

# Urban Agriculture in Ohio

Ohio is a diverse state with a large agricultural economy throughout its 88 counties. Ohio is the 7<sup>th</sup> most populous state in the United States and has a large number of cities and metropolitan areas where urban agriculture is thriving. Below is a brief overview of the urban agriculture landscape in seven of Ohio's largest cities along with examples of how Ohio State University Extension programming supports urban agriculture in these urban areas.

## Urban Agriculture in Columbus

Columbus is the 14<sup>th</sup> largest city in the United States and one of the fastest growing cities in the country. Urban agriculture is growing in size and scope in Columbus as well. The number of urban farms in the Columbus metropolitan area has grown from approximately seven urban farms in 2014 to nearly 40 urban farms in 2024. While some urban farms in Columbus are operated as private for-profit businesses, urban farms operated as social enterprises by non-profit organizations predominate the urban farm landscape. Many urban farms in Columbus operate on land bank properties leased from the City of Columbus. In 2016, the City of Columbus and Franklin County developed a Local Food Action Plan, a community effort to create a stronger, more sustainable local food system. This plan has helped to guide the development of urban agriculture in the Columbus Metro area.



Urban farmers in Columbus market their products directly to consumers at dozens of farmers markets in the metropolitan area, through CSAs, and some farms sell directly to restaurants and institutions. Many urban farms donate produce to address food insecurity in the community.

Hundreds of community garden projects are in the Columbus metropolitan area, many exist to address food insecurity at the neighborhood level. Several community garden projects address food insecurity and job or life skill development for different audiences including youth, New Americans, and refugee communities. Ohio State University Extension leads the largest Master Gardener Volunteer (MGV) program in Ohio, and a majority of MGV projects in Columbus are urban community food projects. In 2023, Master Gardener Volunteers produced more than 38,316 pounds of vegetables, fruits, and herbs for 25 food pantries in the community.

Ohio State University Extension provides a comprehensive and impactful urban agriculture program in Columbus including a Master Urban Farmer training program which has graduated 361 individuals; an extensive 4-H youth and school gardening program which includes a statewide School Gardening Conference and a 4-H SPIN club program on urban gardening; a new agriculture career pathways program targeted to 8th graders in urban core neighborhoods; and a Growing Teachers Throughout the Seasons program which trains teachers to use outdoor raised beds and indoor hydroponic units in the classroom.



## Urban Agriculture in Cleveland

Cuyahoga County is home to 1.2 million individuals, with about 350,000 individuals residing in the city of Cleveland. A recurring theme in the city that continues to the present day is that during difficult economic periods, members of the community come together to raise food on city land. The working men's farms during the Great Depression; the victory gardens during World War II and revived later during the Covid-19 pandemic; community gardens initiated during the years of urban renewal; and the market gardeners of the current local food and food sovereignty movements are all examples of Cleveland's resilience and reliance on urban agriculture in times of need.

Cleveland has over 140 community gardens, with two of the largest and longstanding gardens being Kentucky Gardens in the Ohio City neighborhood and the Ben Franklin community garden near Ben Franklin school in the Old Brooklyn neighborhood. The city is home to the Ohio City Farm and Village Family Farms, an urban farming compound in the Hough neighborhood that is committed to sustainable farming practices that not only provide nutritious, delicious food to the community, but also promote the health of the land and environment. The Rid-All Green Partnership can be found in the Kinsman neighborhood. Rid-All is an agricultural and social enterprise that not only serves as a model for food production and local economic development, but also serves as a learning hub for innovative urban agriculture and community outreach. Ohio State University Extension in Cuyahoga County offers many programs to support urban farmers and community gardeners such as the Market Gardener Training program that accompanies the City of Cleveland's Gardening for Greenbacks Grant program that offers financial support in addition to the education and technical support growers need to enter into commercial markets. The Cuyahoga County Extension Dig In Community Gardener Training prepares interested residents to start garden projects in Cleveland neighborhoods and matches them with Master Gardener Volunteer mentors for support.

## Urban Agriculture in Cincinnati

Cincinnati has a rich and growing agriculture network that is working diligently to meet the food needs of all community members. While the city boasts 66 farms, 24 CSA operations, and 49 farmers' markets, Cincinnati faces significant challenges rooted in equitable access to food. A substantial portion of Cincinnati's Black, Indigenous, and other populations of color live in food deserts, where residents have little or no access to healthy, fresh foods. Many have gone as far as to call this particular issue "food apartheid."

The Ohio State University Extension Hamilton County team is uniquely positioned to align with the urban agriculture goals of the city of Cincinnati to work towards eliminating food deserts in Cincinnati by bringing local government, community organizations, farmers, community development corporations, and food system entrepreneurs together to create a participant-friendly and efficient urban food systems network. This network inherently requires a myriad of support that Ohio State University Extension can provide to drive success. Long-term goals to support a successful urban agriculture landscape in Cincinnati include creating pathways into green industry careers for students in grades K-12, developing programs and curricula that support the success of BIPOC urban agriculture entrepreneurs and their businesses, educating consumers on reducing food waste through preservation and composting, and continuing to offer community-based food, nutrition, and healthy eating programs.

## Urban Agriculture in Toledo

Toledo is the fourth largest city in Ohio, with a population of 270,871. It's the 84th most populated city in the United States, with a metropolitan area population of around 450,000. Urban agriculture is literally and

figuratively 'growing' in Toledo. Both Ohio State University Extension and Central State University Extension have offered a series of programs for those interested exploring or already involved in urban agriculture. In 2024, Ohio State University Extension offered a Small Farm College program for the first time in Northwest Ohio.

