

# Chapter 2



## *Finding Sites for Your CSA*

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*Though the land be good,  
you cannot have an abundant crop  
without cultivation.*

*—Plato*

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Urban agriculture is becoming increasingly popular in the United States. There is a growing local food movement and people are interested in more sustainable communities within cities. Community gardening is the most popular form of urban agriculture, with many neighborhoods setting aside a vacant lot or area in a public park for citizens to garden and grow vegetables.

Finding land to grow vegetables for a self-sufficient urban CSA requires a little more ingenuity, but it's not an insurmountable hurdle. Older industrial cities including Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit have emerged as hotbeds of urban agriculture because they have increasing amounts of vacant land as their populations declined drastically. Smaller populations and more available land have put these cities on the leading edge of changes in food production, and the citizens of these cities are experimenting with going back to becoming producers, not just consumers.

Because urban agriculture requires land that is often zoned and regulated for specific uses, the increase in farming within cities has implications for municipal planning. Sustainable communities thrive with less or no zoning, allowing people to work, live, play, and produce food in one place without commuting. Our dream is that within the city limits of Cincinnati, there will be a large number of CSAs developed that will allow residents of urban neighborhoods to grow food near where they live and work.

The geology of the valley and hillsides of Cincinnati leaves large swathes of “unimproved” land, because the unstable rock formations that form the city’s hills necessitate that we not build close to the slopes. Also, there were once a half million people living in the city, but now the population is under 300,000. Many houses are vacant, and many have already been torn down. In the suburbs, homes often have large backyards that are ideal for growing food for a CSA.

# FINDING LAND TO FARM

A CSA requires about one acre of land to grow food for 30 to 40 subscriptions, although using high-yield methods of farming and a succession of crops in the same beds, an acre may be able to support up to 100 members. You'll need another acre or more for crops that require a lot of space, such as corn, squash, and potatoes. An acre is roughly 42,000 square feet. To give you an idea of the amount of space we're talking about, an acre is an area of land about 200 feet by 200 feet piece of land, or eleven typical suburban backyards, about 60 feet by 60 feet.

You need sunlight, of course—backyards with heavy tree cover are not optimal sites for farming, but every neighborhood has open space that gets enough sun to grow crops. In Cincinnati, many city neighborhoods are lucky to have a lot of tree cover, which is good for the environment, provides shade in the summer, and makes the streets inviting. But even with all of our trees, we have been able to find open areas that are suitable for agriculture.

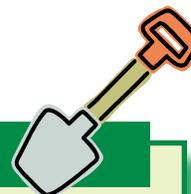
## Backyard Farmland

So, you don't need a lot of land, which may come as a surprise to people accustomed to seeing vast fields of wheat or corn growing for miles in rural areas. Urban farming typically gets more yield from smaller areas, with shorter crop cycles, using the same land to grow several different varieties of produce in one season.

We began our search for land by looking at people's backyards in our neighborhood. This provided us with all the land we needed for the first couple of years. When you are organizing an urban CSA, it makes sense that some of the people you bring together have land that they are willing to share. And conversely, it also makes sense to invite people who have land that can be farmed to join your CSA.

We have developed a contract we use with backyard neighbors that allows us to farm their land

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Yield statistics are from [www.CSAFarms.org](http://www.CSAFarms.org), Community Supported Agriculture in Michigan.



*When you are looking for land to farm in your neighborhood, sometimes you only need to look as far as your own (or your neighbor's) backyard*  
(PHOTO: NANCY SULLIVAN)

in exchange for either CSA share cost or the amount of volunteer hours expected of members. Members generally do not expect remuneration beyond a break on the cost or number of volunteer hours required by a share, but you can make arrangements to provide other compensation agreeable to both the property owner and the CSA.

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See Appendix A, p. 103, for a copy of the contract we use for backyard farming.

## Looking Farther Afield

After several years of growing food in our members' backyards and a community garden (all within a few blocks of each other), we learned that there was a larger plot of land available on a farm a few miles from Price Hill, in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Sayler Park. We have grown corn, squash, beans, peppers, eggplant, and potatoes on an acre of land at this location.

Don't be afraid to look outside your neighborhood if you need additional land. Be flexible and consider any available land if it is easily accessible and logistically feasible (that is, water is available, the size of the land makes it possible to grow more crops and a greater variety of produce, and the land can be used free or for a small rental fee).



## Public and Semi-Public Land

The city of Cincinnati has a significant amount of vacant land that they own, and many other cities also are the owners of record for unused property within their borders. If there is city land in your neighborhood, talk to someone in the building or property department at city hall to see if the property is available for community gardening.

