UC ANR SUSTAINABLE
FOOD SYSTEMS INITIATIVE

Meeting the Needs of Urban Agriculture in California

Urban agriculture delivers social, health and economic benefits and is gaining momentum across California. But urban farmers in many cities still face a variety of obstacles, from land-use restrictions and water access problems to soil contamination and a lack of information on local regulations. Drawing on the findings of a statewide study of urban agriculture needs by UC Cooperative Extension researchers, this brief suggests steps that local officials can take to help address the most common barriers.

1. ***Make zoning and regulatory information accessible***
2. ***Develop a transparent process for use of city-owned land***
3. ***Create an urban agriculture incentive zone***
4. ***Update zoning to make it urban-ag friendly***
5. ***Make water accessible while promoting efficient use***
6. ***Provide guidance and support for soil testing and remediation***

University of California
Agriculture and Natural Resources

Introduction: A Growing Movement

Urban agriculture is the production, distribution and marketing of food and other agricultural products within metropolitan areas. Its well-documented social, health and economic benefits and popular support have drawn the attention of local officials, community advocates, state policymakers, academic researchers and others. A new state law allows local governments to designate urban agriculture incentive zones, and an increasing number of cities across the state are taking action to foster the growth of urban farming in their communities:

- In 2014, Oakland updated its city planning policies to allow community gardens "by right" (i.e., without any special permit) in most zones of the city. "Limited agriculture," which includes growing crops for sale and having up to three beehives, is allowed by right in many zones on sites of up to one acre.
- San Diego has eased restrictions on urban agriculture, making it easier for residents to keep chickens, miniature goats and bees in their backyards. In addition, recent policy changes allow San Diegans to more easily establish farmers markets, produce stands, community gardens and small urban farms.
- Local ordinances to promote urban agriculture are moving forward in Sacramento, Richmond, Encinitas and other cities.

The Benefits of Urban Agriculture

Social impacts:	✓ Creating safe places and reducing blight ✓ Enhancing community development and building social capital ✓ Creating education and youth development opportunities ✓ Fostering cross-generational and cultural integration, and providing access to lands
Health impacts:	✓ Food access and security ✓ Increased fruit and vegetable consumption ✓ Food and health literacy ✓ General improvements to health and well-being
Economic impacts:	✓ Job creation ✓ Training and business incubation ✓ Market expansion for farmers ✓ Economic savings on food ✓ Savings for municipal agencies ✓ Increased home values

An annotated bibliography of studies documenting these benefits is available on the UC ANR Urban Agriculture website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/UrbanAg/files/185843.pdf

Identifying Obstacles

UC's recently formed Urban Agriculture Team, a program of UC Cooperative Extension, has launched an effort to assess needs and develop resources to support the efforts of urban farmers as well as urban agriculture policymakers and other stakeholders.

To understand the barriers to further expansion of urban farming in California, the Urban Agriculture Team conducted interviews with 30 urban farmers and community leaders around the state. This study found a number of common challenges, including difficulty finding information on municipal policies; zoning that prohibits urban agriculture; issues related to land access and tenure; high water prices and difficulty setting up water connections; and concerns about soil contamination.

This research helped to identify a series of steps that city officials and local advocates can take to help expand urban agriculture in their communities.

What Your City Can Do to Support Urban Agriculture

1. Make zoning and regulatory information accessible

The challenge: Urban farmers have difficulty determining what is and isn't allowed in their municipality.

What cities can do: Make information on zoning, regulations and permits readily accessible to residents. Creating a simple website with key information and appropriate city contacts is very helpful. San Francisco's urban agriculture website is a great example: http://www.sfenvironment.org/buildings-environments/urban-agriculture

2. Develop a transparent process for use of city-owned land

The challenge: Access to land is a major barrier for urban farmers. Land tenure is also an issue, and moving a farm once it is established is difficult.

What cities can do: Most cities own land that is vacant and unused; some of this land may be appropriate for farming. Cities can create a clear application process, a low fee and multi-year leases so that vacant land can more readily be used for urban farming. A number of U.S. cities, such as Escondido (San Diego County) and Baltimore, have created adopt-a-lot programs and land banks that successfully connect urban farmers with land.

3. Create an urban agriculture incentive zone

The challenge: Privately owned land is sometimes an option for urban farming, but landowners may have little incentive to offer their land for lease at an affordable price or for an extended period of time.

What cities can do: A recently enacted California law, AB 551, created a way for cities to establish urban agriculture incentive zones. In partnership with their county government, cities can define a geographic zone in which landowners who lease their land for urban agriculture for a minimum of five years can potentially reduce their property taxes. To learn about the process for creating an urban agriculture incentive zone, see UC ANR's AB 551 Implementation Guide at http://ucanr.edu/sites/UrbanAg/files/190763.pdf

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4. Update zoning to make it urban-ag friendly

The challenge: Urban farmers frequently experience barriers related to zoning because agriculture was historically considered a rural land use and is excluded or ignored in many municipal codes.

What cities can do: Some California cities, including San Francisco and San Diego, have enacted zoning amendments to facilitate urban agriculture. Talking with local urban farmers and urban agriculture advocates can help cities to identify which zoning issues are of concern and determine how to address them. Key tasks typically include defining various types of urban agriculture, deciding where they can take place and determining which practices will be allowed "by right" and which will require special permits.

5. Make water accessible while promoting efficient use

The challenge: Water can be difficult to access and it can be expensive. Urban farms generally use municipal water and some vacant land available for urban agriculture may not have a water connection. Connecting the site and installing a water meter can be a major expense for urban farmers, as can the cost of the water itself. At the same time, it's important for urban farmers to use water efficiently.

What water providers can do: Water utilities can provide a discount or grant for water meter and water line installation, help urban farms to calculate their water budget and encourage urban farmers to participate in training on efficient irrigation practices. San Francisco's water utility provides all of these programs: http://sfwater.org/index.aspx?page=469. Some cities discount water rates for certain types of urban agriculture. Los Angeles, for instance, discounts water used for community gardens.

6. Provide guidance and support for soil testing and remediation

The challenge: In some cases, urban soil has been contaminated or degraded by industrial activity, unauthorized dumping, lead-based paint contamination from adjacent buildings or other causes. In other cases, urban soil is relatively clean. Elevated levels of lead are generally the most common concern.

What cities can do: Support for soil testing, interpretation of results and developing remediation plans at the municipal level is ideal. Minimally, local governments should provide information on best practices for soil testing and soil management. San Francisco's Department of Public Health provides an excellent Lead Hazard Risk Assessment and Management Guide for Urban Gardens and Farms: http://www.sfdph.org/DPH/files/EHSdocs/ehsCEHPdocs/Lead/LeadHazardUrbanGardening.pdf

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For more resources from the UC ANR Urban Agriculture Team, see http://ucanr.edu/urbanag

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