

# PLOWSHARES INTO POLICIES

**AT CITY HALL, URBAN  
AGRICULTURE HAS ITS  
FOOT IN THE DOOR.**

BY BRIAN BARTH



**ABOVE**  
Truly Living Well's  
four-acre Wheat  
Street Garden  
in Atlanta.

In 2004, Karen Baumann woke up to a notice on her door stating that the tomato plants in her front yard were violating city code. If they were not removed, she was informed, the city of Sacramento would impose a \$750 fine. The story hit the local media outlets, and a circus of public debate ensued. An anonymous group sprayed her yard with Roundup in the dead of night, a story that was later retold at a town hall meeting by Baumann's twin 11-year-old sons, dressed as a tomato and a carrot. After three years of deliberation, the ordinance was revised to include the right to grow a front yard full of food.

Vegetable gardening has never been so popular, or so politically charged.

According to the latest figures from the National Gardening Association, 42 million American households—more than one in three—are growing a portion of the food they consume. The number represents a 17 percent increase over the past five years, but hone the data to the 18-to-34 age group and the change is an earth-shattering 63 percent. Millennials spent \$1.2 billion on their food gardening habit in 2013, propelling the “Good Food Revolution,” as urban agriculture pioneer Will Allen has so aptly coined the movement, forward at breakneck speed.

Though the raucous cry of urbanites to live more intimately with the source of their sustenance may have

thoroughly saturated the airwaves of mainstream culture, the message has percolated more slowly into the institutions that govern urban land use. The zoning ordinance concerning front yard landscaping requirements in Karen Baumann's hometown of Sacramento dated to 1941 and stated, “No more than 30 percent of the landscape setback area may be devoted to the growing of vegetables and/or fruit. Fruit and/or vegetable plants shall not exceed four feet in height.”

Today, the Sacramento Convention and Visitors Bureau has a website and full-page ads in national magazines advertising the city as “America's Farm-to-Fork Capital.” “This



**“URBAN AGRICULTURE HAS BEEN DRIVEN BY PRACTITIONERS, NOT PLANNERS AND POLICY MAKERS.”**

is one of the cool things in Sacramento,” said Mayor Kevin Johnson at a news conference to announce the city’s new brand identity in 2012. The following year, the inaugural Farm-to-Fork Festival put on by the city brought 25,000 people to Sacramento’s Capital Mall.

The cause of local food has been taken up by public health advocates, community revitalization groups, doomsday Armageddonists, and eco-utopists alike. Now, the planning and design community is getting on board, helping urban agriculture to wiggle its way from being a lovably homegrown, guerrilla garden movement to become a sanctioned form of land use. Ten years after Baumann discovered her gardening efforts constituted a criminal act, her intentions, and those of thousands of other well-meaning gardeners across the country, are being vindicated.

“Urban agriculture has been driven by practitioners, not planners and

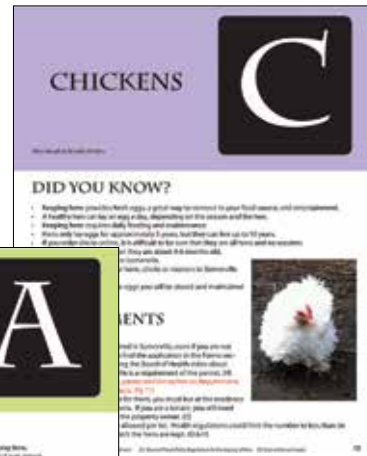
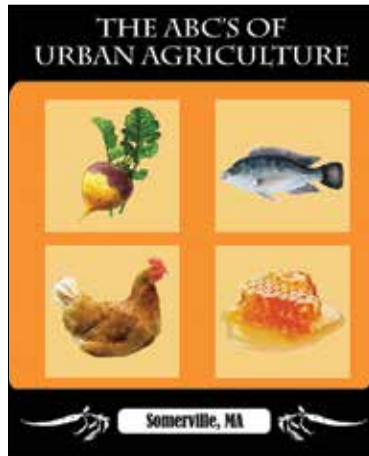
policy makers,” says Martin Bailkey, a coauthor (with Kimberly Hodgson and Marcia Caton Campbell) of a 2010 report by the American Planning Association on the subject, “but some, even some mayors, are starting to see themselves as leaders in this, rather than just the farmers and community groups. If you were to gather 100 practicing planners today, the percentage that have at least a basic working knowledge [of urban agriculture] would be much higher than it was five years ago.” Bailkey’s report, *Urban Agriculture: Growing Healthy Sustainable Places*, has undoubtedly contributed to the phenomenon, but he emphasizes that there is a natural lag time in the process. “You often have to wait until the whole zoning code is up for a rewrite,” he says, “then you can go in and address each part where food production plays a role.”