Other public entities, such as community housing authorities, also own land that may not be occupied currently. In Price Hill, the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority has a multi-acre piece of property where housing was razed; the Enright CSA is now farming that land. There are also several plots of land owned by a local land trust that were originally community gardens but are not currently used.

Another possibility is checking with your local school board; existing schools often have excess land around their buildings, and the school board may also own land that once was used for a school or that they are planning to build on eventually. Sometimes these kinds of groups can be persuaded to negotiate a short lease on good terms to build community goodwill, with the understanding that when they want to develop the land, the farm will have to give up cultivation. But being able to use the land for a few years is well worth investigating, if the price is right and water is available.

Vacant land is often an eyesore in neighborhoods, and if the owner is willing to allow the land to be used for farming, it can improve the area, make the street safer, and even involve nearby residents.

Whenever you are negotiating to use property owned by the city or county, another entity, or a private owner, you should try to work out at least a three-year agreement to use the land. It usually will take at least

*Unused farmland near your community, public land, vacant lots—all are possibilities for growing food in or near where you live—just look around you (PHOTO: NANCY SULLIVAN)*

a season to get the land in good condition for crop production, and being able to use it for at least a couple of years after it is functioning well gives your CSA the continuity it needs to produce well.

When you are talking to owners—public or private—about using vacant land for urban farming, you can make some good arguments for how such land use will improve the neighborhood and even potentially raise property values. New York University funded a study titled “The Effect of Community Gardens on Neighboring Property Values” that determined that community gardens create significant positive effects on surrounding property values. Those effects are positive across the board but inversely associated with current values in the neighborhood—that is, the poorest of host neighborhoods see the largest increase in value for surrounding property. The study also found that more organized and stable gardens—such as a co-operative CSA—have the greatest positive impact.

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The complete NYU study is available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6229.2008.00213.x/abstract>.

## Purchasing Land

You may find that land suitable for farming is for sale in your community. If the price is right, purchasing it might make sense. Renting land, if the price is reasonable and the land is good, is also a possibility, and farming some of the semi-public land discussed previously sometimes involves paying a small lease fee. Also, you may find owners who are willing to donate their land for a good cause. It never hurts to ask!

You can find help concerning how to find land to farm online, though a lot of the information is geared more toward rural farming. But the information can be applicable to the purchase or lease of property anywhere. One guide, *The Field Guide for Beginning Farmers* (<http://fieldguideforbeginningfarmers.wikispaces.com/>), talks about different ways to acquire land for crop production:

- ▶ **Cash Lease** Most cash leases are short-term agreements with little commitment from either the landowner or the CSA. Though some leases are made on a handshake, it makes a lot more sense to get it in writing.
- ▶ **Crop Share** This model is comparable to using members’ backyards to grow CSA produce—the rent payment comes in the form of a share of what is grown.
- ▶ **Long-term Lease** A long-term lease is almost the equivalent of ownership. Some leases can be for as long as 99 years, common with publicly owned land.
- ▶ **Lease with Option to Buy** In this case, the land owner and the CSA negotiate a purchase price and agree on a date for purchase. A portion of the rent money paid from the time of agreement to the time of purchase is put toward the down payment for the land.
- ▶ **Lease with Right of First Refusal** With this type of clause in a rental agreement, the landowner can only sell to a third party after the CSA has been notified and given a chance to match the offer.
- ▶ **Purchase** Of course, you can always simply purchase the land, possibly with grant money—an urban CSA is not necessarily going to meet the qualifications for a bank mortgage. But there are many other possibilities, including seller financing, fundraising to purchase the land, and/or a sale at a very low price.

When you are looking for land to farm, the important thing is to keep your options open. When you find a space that looks promising, don't be afraid to explore it, find out who owns it, and see if it might be available and useful for your needs. There is a lot of available land around, even in urban settings—in Cincinnati's Over the Rhine neighborhood, which is in the inner city, there are about a half-dozen community gardens located on vacant lots, between buildings, and near the 160-year-old Findlay Market. The space you need is out there; find what will work for you.

## GREENHOUSE FACILITIES

The main purpose of a greenhouse is to have a place to start seeds and grow seedlings until they are ready to be put out in the gardens. If you have a greenhouse in your CSA operation, you will need less land, because you will be able to have succession plantings in one garden. The Enright Ridge CSA has had up to five successions of plantings in a bed during the season, making the land we have extremely productive. However, if a greenhouse isn't available, there are other options, including starting seeds in cold frames or hoop houses, or seeds can be planted directly in the ground.

