
Want to Start an Urban Garden?

A Guide to Urban Agriculture and Farming in St. Louis

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Photo taken at Maplewood Richmond Heights Early Childhood Center Garden



Gateway Greening



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Urban gardens are a growing trend in urban centers across the country. Every year sustainable and locally produced foods become more popular, and gardening has grown along with it. There is no way to get more locally produced food than growing it yourself. Luckily, here in St. Louis we have plenty of land on which to start a garden or urban farm and the city government is supportive of these projects. In January 2013, the [City of St. Louis adopted a Sustainability Plan](#), designed to create a more environmentally friendly, healthy and vibrant city. With the adoption of this plan the City has become increasingly supportive of urban agriculture.

A Garden... But What Kind?

The first decision you will have to make is what type of garden or farm you want to start. The simplest distinction between gardens and farms is that gardens produce food that is used by the gardeners for personal use, while farms produce food for sell to others.

Home Gardens

The oldest form of urban agriculture, backyard gardens have historically been an important source of supplemental and even primary nutrition in the City of St. Louis neighborhoods. Home gardens not only increase access to fresh foods in neighborhoods where fresh food outlets are few and far between, but they can also be a great springboard for larger, commercial projects. If you are considering starting an urban farm, we recommend turning your backyard over to food production first to gain experience with the complexities of growing food in an urban environment.

The St. Louis Department of Public Safety defines a home garden as a garden less than one acre in size that is maintained by one or more individuals who reside in a dwelling unit on the subject property who grow and harvest food or horticultural products for either personal consumption or for sale or donation.

Community Gardens

Community gardens have sprouted throughout the St. Louis region and have often proven to be very successful. In community gardens, the food is grown communally in one large garden and distributed amongst the gardeners, or each gardener is assigned an individual bed and keeps the food they grow. The structure and management of community gardens can vary widely. Most commonly, a community garden will have one or two garden leaders who manage membership, fees and other administrative details. Garden maintenance is typically collaborative, with gardeners maintaining their own beds individually, and the

common areas being a shared responsibility. The laws, regulations, and permits surrounding community gardens are significantly looser than those pertaining to farms.

The St. Louis Department of Public Safety defines a Community Garden: an area of land less than one acre in size that is managed and maintained by a group of individuals to grow and harvest food and/or horticultural products for personal or group consumption or for sale or donation. A community garden may be divided into separate garden plots for cultivation by one or more individuals or may be farmed collectively by members of the group. It may also include common areas maintained and used by the group such as tool storage sheds.

Urban Farms

Urban farms are cultivated with the intent of growing food for sale. They are usually larger than community gardens, and because they are intended for commercial production, are subject to further regulations. A more comprehensive breakdown of these regulations will be provided below, and they include business licensing, conditional use permitting, and food safety regulations. An urban farm may or may not be the farmer's primary source of income (currently in St. Louis, they typically are not). (For more information on the different types of urban agriculture, and a definition of market gardens, see pages 4 and 22 of the study "[Seeding the City.](#)")



Photo taken at New Roots Urban Farm

The St. Louis Department of Public Safety defines an urban farm as: an area, land or structure, of one or more acre that is managed and maintained by an individual, group, or organization where homegrown products are produced to be sold or donated. An urban farm includes but is not limited to outdoor growing operations, indoor growing operations, vertical farms, aquaponics, aquaculture, hydroponics, and rooftop farms.

If you have decided to embark on your own urban agriculture adventure, the information below can help you navigate the process and increase your chances of success. Not all of the items listed below will pertain to every project; so, if some of them don't apply to your goals or site, skip ahead.

Before You Start A Garden...

Get your neighborhood involved

While this is not essential to all forms of urban agriculture, maintaining a good relationship with your neighbors is always a good idea. This is true for both community gardens and urban farms.

If you are trying to start a community garden, gathering enough people to fill the garden is essential. This can be one of the most challenging aspects in starting a community garden. Community gardens require a lot of work, even once they are established. The more people you can get involved, the more likely it is that your garden will be successful. Find out if there is a **neighborhood association** in your neighborhood, go to a ward meeting, find a local community center (such as a church or place of worship), or even put up signs and host an event at your potential location.

