The city of Lawrence, MA was hit hard by the foreclosure crisis. In the industrial city divided by the Merrimack River, many abandoned properties and vacant lots can be found especially in the poorer parts of the city. With a per capita income of under $15,000 and unemployment rates twice the state average, Lawrence is one of the poorest cities in New England. But a program has started to change the quality of life for many city residents simply by creating community gardens on the sites of previously vacant lots.

Organizers of the Neighborhood Community Garden Initiative, including Art McCabe of the Community Development Department, want to achieve multiple goals to benefit neighborhoods in Lawrence. They want to reuse abandoned and sometimes crime-prone areas to provide residents with a chance to grow their own food. In addition to giving residents access to free, fresh, and local produce, McCabe and his colleagues want to provide opportunities for training, physical activity, neighborhood engagement, and community stabilization. They even hope to establish farm stands that could be sources of income for growers.

The program in Lawrence is already reaching many of these goals. Since the initiative began in 2011, 12 vacant lots have been converted into gardens, orchards, or parks. There is now a waiting list to join the more than 340 gardeners already working in the city. Also, the Lawrence Youth Team has now engaged more than 40 young men previously involved in gangs.

“Building community gardens gave us a way to engage some kids who are in gangs in the city,” McCabe says. “Most of them are just looking for a way to re-engage. We give them job training, and it gives them a sense of being able to give back.”

Involving young people has been one of several keys to their success, says McCabe, who spoke at a congressional hearing on the topic in July. Organizers saw that it was necessary to give growers a sense of ownership. They worked with neighbors to build partnerships and understand the dynamics of the community.

The success of urban agriculture is not isolated to Lawrence. Communities and urban areas throughout the need for dedicated people to organize and maintain the gardens.

Safety of Foods Grown in Urban Soils

Many vacant lots are brownfields. “A brownfield is an abandoned area, often used for industrial purposes years back, that has a range of contaminants,” explains SSSA Fellow Sally Brown, associate professor at University of Washington.

While some vacant lots contain contaminants, others are just perceived as contaminated due to the history of their use, with brownfields being sites of former industries or smaller commercial venues such as gas stations, even abandoned railroads. Due to the variety of previous uses, a number of different contaminants can be found including heavy metals, chemicals, and organic compounds.

Testing for, dealing with, or removing contaminants takes a lot of time and money, complicating the reuse of the area. Because of this, cities often support urban gardening initiatives and give the land to growers for free or for very little cost, but sometimes require the need for dedicated people to organize and maintain the gardens.