Bailkey says farming in cities “makes enough sense as an intellectual idea that it will eventually catch on...and people like me are just in a position to push it along in the

meantime.” By some measures, the idea has caught on quite a bit, and it’s now hard to find a city that hasn’t officially condoned the idea, though this often takes form as one of many broadly defined sustainability goals, rather than true policy changes or allocation of funds.

On the surface, urban agriculture sounds like a paradox, or at least an oxymoron. “It’s a new thing, but it is a very old thing, as well,” says Luisa Oliveira, ASLA, a senior planner for landscape design with the city of Somerville in eastern Massachusetts. “Two generations ago, people were growing vegetables in the city, keeping chickens and bees.” Then came World War II and the explosion of tract homes that followed, where the baby boomers grew up thinking that turfgrass, foundation shrubs, and shade trees were the extent of horticulture suitable for urban life. The family dog replaced the chickens that the previous generation was more likely to have kept in the backyard. As cities bulged into the hinterlands and

**ABOVE**  
Somerville’s South Street farm teaches food system arithmetic.



**LEFT**  
Somerville coaches its citizens on urban agriculture.

white picket fences went toe-to-toe with the barbed-wire paddocks of farmland, a new generation of land-use ordinances emerged to ensure that suburbanites were comfortably insulated from the sights, sounds, and smells of working farms.

With agriculture, “most municipal codes have outdated references to things like keeping cows,” says Oliveira, “or they neglect the subject entirely.” In either case, confusion has been commonplace among aspiring growers—and the planning offices in their jurisdictions—in knowing just what they can and cannot do. A new generation of zoning ordinances is changing that, however. “The push came from people already engaged in growing,” Oliveira says, “but it also came from the administration.” She’s referring to Somerville Mayor Joe Curtatone, who has made public health a pillar of his decade-plus tenure in the town of 78,000, just outside Boston. Curtatone’s “Shape Up Somerville” initiative was one of America’s earliest municipal-led anti-obesity campaigns, and an inspiration for First Lady Michelle Obama as she was plotting to till up the South Lawn of the White House.

In 2011, Oliveira was part of the interdisciplinary, interdepartmental team that dismantled Somerville’s zoning code and put it back together with provisions to accommodate agricultural practices tucked into the folds. “There was me, a landscape architect from parks and open spaces, representatives from the legal department, board of health, planning and zoning, the inspectional services division.... We also consulted with a lot of community experts. A local woman who runs a chicken concierge service helped us with the space requirements for coops, with keeping them clean and keeping the feed inside the home to minimize problems with rodents.” Details like these are woven into the language of the new ordinance, making the rules precise enough that they are enforceable.

Fear drives some of the resistance to urban agriculture. “Some people are very uncomfortable with bees anywhere near them, whether they are allergic or not, [which] is also true for chickens,” Oliveira says. She says they’ve made every attempt to instill the ordinance, and the educational campaign that has gone with it, with best practices, such as requir-

ing growers to dispose of fallen fruit and keeping chicken feed indoors in rodent-proof containers. To reassure those fearful of bees, the city has publicized the relatively docile nature of honeybees compared to yellow jackets and hornets and provides information to residents on how to tell the difference among them.