There are over 100 community gardens in the Toledo metropolitan area, and those efforts are led by Toledo GROWs (Gardens Revitalize Our World). Many of these grassroots projects address food insecurity, job or life skill development for different audiences including youth and adults. Ohio State University Extension Master Gardener Volunteers (MGV's) assist with gardening projects including several at local libraries and a community center. In 2023, MGVs were recognized for their efforts in collaborative project with Sylvania Area Family Services, Toledo GROWs, and the Believe Center Inc. that included a summer youth camp and growing produce that was made available at a choice food pantry.

Many farms and gardens access land through local land banks, either by renting or purchasing these urban lots. Produce grown is sold or donated directly to families, consumers, and institutions at farmers markets and through CSA subscriptions.

## Urban Agriculture in Akron

Akron, Ohio has the reputation of being an industrious city, known for being the rubber capital of the world. It's also known for local legend LeBron James getting the job done to win Northeast Ohio an NBA championship and develop his foundation's I Promise School. An Akronite who also exemplifies this industriousness is Elaine Evans. In 1988, Elaine established Let's Grow Akron as a nonprofit community gardening organization focused on strengthening neighborhoods and improving access to affordable healthy foods. Let's Grow Akron manages 10 production garden sites, 25 community gardens, a community farmers market, a kitchen for value-adding and food demonstrations, and a community compost cooperative.

Akron was the location of the first seasonal high tunnel funded by the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) as part of the Northeast Ohio High Tunnel Initiative. Today that tunnel is located at Abundant Life Farm in Bath Township. Among Akron's most enthusiastic growers are its newest residents from communities including Bhutanese-Nepali, Ka'Ren, Afghan, Congolese, and Hmong. Since the early 2000s, Akron has welcomed over 6,000 refugees, many of whom reside in the North Hill area which is known as the city's most diverse neighborhood. The North Hill neighborhood is home to the Akron Cooperative Farm which hosts over 140 community farmers.

There are other individuals and agencies growing with residents and youth in Akron. Many advocates and partners including the Summit County Public Health, Summit County Landbank, Summit Metro Parks, Akron-



Canton Regional Foodbank, Summit County Farm Bureau, Summit Soil and Water Conservation District, local chefs, and Master Gardener Volunteers have worked over the years to strengthen urban agriculture in Akron and there is still lots of room for growth!

## Urban Agriculture in Dayton

Dayton, Ohio is the 6<sup>th</sup> largest city in Ohio and is home to 140,000 residents. Urban farming in Dayton has grown tremendously over the last decade and is still continuing to

grow. Urban farms in Dayton provide dozens of products to consumers through farm markets, CSA subscriptions, and direct sales to restaurants. Many urban farmers work with volunteer organizations to donate products as well, so products are used in the community and not contributing to food waste.

The Ohio State University Extension Master Gardener Volunteer (MGV) program in Montgomery County is made up of 100 dedicated volunteers who serve Dayton and surrounding communities through volunteer support and education. There are dozens of community gardens that call the Dayton area home. These community gardens are addressing food insecurity and building life skills for youth, immigrants, and refugee communities. The MGV program dedicates many hours of volunteer service at community gardens in the metropolitan area. On top of providing volunteer support for these areas, Master Gardener Volunteers are providing education and guiding groups to various resources to help these gardens thrive.

Ohio State University Extension in Montgomery County partners with organizations in Dayton to provide volunteer support, education, and outreach in the community. SNAP-Ed and agriculture and natural resources program staff partner with local school districts to provide gardening education in schools as well as providing gardens through the SNAP-Ed PSE mini grant. The youth outreach program provides agriculture focused programs in urban K-12 schools utilizing ag in the classroom curriculum and Chick Quest.

## Urban Agriculture in Youngstown

Youngstown is a shrinking city due to the decline of the steel industry, however, the interest in urban agriculture is growing. Within the old steel city there are numerous of vacant lots, many of which need improvements such as soil remediation, grading, or pest control prior to growing plants in the ground. Soil contaminant testing is frequently done in order to develop urban farms, orchards, pollinator gardens, or natural areas. The Flying High GROW Urban Farm, one of four urban farms in Youngstown, took a different approach to urban production. They started using raised cement block beds on an old black top parking lot to grow food crops. They have since expanded to growing in the ground on neighboring vacant lots, in an urban orchard, and in greenhouses.

Every summer Ohio State University Extension in Mahoning County and Master Gardener Volunteers (MGVs) host a *Veggies and More Tour*. This is a summer garden tour that helps to highlight different types of community gardens in Youngstown. The city of Youngstown has more than 20 community gardens, so the tour rotates through different locations each year. The tour has visited pollinator gardens, vegetable gardens, community gardens, school gardens, and urban orchards. In 2024 over 200 participants toured the 10 tour locations. A Good-Natured Garden Partners youth gardening program encourages youth to learn about gardening and take an active role at a community garden.

Ohio State University Extension in Mahoning County is dedicated to helping urban agriculture grow in Youngstown, providing Master Gardener Volunteer training, Ohio Certified Volunteer Naturalist training, and guiding the development of new gardens and natural spaces. Educational programming is provided through the Extension in the Classroom program. This program allows Extension staff and volunteers to help youth learn more about agriculture by meeting them where they are and by training teachers to use agriculture curricula in their classrooms.