For urban farmers, maintaining cordial relationships with neighbors may go a long way in ensuring the security of the farm and its long-term viability.

For both prospective urban farmers and community gardeners, the [local alderperson](#) may be a great ally and resource in the process of starting an urban agriculture project. Aldermen are often very helpful and knowledgeable when dealing with local politics, whether that is at the neighborhood- or city-level.

Find a location

Finding space for a garden in St. Louis isn't difficult, but a suitable garden space requires more than a vacant lot!

The most important consideration in choosing an appropriate site is securing the legal right to use it. For community gardeners, the simplest approach is to find private property and obtain the permission of the landowner. Another approach available to both prospective community gardeners and urban farmers is to apply to the [Land Reutilization Authority \(LRA\) Garden Lease Program](#). Through the Garden Lease Program you may lease a parcel for five years for a total amount of five dollars. The City of St. Louis also has a ['Mow to Own' program](#), where residents can take ownership of a vacant lot located next to an occupied residential or commercial property they own, for a nominal fee, if they maintain the lot continually for two years.

If you want to start an urban farm, you should keep in mind that you will additionally have to obtain a conditional use permit from the City's Board of Public Service (or from the relevant municipal authority if your site is not in the City of St. Louis). Urban farming is

allowed in all zoning districts, with a conditional use permit. To begin the permitting process, you may [contact the Administrative Assistant of the City's Zoning Section](#). Your [local alderperson](#) may also be of assistance.

Note that LRA now requires general liability insurance for agriculture projects on LRA property that is not adjacent to the gardener's or farmer's residence. For community gardens, liability insurance can be very expensive if it is sought individually. Therefore, the best approach may be to request a larger organization that already has liability coverage to sponsor the garden. For instance, Gateway Greening offers a [low-cost pooled liability insurance program](#) to community gardens, including gardens that are *not* in the Gateway Greening network. Other options might include local community land trusts, neighborhood associations, churches, etc.

Urban farms will require general liability insurance, and perhaps product liability insurance as well. If your farm is a nonprofit venture, you may obtain an insurance policy through companies that work exclusively with nonprofit organizations, such as First Nonprofit Insurance Company. If the farm is on the same parcel as your place of residence, it may be covered by homeowners' insurance (but do verify this with your insurance provider). Additionally, [membership in the Missouri Farmers' Union](#) entails a \$1000 liability insurance policy. Generally, urban farms may check with companies offering agricultural insurance policies.

Other questions to consider are:

- Does the site get enough sunlight to support the plants you want to grow?
- How big is the site? If you want to start a community garden, can it accommodate all the people interested in participating? If you want to start an urban farm, can it produce enough to support your goals?
- Is the site visible from the street? Visible sites are usually safer and may attract more neighborhood support.
- Is there adequate parking space near the site for gardeners and farm workers?

Investigate the soils

The health of your soil has a big impact on the quality of your garden, as well as the healthfulness and the safety of its products. It is important to [understand the soil's nutrients and investigate potential contamination](#). Given St. Louis's long industrial history, the soils are likely to be contaminated with toxins and heavy metals.

Fortunately, there are a number of measures that can be taken. First, the EPA recommends to start by asking your neighbors and previous landowners about the history and past uses of the parcel. Another resource could be [historical aerial maps](#). Secondly, you should conduct a soil test; there are many local soil testing sites to help you do that. The University of Missouri Cooperative Extension Office, for example, conducts soil analysis tests. [Samples](#) may be dropped off directly at the Extension Office in Kirkwood, or at Gateway Greening's or Brightside St. Louis's office.

Keep in mind that the basic soil test primarily tests soil nutrients, and does not include contaminants. You may have to do a more thorough test, if you suspect that your soil may contain other pollutants. For more information on pollutant testing, you can talk to Gateway Greening.

