form derived from a federal directive encouraging more of a focus on urban growing systems. A desktop evaluation was conducted where the IL STAR team explored the UA landscape in the state. This initial evaluation helps to broadly understand the production context, including local natural resource concerns, predominant crop types and production systems, and current and emerging conservation practices. It was clear that there is a large population of urban growers who could benefit from a STAR Tool unique to their growing conditions.

Developing this idea alongside a working group comprised of UA stakeholders, including urban farmers and university extension researchers, this form was developed with the intention of helping expand existing the STAR conservation evaluation tool beyond row crops. As the project evolved, we determined that this gap between row crop farmers and urban farmers could be filled by capturing operations that grow food for human consumption, including urban and peri-urban growers at a smaller scale.

Who should use this form?

The IL STAR Urban Agriculture Field Form is ideal for use by urban farms, community gardens, and school gardens. Additionally, any farmer growing food for human consumption is welcome to fill out this form, specifically those with multi-crop/mixed produce operations.

This form would NOT apply for orchards or large-scale popcorn or pumpkin farmers. Farmers growing corn, soy, or other large scale non-wheat row crops should fill out the Non-Wheat Field Form. Farmers growing wheat should fill out the Wheat Field Form. Farmers growing Hay should fill out the Non-Wheat Field Form.

What resource concerns are included in this form?

This form is scored based on conservation practices that address the following resource concerns:

Soil Health – Contamination, organic matter content, compaction
Water Management & Quality – Runoff prevention, water source, nutrient loss
Carbon Footprint – Energy demand, carbon sequestration, organic waste streams

An additional bonus section is also included for Social Sustainability.

Why is social sustainability included?

Food insecurity is a widespread issue and one way to combat this is by keeping locally grown food within the community. Particularly in urban areas where food deserts are common, produce grown in urban farms or community gardens has the potential to alleviate some of this problem. By considering distribution method of urban grown food, we can evaluate whether there is a benefit to these systemic issues. Additionally, keeping locally grown food within the community alleviates some of the need for cold storage and transportation, cutting down on energy demand when compared to conventionally grown produce (Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture).

We recognize that there are systemic issues that make this challenging, but we hope that the inclusion of this section in the form helps bring awareness to the situation. Farmers can achieve a 5 STAR rating without points from this section, but those who are taking steps to help address social sustainability with be awarded bonus points towards their score.

Conservation Practice Definitions

Polyculture

Cultivation of multiple plant species in the same space, intentionally mimicking the diversity found in natural ecosystems. More complex compositions and layers than intercropping and can include both perennial and annual plants. Ecosystems United

Alley Cropping

Trees or shrubs are planted in sets of single or multiple rows with agronomic, horticultural crops or forages produced in the alleys between the sets of woody plants that produce additional products, see NRCS CPS 311.

Intercropping

Growing two or more crops simultaneously in the same field, typically in specific patterns (alternate rows, strips, or mixed plantings). Ecosystems United

High Tunnel System

An enclosed polyethylene, polycarbonate, plastic, or fabric covered structure that is used to cover and protect crops from sun, wind, excessive rainfall, or cold, to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner, see NRCS CPS 325.

Microemitter Irrigation
An irrigation system for frequent application of small quantities of water on or below the soil surface as drops, tiny streams, or miniature spray through emitters or applicators placed along a water delivery line, see NRCS CPS 441.

Irrigation Water Management
The process of determining, measuring, and controlling the volume, timing, and application rate of irrigation water, see NRCS CPS 449.

Bioswales
Vegetated, shallow, landscaped depressions designed to capture, treat, and infiltrate stormwater runoff as it moves downstream. NACTO

Mulching
Applying a layer of plant residues or other suitable materials to the land surface, see NRCS CPS 484.

Infiltration Basins
An infiltration trench or basin is a long, narrow, stone-filled trench that collects stormwater and allows for infiltration into the soil, or a constructed depression where runoff and sediment are trapped while water infiltrates the soil. University of Maryland Extension