

**Community Gardens in Multi Unit Residential Buildings (MURBs)**



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## Community Gardening in Burlington

Established in 2007, [BurlingtonGreen Environmental Association](#) is a citizen-led, nonpartisan, registered charity in the City of Burlington. Through awareness, advocacy and action initiatives, we work with the community to protect the environment, mitigate climate change and create a healthier, more environmentally responsible Burlington. One of BurlingtonGreen's many successful action initiatives was launched in 2012 in partnership with the City of Burlington: Burlington's very first community garden, located at Central Park. Since then, the City of Burlington has added four more community gardens, growing from 30 plots to a total of 217 plots currently.



Community gardening is a great way for Burlington to meet one of its key strategic goals: a healthy and greener Burlington, as outlined in its [Strategic Plan](#). It is also an effective strategy for addressing a number of other issues that are key to the quality of life and lived community experience in Burlington: promoting a healthy lifestyle and adding value to properties; helping to build complete communities; addressing the needs of seniors, a growing population segment in Burlington; and finally, contributing to local solutions to deal with food security issues, something which will become an increasing problem in the wake of pandemics like COVID-19 and as a result of the effects of climate change.

BurlingtonGreen believes it is time to undertake an ambitious expansion of Burlington's existing community gardening activity by promoting and supporting the installation of community gardens in the many multi-unit residential buildings (MURBs) – townhouse complexes and condo/apartment buildings – in our community. We believe that the development of many more community gardens on privately owned and operated sites of MURBs offers multiple benefits to residents, property owners, the community at large and the environment, creating opportunities to enhance sustainable development and promote healthy lifestyles in the process.

## Opportunities and Benefits of Community Gardening



Starting a community garden creates a lot of opportunities for the organizers, the community and community members. A large body of well-documented information testifies to both the opportunities and benefits offered by community gardens and their positive impact on individuals, businesses, the community at large and the environment. We found that community gardening opportunities and benefits can be categorized into some broad themes:

- Enhanced personal health, well-being and quality of life
- Positive economic impact
- Contribution to a healthy environment
- Community enhancement

**Enhanced personal health, well-being and quality of life:** community gardening contributes to:

- Better nutrition: "Adults with a household member who participated in a community garden consumed fruits and vegetables 1.4 more times per day than those who did not participate, and they were 3.5 times more likely to

consume fruits and vegetables at least 5 times daily.”<sup>1</sup> An added bonus is that community gardens benefited individuals who may not have the opportunity otherwise to access fresh fruit and vegetables due to financial constraints or perhaps mobility/transportation constraints.<sup>2</sup>

- Stress reduction: A field experiment demonstrated that while gardening and reading each led to decreases in cortisol levels following a stressful task, decreases were significantly stronger in the gardening group.<sup>3</sup>
- Improved physical fitness through aerobic and muscle strengthening exercise which can also contribute to reduced levels of obesity.<sup>4</sup>
- Enhanced social connection: the connection with other gardeners reduces isolation and improves social inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Community gardens help build relationships within the direct community that may not have been fostered if not for a community garden: much can be learned about others in the community while working together on a project that will improve and benefit the mutual community. A community garden can be a safe and inclusive space for all people of the community regardless of background.

**Positive economic impact:** community gardens can help to:

- Attract small businesses, encouraging entrepreneurship and providing employment opportunities;
- Reduce costs for municipalities, as vacant lots attract litter and sometimes, criminal activity;
- Provide a more economical way of introducing green space than developing parkland – gardens require little land and 80% of their cost is in labour.<sup>6</sup>
- Increase property values: community gardens have significant positive effects on the values of nearby property, and these effects tend to be strongest in lower-income neighborhoods.
- Promote economic redevelopment: opening of a garden can stimulate home ownership, acting as a possible catalyst for community economic redevelopment.<sup>7</sup>



**Contribution to a healthy environment:**

**BUY LOCAL.**

[Greenleaf Communities](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing a healthy and sustainable world, suggests that [community gardening offers a number of environmental benefits](#), such as:

- Reducing ‘food miles’: consumption of locally grown produce cuts down the reliance on produce shipped in from elsewhere.
- Reducing water run-off and mitigating the risk of flooding, as well as replacing impervious structures and improving water infiltration.
- Promoting biodiversity and improving local ecology by offering habitat for numerous species, including pollinators.