When we were forming our CSA, we found an article about setting up an urban farm project that argued a greenhouse was not needed during the first few years. For one thing, greenhouses take a lot of time to construct and to keep up.

We had the good fortune to have an abandoned greenhouse in the neighborhood. A florist had operated at the location for a hundred years, and the availability of the old greenhouse was a major impetus for starting the Enright Ridge CSA. We purchased the greenhouse and land for a very reasonable price, and more importantly, we received a grant to pay for the purchase and the needed renovations. So we have had a greenhouse from the start, and we have definitely benefited from having it—but for most urban CSAs, it is not essential for startup.



*A greenhouse is a great asset, but it is not absolutely necessary for a startup CSA (PHOTO: ERUEV)*

We used a much smaller greenhouse at the house of a nearby resident the first year, while our greenhouse was being repaired. If there is a greenhouse anywhere nearby, don't be afraid to ask if it can be used for the CSA.

Another option is to build a simple greenhouse, not a difficult task if you have people with carpentry skills. In an urban setting, however, construction of a greenhouse may require building permits. Hoop houses are another good option. They can be constructed or purchased relatively cheaply and do a very adequate job. Because they are temporary structures, there is less likelihood that you will need to apply for permits. One CSA in greater Cincinnati that has been in existence for many years uses only hoop houses.

## DISTRIBUTION SPACE

It's a great day when your urban CSA begins to harvest produce, but there are some logistics you'll need to plan for before that day. When the harvest comes in, it needs to go out to members quickly. You will need to store the harvest as it comes in, and you'll need a place to distribute it to shareholders. One location for both storage and distribution works best, but if you do not have access to enough space to store all the food, or to a place that you can use to store it and distribute it, then consider how to operate with multiple spaces. Basements work fine for temporary crop storage. You can use a church, school, or other public facility in the neighborhood for distribution, especially if you arrange to use it on days when the facility's usual tenants are not there. You may be able to locate a decent-sized garden shed a neighborhood resident isn't using. Or you can construct a lean-to shed or hoop house as a distribution site.

After harvesting, distribution is a cleaner and simpler task if you have the facilities to wash the produce and volunteers available to do the work. But don't let this be a stumbling block—if you don't have a place or the people power to wash the vegetables before distributing them to shareholders, people can wash their own share at home. (There is more information about pickup procedures in Chapter 6.)

Set up distribution so it works for you in the space you have. If the space is small, arrange staggered pickup times so that everyone doesn't arrive at the same time. If you have limited volunteers, set things up so people can come in and select their items from the harvest baskets. Alternatively, if you have limited space but plenty of help, pack up the food into shares ahead of time so that people can quickly pick up their box of food, or use several locations for share pickup. One member might get a quantity of produce for several families and then have the shares sitting on their front porch or patios for neighbors to pick up. Be creative—distribution can be handled many different ways, depending on the space you have. Work out the way that works best for your members with your facilities.



*Fresh picked, local produce ready for pickup at the Enright CSA greenhouse (PHOTO: ERUEV)*

# SITE CHALLENGES

Now you have found the perfect places to start growing food for your urban CSA, but you aren't quite ready to farm yet. There are a few other things you are going to have to think about—important things like zoning, water availability, and yes, perhaps paying for the use of the land and the water. There are challenges to every undertaking, but if you have the will, there's always a way.

## Zoning

Keep zoning in mind when you are looking for land to farm. We have not had an issue with this yet, but there is always a chance that it could become a problem if you ignore it. Even though we have not found any restrictions on using backyards or other city land to grow produce, we have discovered that there are restrictions on composting. In the city of Cincinnati, you can compost in your own yard, but there are strict restrictions on composting on other land.

If you include animals, you may find both zoning and health department issues to consider. For example, in Cincinnati, there are no zoning restrictions on keeping chickens, but you must follow fairly strict health department regulations to keep them in a city yard.

Be aware that laws vary from one jurisdiction to another. Cincinnati has one set of zoning and health laws, nearby unincorporated areas have more or less restrictive regulations, and other municipalities and villages have their own laws. Rules can also vary depending on the type of agricultural operation; for example, different guidelines may apply to a market garden than would govern an urban farm project growing food for a member organization. A CSA usually has less restrictions and applicable laws because food is not being sold directly to the public, but you do need to keep food safety in mind. Chapter 6 has more information about GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) programs and instruction for CSAs.