The most common way to eliminate exposure to contaminated soil is to install [raised beds](#). Remediating the soil or importing clean soil will probably constitute the largest cost in your agricultural endeavor. [St. Louis Composting](#), for example, is a good source of soil for urban gardeners in the St. Louis area. Additionally, the City of St. Louis Forestry Division delivers free orders of compost and mulch to community gardens in the city. Gardeners may contact the Forestry Division directly to place an order, or talk to their alderperson who will place an order on their behalf. The [Forestry Division](#) also regularly delivers free compost and mulch at [7 pick-up sites](#) located throughout the city.

Beyond what is in the soil, if you are going to do any digging for installations, you should consider what is underground. St. Louis is verify old city and has seen substantial transformations over the years. If you are going to be digging more than 18” deep into the soil, you should consider getting a locating service to survey your potential site. This can be done by [calling 811 or by visiting their website](#).

Find water for your garden

Water access is a crucial aspect of starting a garden or farm, and may take a bit of searching.

Community gardens

If the site you have chosen to install a community garden does not already have a water supply, check with neighbors or nearby organizations. Churches, community centers or local businesses often allow community gardens to tap in and use their water. If you have started a community garden you can apply to Gateway Greening’s [water access program](#). This program is open to all community gardens throughout the city, including gardens not in the Gateway Greening network. Once enrolled in the program the city will waive the water bill to your community garden.

The city also allows community gardens to use **fire hydrants**, if the proper permits are filed. To apply for the permits, you will need to write a letter as directed by the St. Louis Water Division on their [hydrant use permits page](#). Your local alderperson can help you file for these permits and have the deposit and fees waived, so there is no upfront cost to borrowing a hydrant key and adaptor for the season. Once you have completed the proper permits, the St. Louis Water Division will issue the necessary equipment and you will be able to access water from a fire hydrant near your garden. Contact the St. Louis Water Division to get more information.

If you are willing to invest more in the infrastructure of your garden, and own the property, you can [install a waterline from the main to your garden](#). This requires a permit from the City's Water Division, and the hiring of a contractor to dig the line and install the tap.

The rules and regulations regarding water tap installations are different for large and small tap installations. This refers to the size of the water main that exists on the property. You may contact the [Water Division](#) to find out the size of the main at your property, and for more information. Click on the links below to see the rules applicable to the different sized mains:

- [Large](#) (over 6 inches at the main),
- [Small](#) (water tap installations, being smaller than 6 inches).

This is a considerably more expensive option, but it will eliminate many hassles along the way.

Urban Farms

While obtaining a permit to use a fire hydrant is an option, it may not adequately serve the watering needs of an urban farm. A farm project will most likely require a waterline and be required to pay the metered rate, instead of the flat rate. An exception may be made upon verification by the [Metropolitan Sewer District](#) that the water from your farm does not runoff into the sewers. Additionally, an urban farm may need a [drip irrigation system](#). Another good strategy for both gardens and farms is to use rainwater collection systems, such as rain barrels. [Harvesting rainwater](#) is important because it reduces the amount of water flowing into the sewer system as it provides you with water for your garden.



Photo taken at New Roots Urban Farm

Other Important Considerations

Once you have found a site that is suitable for urban agriculture, the next thing to figure out is **infrastructure**. Depending on the purpose of your agriculture project and your production goals, you may need different types of infrastructure. Some examples include:

- [Raised beds](#)
- Tool shed
- Fencing
- Greenhouses, [Hoop houses](#) (aka [High Tunnels](#)) and other structures for season extension
- Storage and processing space (for commercial urban farms)
- Hand-washing and wash station

Farm animals

Chickens are some of the most common farm animals in urban areas. They can be raised for their fertile manure or eggs. In St. Louis, you may own up to eight total fowl on a residentially zoned parcel, and none of which may be a rooster. In 2017, the St. Louis Board of Alderman passed [Board Bill 52](#) (see [City Ordinance 70608](#)), which amends, repeals, and enacts several ordinances pertaining to the keeping of fowl in the City of St. Louis to better enable residents to keep fowl and to clarify related regulations and requirements. For more information about keeping chickens, please visit the [Keeping Chickens in St. Louis FAQ](#).