<sup>1</sup> <https://nccommunitygardens.ces.ncsu.edu/nccommunitygardens-research/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://blog.gardeningknowhow.com/gardening-pros-cons/pros-and-cons-of-community-gardening/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://nccommunitygardens.ces.ncsu.edu/nccommunitygardens-research/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/take-action-to-improve-health/what-works-for-health/strategies/community-gardens>

<sup>5</sup> [The Community Gardens Storytelling Project](#), Waterloo Region Public Health department

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.collective-evolution.com/2015/11/01/5-reasons-why-community-gardens-are-good-for-your-neighbourhood/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://nccommunitygardens.ces.ncsu.edu/nccommunitygardens-research/>

- Using sustainable agricultural methods: most community gardens are organic.
- Helping improve air and soil quality.
- Reducing neighborhood waste through composting.
- Positively impacting the urban microclimate.



**Community enhancement:** community gardens can offer a number of social benefits as well, including:

- Increasing community safety: Studies in the ‘Journal of Environment and Behaviour’ found that aggression and violence were “significantly lower among those people who lived near some green space than those who lived in more barren conditions”.<sup>8</sup>
- Supporting collective efficacy: the place-based social processes involved in community gardening led to increased volunteerism, leadership, neighborhood activities and recruitment.<sup>9</sup> This can include the development of relationships between community gardens and local garden centres and businesses who step up to provide help in order to garner goodwill and positive PR.<sup>10</sup>
- Promoting social health and community cohesion.<sup>11</sup> Providing a chance for community members to learn about different cultures, backgrounds and traditions can help improve an overall sense of community beyond the garden itself.
- Reducing the impact of food deserts in low-income areas, allowing residents greater access to nutritious food and benefiting health.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, community gardens are beneficial on a number of levels. By including them in community design we can build opportunities to grow the kind of complete communities that BurlingtonGreen believes will make Burlington a healthier and greener city, addressing socio-economic issues while offering a higher quality of life to residents.

## Helping to Build Complete Communities

BurlingtonGreen’s vision for complete communities is embodied in our [Community 20/20](#) initiative and the [15-minute city concept](#). Complete communities are Smart Communities – they are places where residents can live, work and play while reducing their impact on the environment. Community gardens are one of several strategies mentioned in our [Smart Community Checklist](#) to help guide municipalities and developers in creating place-based solutions to urban development that offer maximum resident satisfaction with minimum environmental footprint.

Given Burlington’s plan to intensify development in selected and appropriate areas of the city, with an increasing shift to intensification and multi-unit residential buildings (MURBs), this is a good time to consider how community gardens can be incorporated into the design of these structures to enhance residents’ quality of life while meeting the City’s strategic objective of a healthier and greener community. And since MURBs attract seniors because they can be easier to maintain, we can also improve life for this growing segment of our population.

<sup>8</sup> Martin, Andrew. <https://www.collective-evolution.com/2015/11/01/5-reasons-why-community-gardens-are-good-for-your-neighbourhood/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://nccommunitygardens.ces.ncsu.edu/nccommunitygardens-research/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://tcgn.ca/start-a-community-garden/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://nccommunitygardens.ces.ncsu.edu/nccommunitygardens-research/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://greenleafcommunities.org/the-many-benefits-of-community-gardens/>

## Community Gardens and Multi-unit Residential Buildings – Challenges and Opportunities

While there are many good opportunities with community gardens, there are also some potential challenges and barriers we might face when starting up a community garden. One of the biggest barriers can be lack of community interest<sup>13</sup>. Some members of the community may not be interested in the garden at all and may object to it, as they don't want the garden in "their backyard". These same folks could be concerned about the costs of a garden and how it could affect them if they don't plan to use it (such as increases in common element fees for the garden). These concerns can and should be addressed when starting a garden through an education campaign to help community members understand the benefits of the garden and offer acceptable financial models, as suggested below.