## Soil Testing and Remediation

In an urban area, the land you use to farm may have once been the site of a house or business, or it may simply be too rocky or clay-based for agriculture. In most cases, you will want to have the soil tested for lead and other contamination. In the city of Cincinnati, a program to encourage urban gardening that began in 2009 offered soil testing at little or no cost; you may find a similar program in place, or you can find a lab to test your soil online.

The Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District offer a low-price soil fertility kit you can use to test the soil yourself. County residents can pick up soil test kits for \$5; if you are a nonresident, you can purchase a soil test kit for \$12. More information about the soil test kits is available at Hamilton County Soil and Water Conservation District offices, located at 22 Triangle Park Dr., Cincinnati, Ohio; telephone (513) 772-7645; website [www.hcswcd.org](http://www.hcswcd.org).

If the soil needs amelioration, your farmer will be able to guide you in what needs to be done to make the land farmable. We have a fairly large-scale compost operation, using all of our agricultural waste as well as leaves collected in the neighborhood, so we create some of our own soil amendment. Although the issue of having safe and arable soil is important, it isn't insurmountable. But do keep in mind that soil testing is a first step when you find the land for your urban farm.

### WHAT'S THE BUZZ



The OSU Extension Service provides a fact sheet about soil testing at <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/1000/pdf/1132.pdf>.

## Availability of Water

Land without access to a water source greatly limits what can be grown there and how the food is grown. In our midwestern climate, we go through dry spells almost every summer. There are a few plants that do not require a lot of water, but you cannot build a CSA around such crops. And you can count on nature to take care of the watering through rain most of the time, but you will almost certainly see a time, probably at the height of summer, when you are going to have to water the plants.

If you are farming in neighborhood backyards, you won't have to worry too much about this problem, because almost all homes have a water source. You do need to consider how you will reimburse the homeowner for the water used. The easiest way to calculate this is to take the previous year's water bill(s) from before the backyard was used for CSA farming, and subtract that amount from the bills for water use during the time the CSA is using water for the garden. It may not be exactly accurate, but it will be close enough to assess the basic CSA usage to determine how much to reimburse the homeowner.

Vacant lots and public property can be more challenging when it comes to locating a water source. If the land is in the city and has a municipal water hookup, it is usually possible to install a meter on a faucet. If there isn't water on site, you may be able to get approval to use a metered fire hydrant to water the garden. Or you can try approaching a homeowner close to the garden plot to see if they would allow you to use their water for the garden in exchange for compensation, similar to using water from a member's house to irrigate



*A barrel or other container to catch rain water is an economical and sustainable way to provide water for irrigation of garden plots, even when city water is available*

a backyard garden. At our new CMHA garden site, we have contracted with nearby homeowners to cover the owners' water bill during the growing season in exchange for using their water.

You can also consider collecting water in rain barrels or other large water containers if there is a building nearby with drainpipes that can be used to fill the containers. However, in this case, the amount of water is limited by how large the containers are—and how often it rains during the growing season. Finally, you can look into the feasibility of carrying water to the site, either manually or with a plastic tank fitted in the back of a pickup truck, but this would likely be a major challenge. We strongly recommend that you not take on land for a garden without first working out the watering issue.

## BACK TO THE LAND

If you have willing members with sunny backyards or a community garden that needs someone to take it over, you are well on your way to starting your urban CSA. If neither of these simple solutions is in the cards, however, don't despair. There *is* land in or near your neighborhood available for growing food. You just might need a little help—and some time and perseverance—to find it and work out an arrangement to use it.

Some resources you might be able to use to find help include your local agriculture extension agent. Most counties have agriculture extension programs, and it's worth a call to see if someone has been down the same path before and the agent can give you some ideas on where urban farming has taken root in your community in the past.

*A Farmer's Guide to Securing Land*, published by California FarmLink in 2008, provides tools and examples to help keep farmland in viable agriculture. It is geared more toward traditional rural farming, but it also describes several different land tenure "models" including leases, partnerships, and ownership, which might be helpful if you are looking to lease or buy property.

The USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) has two programs for land purchase that specifically benefit beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers. If your urban CSA is in an inner city neighborhood with a high poverty rate, it may qualify for the Direct Farm Ownership Loan Program.

You are thinking about starting a co-operative urban CSA—a challenging concept in itself. You are going to have to think creatively to solve many problems that arise. Finding suitable land and negotiating a way to use it is step one—so start thinking "outside the box," and you'll discover that possible sites are abundant. As a bonus, the connections you make when you talk to landowners, school principals, recreation center managers, and other people in the community while looking for land may be invaluable when you reach other steps in the process of organizing your CSA. ■

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*A Farmers' Guide to Securing Land* is available online at <http://www.californiafarmlink.org>.