Beekeeping also holds many benefits for the urban gardener. Bees not only give us honey, but they also produce wax and accumulate pollen, which can be used in a wide range of products from candles to cosmetics. In the City of St. Louis, residents may have up to five beehives ([see City code 15.140](#)), which is adequate to sustain commercial production. If you are planning on having a beehive on your garden or farm, you will need to install a fence to protect both the bees and potential trespassers who may be allergic. Additionally, if you are starting a community garden, be sure to discuss as a group how to handle situations with potentially allergic visitors. If you are new to beekeeping, the [Eastern Missouri Beekeepers Association](#) and the more local [St. Louis Beekeepers](#) can be very helpful resources.

Composting

[Compost](#) is an extremely valuable resource for urban gardeners. It is a natural source of nutrients for your plants, and a safe and low-cost way of recycling organic waste such as food scraps and grass clippings. Gateway Greening provides [information](#) on composting. It is generally a good idea to keep your compost pile or bin in the backyard and away from your neighbor's property.

Zoning Regulations

As mentioned above, a commercial urban farm will require a conditional use permit. Additionally, zoning also affects the rules and regulations surrounding infrastructure projects. Any building that will be built on the land to serve your agricultural needs is considered an “accessory building.” The restrictions on accessory buildings are based on the size of the building and the zoning district. For clarifications, you may contact [the City Building Division](#). You may also look through the [City’s zoning code](#).

It is worth contacting the [City’s Building Division](#) for information on permits, fees, and other building regulations, if you plan on building an accessory building of any sort. If the building, such as [a greenhouse](#), is over 120 square feet, it will require a building permit. A building permit is also required for installing a fence, regardless of zoning district. In zones A-E (residential zones) fences may be up to 4’ high in the front of the lot, and up to 6’ high in the back. In zones F-L (non-residential and commercial zones), fences may be 6’ high around the entire lot.

Selling your Produce

In response to increasing interest and demand for sustainable and urban agriculture, the St. Louis Department of Public Safety has released a policy memo defining and reviewing urban agriculture practices in the City of St. Louis. The memo makes clear what is and is not a valid use of urban farming and produce, and ensures urban farmers are operating in accordance with the law.

As per the memo, all home gardens and community gardens are permitted in every zoning district and urban farms are conditional uses in every district, so long as such gardens and farms adhere to the following restrictions and limitations:

1. The sale of raw, unprocessed produce, to include eggs and honey, from home or community gardens or urban farms is permitted without license or taxation so long as they are sold from the same premises from which they were grown or harvested
2. Sales may take place from May through November between 7 a.m. and sundown, up to 3 days per week and 30 days per year
3. The sale area cannot exceed 50 square feet, any canopy must not exceed 10’ by 10’, and any signage must be professionally made and no larger than 4 square feet.
4. The garden cannot use farming equipment with an engine greater than 30 horsepower, motorized equipment cannot be used between 8 p.m. and 8 a.m., and the garden cannot be a nuisance to for neighbors.

If you want to have an urban farm, please see the next section.

Further Regulations for Urban Farms

Commercial urban agriculture projects are subject to further regulations if the food harvested is processed for sale. **Food processing** is the transformation of crops into value-added products like jams, pickles, baked goods, etc. It includes any process that changes raw foodstuffs into a variety of different and tasty foods. Food processing that does not use meat, eggs or livestock products is regulated by the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. These are statewide regulations to ensure food safety and protect public health. All food processing undertakings are subject to inspection by health inspectors from the state. The Missouri Business Development Program has published a helpful overview of the steps you need to take to [start a food processing business](#). The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services also has [a brochure](#) summarizing the requirements applicable to food processing operations. The [Department of Health's "Frequently Asked Questions"](#) may also be a helpful starting point.

The Future Of Urban Agriculture Policy in St. Louis

The urban agriculture trend in St. Louis is growing, but it is young, which means that there are still very few rules and regulations that specifically address the concerns and needs of urban agriculture. There is currently a large grey area of undefined regulations that can cause much confusion to anyone navigating the system.