To begin with, start-up expenses and finding the funding and financial support to build and maintain a community garden can certainly present a challenge<sup>14</sup>. The costs for a community garden start up can range from \$500 to \$50,000 plus maintenance costs<sup>15</sup>. This could be a major barrier to any project, but it can be addressed by forming partnerships with and obtaining sponsorships from local garden centres, businesses or municipal government for help in providing either capital or necessary materials and equipment. And charging interested gardeners a small yearly fee can provide funds to maintain the garden and address equipment upgrades when needed.

Another potential issue that was found is that the community may not have the skills or know-how to maintain the garden and take care of it. Here again, partnerships with local garden centres and/or the municipality can offer potential opportunities to develop skills for interested gardeners. For example, gardeners may not know which fruits or vegetables to plant. Of course, depending on the local climate, only certain crops can be grown based on temperature and rainfall. This is easily solved by conducting some research on what could be grown based on climate and discussing with gardeners/community members what sort of crops they would like to grow and offering potential options based on climate research. Approaching local garden centres for advice might also lead to a mutually beneficial partnership.

Another barrier to starting a community garden is access to water sources. Allocating a space for the garden in close proximity to a water source if possible is important. Additionally, water collection via rain barrels can be considered as an option that also supports smart water management. If that is not possible, a potential solution would be to discuss with the building operators the possibility of adding a water source where the garden will be or perhaps try to partner with local businesses/community members to secure a mobile water source for the garden. This will come at an additional cost which would need to be factored into usage fees.

## Seniors and Community Gardening – A Great Fit!

Burlington has attained the enviable ranking of the [best mid-sized city in Canada](#) for several consecutive years. There are many reasons to appreciate living in this city: low crime rate, diverse amenities, and arts and cultural opportunities. In a 2019 article, [Goodtimes](#) named Burlington the top city in Canada to retire in. With a 2016 median age of 43.3 years, and attributes that attract seniors, it is imperative for the city to be strategic in addressing the needs of an aging population. Two key elements to healthy aging are nutrition and physical activity, and community gardens can address both.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/E0/04/30/32/00001/perch\\_s.pdf](https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/UF/E0/04/30/32/00001/perch_s.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.seewhatgrows.org/5-challenges-community-garden/>

<sup>15</sup> [https://auroragov.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_1881137/File/Residents/Neighborhood%20Liaisons/Community%20Gardens/001814.pdf](https://auroragov.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_1881137/File/Residents/Neighborhood%20Liaisons/Community%20Gardens/001814.pdf)

In 2015, the federal and provincial governments jointly released [“Healthy Aging in Canada: A New Vision”](#) providing key strategies for seniors. The report recognized that “walking and gardening may be the most important things seniors can do to maintain mobility and prevent disability” (p. 13). Additionally, the City of Burlington’s [Active Aging Plan](#) envisions Burlington as a “caring and age-friendly city where citizens enjoy healthy, active lives and feel safe, connected and valued as they reach their full potential.” In 2020, 45% of community garden permits in Burlington were issued to residents 55 years of age or older at the time of registration<sup>16</sup>. Not all older adults engage in gym programs or high intensity exercise, so gardening is a good choice for physical activity. Besides providing physical exercise, a community garden can encourage social interactions, increase mental focus, lead to better sleep, provide vitamin D from sunlight, and reduce the risk of depression<sup>17</sup>. Researchers have also found daily gardening to represent the single biggest risk reduction for dementia, reducing incidence by 36%. Another study estimated the risk reduction at 47%!<sup>18</sup>The benefits are both diverse and significant.



In addition to exercise, seniors require a nutritious diet for optimal health and aging. It is [recommended](#) that adults over 51 eat 7 servings of fruit and vegetables each day. A garden can provide easily accessible fresh organic produce for individuals and communities. This would be significant for seniors on a fixed or limited income.



