The Case for Agriculture within Suburban Retrofit

By

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Background

Both the concept and phrase ‘urban agriculture’ is not only familiar among urban dwellers, planners, and policy makers; it has been welcomed and has become a poster child by the public health and smart growth communities for sustainable and healthy nutrition. Reasons for this success include the attendant increase in public and private sustainability initiatives as well as community engagement coupled with evidence that urban agriculture is an indispensible component in the national toolkit currently being employed to reduce lifestyle and diet related chronic diseases such as childhood and adult diabesity, hypertension, and heart disease. The rural agricultural sector continues to experience resurgence and growth thanks in part to the ‘back to the farm’ movement and the growing increase in demand for organic and fresh produce, due also in part to the urgency surrounding prevention and management of obesity and the abovementioned diseases.

One area of community however, remains under-engaged in the neo-agricultural movement, yet is as needed as other sectors for community and kitchen gardens as well as modest to mid-sized agricultural enterprise - and that is suburbia. Indeed, the argument may be made that suburban dwellers may be more in need of agricultural engagement, because urbanites may be getting modest amounts of physical activity due to the fact that they tend to use public transportation and walk versus their suburban counterparts who generally have fewer options for alternative transportation. Although urban renewal spurred by a growing demographic of empty nesters looking to downsize and become urban dwellers as well as expected background urban migration, keeps city populations increasing, the constant exodus of new and growing family units to suburbia is not likely to abate in the foreseeable future.

Challenges

The inherent layout designs, planning, and bylaws of many planned suburban communities frequently preclude suburban dwellers from planting community or kitchen gardens. At best, community members may be unsure if they may plant non-flora as
landscaping material; usually neighborhood/homeowner associations discourage and often times penalize community members for not conforming by planting trees, shrubs, and flowers which have been approved by the (homeowner’s) association board. At worst, planting the ‘wrong’ variety of grass or shrubs many times results in fines and an order from the community association to remove the offending plant/s. Although older suburban communities are sometimes more forgiving; the overall attitude of association boards does little to encourage kitchen, home or community food gardens.

As a result of suburban planting restrictions, at least one generation (not unlike many in urban communities) has come of age possessing limited knowledge of agricultural practices; the source of foods; the concept of whole, unprocessed foods: or that food does not come prepackaged. So ironically, is it possible that due to a strong surge in urban food gardening in the form of container gardens, patio gardens, and community gardens, urban dwellers may be on the leading edge of sustainable food practices and healthy eating?

**Opportunities**

The process of converting suburban yards, landscaping, and parks into agricultural lands needs to be addressed by a multifaceted approach, with each sector working in tandem with the others.

![Model of Components for Suburban Agriculture Retrofit](image-url)

It is reasonable to hope that a collaborative effort including school, community, and kitchen garden programs; nutrition education initiatives; re-thinking what comprises
aesthetic landscaping; and re-examining planning and zoning during suburban retrofit would produce the needed traction to create thriving suburban agriculture.

1) School Gardens

One of the best and oftentimes first places to initialize social change is with the imprintable future generation and this presents a partnership opportunity--with schools, pre-schools, summer camps, and other programs which care-take children for several hours per day. The value of school gardens in introducing children to the origin of fresh produce is being well established everyday: according to the Myers Action Institute, gardening with children at school programs may encourage children to look more favorably on eating produce due to their efforts aiding in the growth. In addition, gardening appears to foster nurturing, an appreciation for nature and diversity, and many other important life skills that support and encourage children to become stewards of our natural resources. School gardening may start as early as the pre-kindergarten age group to produce a generation growing alongside crops and produce.

2) Nutrition Education

There is a dire need for basic nutrition education including food preparation in our communities. There is an entire generation who do not know how to prepare fresh produce or meals from scratch. There is also another generation who know how to cook and prepare food but do so in unhealthy ways and practices. The primary solution for the ignorance is education, but we cannot lay the burden of ignorance solely on the shoulders of individuals. If an individual has never had basic nutrition training, how are they to know what comprises healthy meals or eating habits? Television, radio, and print media will not teach them, the messages surrounding food from the media are commercial sponsorship paid for by food companies who are in business to earn profits. We (as well as our health) are what we eat, therefore nutrition education must become an integral part of school curriculum at all grade levels, otherwise individuals will not understand the concepts and principles of nutrition messaging coming from public health, and we will continue to spin our wheels. People need nutrition education to help them sort through the current maze of diet related messaging.

3) Re-thinking Landscape Aesthetics

The acceptance of edible plant produce versus ornamental plantings could be enhanced by aggressive community education and social marketing endorsing the concept of edible landscaping as well as the beauty and health benefits of growing produce. With proper planning, produce could be found to provide year round plantings in almost every planting zone. The concept of edible landscaping is not new. Victory Gardens were grown in back and front yards as well as parks in Europe, Canada and the United States during World War 1 and World War 2 to ease the pressure on food
supply and communities embraced the concept of carrots and turnips growing amongst
the roses and marigolds. A victory garden in the 21st century would symbolize victory
over obesity and lifestyle related chronic diseases. The current concept of edible
landscaping is burgeoning; a quick search of the interwebs will produce several outfits
which offer to assist homeowners in making the switch.

Warden and Brown from the University of Florida state: Edible landscaping, simply put,
replaces plants that are strictly ornamental with plants that produce food. Edible
landscaping will [allow you to] create a multi-functional landscape that provides returns
(fruits, vegetables, etc.) on your investment of water, fertilizer, and time. An edible
landscape can be just as attractive as a traditional one; in fact, the colorful fruits and
foliage of many edibles are quite beautiful.

4) Community and Kitchen Gardens

Neighborhood and homeowner associations, community members, suburban retrofit
planners, zoning committees, schools, and public health entities have an opportunity to
partner in the removal of barriers to suburban agriculture. The prospects and potential
are almost unlimited, because unlike urban areas, suburbia has more available land for
growing produce as well as soil that may be more nutrient rich and less exposed to
toxins (depending on the level of prior pesticide use). Current and past use of pesticides
on landscaping and lawns, etc. would need to be addressed and although there may be
areas where the soil is unusable, lined beds or containers could readily be put to use.

5) Partnerships

The engagement of partners and stakeholders in the establishment of suburban
agriculture will need champions, entities to take ownership and these champions may
well emerge from the community itself. The list of potential partners is exhaustive,
however, entities to invite to the conversation include retailers who provide garden
supplies, local nurseries and landscape companies, local health departments, school
boards, local government entities and planners, real estate and community developers,
academic agricultural extensions, community and faith based organizations, and non-
profit health care providers through their community benefit initiatives.

Conclusion

Suburban agriculture may offer an exciting and rewarding opportunity to address our
national struggle with weight, diet and diet related chronic disease, and community
connection; there may also be economic and employment opportunities that emerge in
some communities. The numerous benefits of suburban agriculture thus merit
encouragement in locations where it is a fledgling enterprise and introduction where it may be well needed.

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