But this also means that there is a great opportunity to establish a more urban agriculture-friendly city. As both St. Louis and the urban agriculture trend grow, there will be changes to city policies, and we want to help insure that these changes will create the supportive environment that any urban agriculture venture needs to be successful. In 2014, the State of Missouri passed the [Urban Agriculture Zone Act](#), which allows for the establishment of Urban Agriculture Zones in Missouri cities. Such laws can completely change the landscape of the future for urban agriculture and will be open for debate and public influence as they are implemented. As with many different issues, getting involved with local and state politics is critical. As stated above, getting in contact with your [alderperson](#) is a great way to start. You can also call or email your [state senator](#), or you [state representative](#). If you are interested in meeting with policy makers in St. Louis, all of the information regarding contacts, meetings, current bills and other information can be found on [the City's policy-making page](#). If you have an urban agriculture policy concern, please contact the [St. Louis Food Policy Coalition](#).



Additional Resources

Gateway Greening

[Gateway Greening](#) provides a variety of programs and services to urban gardeners with the goal of creating a safe, healthy, and sustainable urban environment. Gateway Greening's programs range from assistance in setting up community and youth gardens to educational workshops, volunteering opportunities on a demonstration garden, a library lending scheme, a how-to video series, and much more!

St. Louis Food Policy Coalition

The [St. Louis Food Policy Coalition](#) (STLFPC) brings together numerous organizations and individuals working throughout the St. Louis region to address our food system needs, from food access to sustainable agriculture and community and economic development. The STLFPC works to shape public policy and promote a thriving local food system that supports the health, community, environment, and economy of the Greater St. Louis area. STLFPC is convened by [Missouri Coalition for the Environment](#), Missouri's independent, citizens' environmental organization for clean water, clean air, clean energy, and a healthy environment.

University of Missouri - Extension

The University of Missouri has agriculture [extension offices](#) with the mission of supporting gardeners and farmers alike. They have programs, classes, information, as well as other resources. The University of Missouri Extension Office has developed a [comprehensive toolkit](#) for new and existing community gardens, as well as [policies on urban agriculture](#). The closest extension office is in Kirkwood.

Lincoln University Cooperative Extension

The [Innovative Small Farmers' Outreach Programs \(ISFOP\)](#), a Cooperative Extension program, works with Missouri's small farmers by providing growers with technical and educational assistance during farm visits, and in workshop and conference settings at little or no cost to the residents of Missouri. Their main office is on the campus of Lincoln University, in Jefferson City, and their outreach centers are located in Kansas City, St. Louis and Southeast Missouri. For a list of [useful topics and links](#), [click here](#).

Missouri Beginning Farmers

A good resource for gardeners throughout the state of Missouri is [the beginning gardeners website](#). It is set up by the University of Missouri Extension Office to help farmers get started and be as successful as possible.

Missouri Farm to School

The Farm to School program aims to promote the use of locally grown produce in the cafeterias of schools and other institutions in order to strengthen the connections between communities, local producers, and healthy and nutritious food. Participation in the Farm to School program can be an important financial benefit to growers. [The Missouri Farm to School website](#) has very helpful information for farmers and vendors, including a list of steps to get involved and other resources. The National Farm to School Network has a webpage for [Missouri resources and policies](#).

Brightside St. Louis

Brightside St. Louis has the mission to create a cleaner, greener, more environmentally-friendly St. Louis. Brightside offers a number of services and resources for urban gardeners, from information on rain catching and using native plants, to a [demonstration garden](#), and a [neighborhood greening program](#).

Missouri Botanical Garden

The Missouri Botanical Garden offers a lot of valuable help to home gardeners, including on [vegetable gardening](#) and sustainable gardening. In addition to the factsheets, visual guides, and other advice posted on the [Gardening Help webpage](#), the Missouri Botanical Garden offers a number of gardening classes and visits to the Kemper Center for Home Gardening.

City of St. Louis Business Assistance Center

Housed in the City of St. Louis government, the [Business Assistance Center](#) provides assistance in licensing and permitting new businesses in the City. The BAC provides prospective business owners with information on various requirements, and helps them process their applications.

Metropolitan Sewer District

The Metropolitan Sewer District has a [grants program](#) for gardens that provide rainscaping that helps prevent rainwater from running into the sewer drains.