While Burlington is an affluent community, there is poverty in Halton, although it can be hidden. In 2018, [Community Development Halton](#) reported a 53% increase in the size of Halton’s population living in poverty compared to an overall population growth of 25%. In 2015, there were over [44,500 Halton residents living in poverty](#) compared to 29,000 persons ten years earlier. Halton’s poverty rate rose from [6.6% to 8.2%](#). A successful garden can yield produce that can also be donated or shared, thereby providing immediate benefits to the gardeners and potentially to others experiencing food insecurity. Community gardens are an affordable, manageable strategy to address poverty among both seniors and the general population in Burlington and throughout Halton.

## Community Gardening in Today’s World – Pandemics, Climate Change and Food Security

In 2018, 1 in 8 households in Canada was identified as food insecure: this is defined as “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints”<sup>19</sup>. Canada is facing significant barriers to achieving its UN Sustainable Development Goal of Zero Hunger by 2030. The COVID 19 pandemic has both highlighted and intensified food insecurity globally. In Canada, there are disruptions in domestic food supply chains affecting production. The Canadian Agriculture Minister warns of higher prices and less variety of foods due to COVID19. This will lead to increased vulnerability for seniors and others on

<sup>16</sup> Source: Michelle Bennett, City of Burlington

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.griswoldhomecare.com/griswold-home-care-terms/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.collective-evolution.com/2015/11/01/5-reasons-why-community-gardens-are-good-for-your-neighbourhood/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://proof.utoronto.ca/more-canadians-are-food-insecure-than-ever-before-and-the-problem-is-only-getting-worse/>

a fixed or limited income. It is imperative that society increases the resiliency of its food system, and that can begin at the local level.



There was a threat to the world's food supply before COVID19: climate change. If global warming is not kept below 2 degrees Celsius (the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) recommends a ceiling of 1.5 degrees), Canada will feel the impact of food shortages and price shocks<sup>20</sup>. Community gardens can play a role in addressing the impending crisis. In April 2020, 163 signatories including food and environmental organizations, academics, farmers and advocates, requested that the Prime Minister and Cabinet members make transformative changes to the agriculture sector to deal with food security in Canada. They specifically reference the role of community gardens in addressing food security, calling for: "A public education campaign explaining agroecology and calling for backyard and community agroecological victory gardens"<sup>21</sup>. Agroecology is defined as an environmentally sustainable model of food production, and community gardens are a key element. Countries must increase the resiliency of

their food system, and municipalities, neighborhoods, and individuals all have a role. In creating community gardens, Burlington can protect its most at risk residents.

Municipal gardens can play a multi-faceted role in the fight against climate change. As well as mitigating food insecurity, they also positively influence the urban microclimate by improving air and soil quality and supporting pollinators, as mentioned earlier: "... urban gardens contribute to water regulation through unsealed soils, improve air circulation and cooling through plant transpiration and shading ... They also provide important habitat for wildlife and genetic diversity"<sup>22</sup>. The gardens benefit the whole community and contribute to a reduced carbon footprint and increased quality of life.

## Successful Community Gardening – Local Models and Examples in Ontario

As part of our research, we explored a number of examples of community gardening programs in Ontario, discovering a range of models that varied by municipality. Some programs have been operating for decades; others began within the last 10-15 years.

### ***Burlington***

Starting here at home, the City of Burlington has 5 different locations of City-sponsored community gardens throughout the city and has 217 plots available. Plots are available at \$51 per season to support the Program's operational costs. The City provides a community garden coordinator to help gardeners with gardening advice and answers to their questions. The program in Burlington is very successful with so much demand that it is managed using a lottery system to assign plots, with permits for only one season. Another benefit of the Burlington program is that it provides 7 plots to be used by volunteers to grow food for the [Burlington Food Bank](#). BurlingtonGreen was pleased to launch the impactful [Grow to](#)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/08/08/news/canadian-food-supplies-risk-if-climate-change-not-slowed-new-un-report-shows>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/04/17/opinion/concerns-about-food-supply-grows-pandemic-crisis-deepens>