Other cities are finding opposition to urban agriculture is more complicated. In Arlington County, Virginia, the county’s Urban Agriculture Task Force has recommended changes to the current rules that prevent most residents from legally raising chickens, with one important caveat: Coops must be at least 100 feet from any property line, which cancels out the options for most would-be chicken owners in Arlington by virtue of the long narrow lots that are the norm in this affluent, densely populated area.

The Arlington Egg Project has formed to advocate for chicken-keeping rights, while Backyards, Not Barnyards! is the coalition representing the other camp, and their heated debates are reminiscent of those heard daily

just across the Potomac River on Capitol Hill, where many of these residents work. The desire for fresh eggs and the opportunity for children to grow up knowing where their food comes from is well-intentioned and innocent enough, but opponents point out the potential for disease, rodents, and manure-laden runoff into nearby waterways as cause for serious concern. Plus, they fear that opening the door to chickens could allow other farm animals to follow and turn the city into a freakish hybrid between urban and rural realities, eroding the qualities that make people want to live in the city in the first place.

## THERE ARE FEARS THAT OPENING THE DOOR TO CHICKENS COULD ALLOW OTHER FARM ANIMALS INTO CITIES.

In Somerville, the regulations attempt to address the concerns and quality of life of all residents. For example, it is now legal to sell produce grown on private property directly from the site. However, to protect the residential character of Somerville's neighborhoods, sales can occur only between normal business hours for a maximum of three days per week and a total of 25 days each year. The sale area can occupy no more than a space seven feet by seven feet, and signs are limited to two feet by three feet; both signs and farm stands must be stored out of sight when not in use.

The city also addresses the threat of soil contamination, as high concentrations of lead and other heavy metals are frequently found in urban

soils. These metals can be taken up by food crops, posing a health hazard to those who consume them. Somerville requires people growing for distribution to the public to have their soil tested, and the results must be displayed at the farm stand if the soil is deemed safe for agriculture. Otherwise, urban farmers have the option of growing in raised beds using soil imported from off-site.

The results are one of the most comprehensive, integrated urban agriculture plans in the country. Making it user-friendly was a major focus. Somerville's Urban Agriculture ABCs (an acronym for Agriculture, Bees, and Chickens) lays out a step-by-step process for growers—whether commercial, hobbyist, or in between—to get started, detailing the activities that do and don't require permits and exactly how to obtain them. Everything is spelled out in plain language, and special care is taken to cross-reference each rule with any others that could be triggered in the process. On the whole, Oliveira says that the community's response to the plan has been exceedingly positive. "There has been a handful of complaints," she says, "but the sky hasn't fallen...we haven't been overrun with chickens yet."

The largest U.S. cities are now inching down the path laid by places like Somerville. In Atlanta, urban agriculture is finding its voice at city hall. When, in 2011, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed announced a design competition for a state-of-the-art urban farm center to be built on the site of a demolished building across the street from city hall, the city realized it was moving ahead of itself. It couldn't build a world-class example without first changing the rules that would allow its constituents to emulate it.

"Atlanta has been slow moving in terms of its policy environment, but the grassroots effort has always been strong here," says Julie Self, the director of the Atlanta Local Food Initiative, a local nonprofit group that advocates for a more localized food system. With faculty from the Turner Environmental Law Clinic at Emory University, she has been working with various groups to draft the city's first comprehensive zoning revisions to better accommodate food production. "There wasn't much of a need to change zoning for what people are doing privately on their own property," she says, "but we have a lot of market-based operations where people couldn't even get a business license" owing to existing regulations.

Of the pending zoning changes, Self says they've passed through the community input phase with overwhelming approval from the Neighborhood Planning Units and have won the favor of Atlanta's zoning review board. This summer they went before the city council for a final vote and passed.

Urban planning is about balancing priorities—social, economic, environmental, and aesthetic, among countless others—and urban agriculture touches on all of them. If nothing else, the policy changes sweeping the country of late are permitting a finer grain of responsiveness on the part of local government to regulate this emergent form of land use. On the roster next to public works, parks, planning, and police, we may soon see the first municipal departments of agriculture. ●

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