<sup>22</sup> Cabral I., Costa S., Weiland U., Bonn A. (2017) Urban Gardens as Multifunctional Nature-Based Solutions for Societal Goals in a Changing Climate. In: Kabisch N., Korn H., Stadler J., Bonn A. (eds) Nature-Based Solutions to Climate Change Adaptation in Urban Areas. Theory and Practice of Urban Sustainability Transitions. Springer, Cham. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-56091-5\\_14](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-56091-5_14)



[Give](#) program shortly after establishing the City's first public community garden at Central Park in 2012, and has donated almost 9000 lbs of fresh, healthy produce to community members in need. The year 2020 saw the addition of the [Grow a Row](#) initiative which encourages gardeners to grow an extra row of produce to donate to residents facing food insecurity. A number of resources are provided on the [City's community gardening web page](#), including information about applying for grants to start a new community garden. About 15 other known community gardens on private property also exist, some affiliated with faith organizations; however, as gardens are self-reported, there is at this time no definitive list available.

Examples of community gardening in other Ontario communities include:

### ***Aurora***

Contrasting the Burlington program and model is Aurora. While Aurora does not coordinate any type of program run by the city, they allow citizens to locate a garden site, organize gardeners/volunteers and manage it on their own or with help from a company.<sup>23</sup> They allow for garden sites to be on residential land, Homeowners Association common property, vacant land lots, public property or commercial property. This offers community members the flexibility to organize on their own and find a location that works best for their group.

### ***Barrie***

The City of Barrie's city-run program is similar to Burlington's. Some differences are that costs can range from \$22.60 to \$56.50 for a plot and each location elects a garden coordinator, who is a gardener in the community and at that location.<sup>24</sup> Another difference is that the City of Barrie requires gardeners to be registered. Barrie also allows gardeners to rent more than one plot subject to demand.

### ***Hamilton***

Our near neighbour Hamilton has a healthy community gardening culture. The City of Hamilton provides some annual funding, and reviews and approves new garden applications through the Public Works Department's Operations and Waste Management Division, and the community gardening program is administered in partnership with the [Hamilton Community Garden Network \(HCGN\)](#). HCGN is run by [Neighbour to Neighbour Centre](#) to sustain and expand the garden community in Hamilton and support Hamiltonians in using gardens to build the community, enhance the environment and promote wellness. The HCGN serves as a hub of the garden community by helping people to access resources and tools to start, run, or participate in gardens through guides and fact sheets, and to get connected to supplies; find gardens through the interactive garden directory and map; and learn and connect through e-mail, events, workshops and meet-ups. Another program, rooted in the British wartime victory gardens is [Hamilton Victory Gardens](#). Started in 2011 by two Hamilton residents in partnership with the Good Shepherd Centre, the program now operates 12 community gardens on empty city lots, where local volunteers have grown and donated over 230,000 pounds of food over the years to local food banks and food programs.

### ***London***

[Community gardening in London](#) originated in 1993 and was operated by several different organizations over the years, including the Middlesex London Health Unit. In 2002, the London Community Resource Centre (LCRC) took over and has been managing the gardens located on City land ever since. Since 2006, the City of London has provided core funding to support the management of London's Community Gardens Program as well as in-kind contributions, including assistance with community garden openings, maintenance and seasonal closures, watering and composting services, and ongoing liaison with gardeners and the LCRC on issues related to gardens in parks. The City works with the community to select

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<sup>23</sup>[https://auroragov.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_1881137/File/Residents/Neighborhood%20Liaisons/Community%20Gardens/001814.pdf](https://auroragov.org/UserFiles/Servers/Server_1881137/File/Residents/Neighborhood%20Liaisons/Community%20Gardens/001814.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.barrie.ca/Living/ParksTrails/Parks/Pages/Community-Gardens.aspx>

sites for newly proposed gardens on public land, and to facilitate consultation and any necessary public processes. In 2015, City Council endorsed the London Community Gardens Program Strategic Plan (2015 – 2019) and the Year One Implementation Plan, with a vision to establish a community garden in every London neighbourhood, initiated and led by local residents. London is currently home to 17 community gardens located on municipally owned land, with plots, including raised plots to facilitate accessibility, rented on a geared-to-income basis. This number does not include many more community gardens spread across the community on non-City property, including roof tops, schools and universities, churches, and other private properties.

### ***Peel Region***

[Ecosource](#) opened the first community garden in Mississauga in 2006 in a pilot partnership developed with the [City of Mississauga](#) and [Evergreen](#), and has expanded the program to manage 8 community gardens as well as a large urban agriculture teaching site, and delivers mobile food growing workshops to thousands of Peel residents. The Ecosource Community Gardens Program connects residents in Mississauga neighbourhoods with gardening spaces that encourage active, healthy living and help green the city and is supported by the City of Mississauga.

### ***Toronto***

Toronto has a large network of community gardens across the city, ranging from Etobicoke to Scarborough and North York to the downtown core. In total there are 127 community gardens throughout the region, and sites are situated on a range of properties, including city parks, rooftops, senior citizens' residences, schools, faith organizations and community and health centres. Each garden varies cost-wise, as some could be sponsored or are already financially viable and some are newer and require fees for operating. The [City of Toronto community garden website](#) provides good information on how to join, start and maintain a community garden, including how to access potential funding sources through a link to the [Toronto Community Garden Network](#) (TCGN), which is made up of interested and energetic individuals and organizations from across the Greater Toronto Area that are committed to greening and sustainable gardening practices across the City of Toronto, and to making community gardening an integral part of city life. The TCGN site also provides excellent resources.

### ***Waterloo Region***

Waterloo Region has a long history of community gardening going back to the 1970's, with [a very robust network of 80 community gardens](#) and a well-established collaboration between the regional and municipal governments to promote community gardening across the Region as well as a formal incorporated board, [the Waterloo Region Community Garden Network \(WRCGN\)](#) whose mission is to promote and sustain community gardens throughout Waterloo Region. Community gardens can register with the network and are helped by the network. Waterloo Region incorporated a mandate to promote community gardening into its Official Plan and has provided an enabling service through the regional Public Health department. Kitchener supports community gardening with start-up funding through a grant program, supplies compost delivered by City trucks and assigns staff to provide support to gardens on city-owned land. The City of Waterloo has about five gardens on city land and has updated city by-laws to allow gardens on land regardless of zoning, while Cambridge has some interesting garden models, such as one managed by a partnership between a church and a social housing organization. There are several gardens located at multi-unit residential sites throughout the region, such as town house and condo complexes, apartment buildings and seniors' residences.

*Summary*



The maturity of community gardening as a formal, organized activity varies by municipality, with some municipalities having more formal structures and models, most operating as collaborative partnerships between municipal or regional governments and local community organizations, and in general, a high and growing demand for community garden plots, with typical waiting lists, or lottery-style assignment of plots in efforts to fairly meet demand. Many communities incorporate some model of volunteer food-growing initiative geared to supporting local food banks or other food security charitable organizations. Website resources and application portals are common to the municipalities we reviewed, and in some cases, reports have been produced testifying to the benefits of community gardening for both gardeners and the community at large.

The good news is that community gardening seems to be well accepted and supported at least to some degree by local government, with a growing recognition that it can play a role in supporting strategic goals like developing healthier communities and meeting social justice objectives. Particularly in the Greater GTHA, where land is at a premium and development has overtaken much of the region’s prime farmland, municipalities can and should be looking for strategies to increase urban agriculture, of which community gardening is one.

**Conclusion**

Based on the numerous environmental and social benefits discussed above, it is recommended that local developers incorporate community gardens in the design of their developments, providing a wonderful opportunity for their buyers / tenants and the community to stay healthy, active and socially connected.

MURBs are becoming increasingly popular in Burlington and will continue to be so in the coming years to accommodate future growth in the city and align with provincial growth policy. Incorporating sustainable design guidelines and features including community gardens is an important step that enables members of the development community to advance their environmental priorities and commitments, in addition to increasing property value and catering to a growing market demographic.



Respectfully,

The BurlingtonGreen Advocacy Team