



2024

What We Learned Report

Community Garden Action Plan Review



City of Ottawa
Ontario, Canada



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Executive Summary

Community gardens serve as essential spaces for residents to come together to grow food, foster community connections, and enhance local biodiversity. In response to an increasing number of requests from residents seeking greater access to municipal land and supports, Council has initiated a review of the Community Garden Action Plan. This update includes the request to expand the definition of community gardens to include other green initiatives, ensuring that these spaces serve the diverse needs of our community.

This What We Heard Report, compiled from public consultations and an online survey, highlights a strong community desire for increased support to community gardens and green initiatives. Residents expressed that these initiatives significantly impact their lives, offering benefits such as improved mental health, food security, and opportunities for cultural exchange.

The City aims to address operational needs and community feedback, with a formal report to the Community Services Committee in the Spring 2025, to ensure that recommendations align with community priorities and facilitate greater involvement in sustainable urban practices.



Background

Ottawa is home to over 120 food-producing community gardens. Among these, 27 are situated on City land. The City supports and funds these initiatives through the Community Gardening Network, operated by the non-profit organization [Just Food](#).

On October 24, 2023, a [Motion](#) directed City departments to review and update the current [Community Garden Action Plan](#) with formal recommendations regarding scope, leadership, processes, and resources needed to support community gardens and similar green initiatives on City-land.

To support this review, the City is collaborating with an external consultant, Hoffmann Hayes, who bring extensive experience in the field of urban agriculture, community gardening and community development to support the community engagement and review of internal processes for community food gardens and similar community-led green initiatives in the City of Ottawa.

The content of this report provides insights on community priorities, interests, and needs for support to inform the City's role in community gardens and green initiatives. This information will inform recommendations and next steps in the development of an updated City of Ottawa's Community Garden and Green Initiatives Framework.

Please follow the Community Gardens and Community-Led Green Initiatives [Engage Ottawa](#) page to stay updated with the progress.



Definitions

Community-led green initiatives are a collective definition for all community driven efforts that enhance a healthy and diverse urban ecosystem. These initiatives could include the development of pollinator gardens, species management and the protection of naturalized spaces and natural assets to support the long-term sustainability and resilience of Ottawa's urban environment.

A **community garden** is a shared space where people work together to grow food and build community. Community gardens are used to grow food or contributory plants that assist in food growing, such as pollinator beds and native plants. Community gardeners grow produce for the personal use of those using the garden and or for donation to a non-profit organization through individual or shared plots. Community gardens help contribute to:

- Food security
- Community development
- Civic participation and social inclusion
- Neighborhood revitalization
- Environmental awareness
- Individual mental and physical health and wellbeing

City-owned land is property legally owned and managed by a municipal government for various public purposes. The City uses and manages this land to benefit the public, adhering to local laws, regulations, and planning processes, ensuring that it serves the public interest and meets community needs.



An aerial photograph of a lush green community garden. A person is visible in the upper right corner, kneeling and watering plants with a green hose. The garden is filled with various green plants, including leafy greens and herbs. A large teal circle is partially visible on the left side of the image, and a large yellow circle is partially visible on the right side.

Methodology

In June 2024, the City of Ottawa conducted two virtual engagement sessions aimed at gathering community input on community gardens and greening initiatives, attracting 93 participants: 49 for community gardens and 44 for community-led green initiatives.

The discussions featured six community speakers, selected by lottery, who shared their local experiences with projects in the urban area. Additionally, over 20 small group discussions facilitated deeper conversations among attendees.

Members of the public were invited to participate online through the Engage Ottawa platform which contained information on the review and an online survey.

The online survey was available from June 10 to July 11, 2024. The surveys were made available in both French and English. This initiative garnered significant interest, with 4,057 visitors engaging with the platform and 946 community members responding to the survey.

The project ranked 9th among the top-performing City projects on Engage Ottawa in 2024, highlighting the community's active involvement and interest in these initiatives.

The public consultation and survey aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- Understand the current and desired scope of requests, level of demand and interest.
- Explore the benefits and impacts of community gardens and green initiatives.
- Examine the current needs, challenges, and opportunities.
- Identify areas of improvement.
- Determine community priorities.

The following questions guided the discussions:

1. How have community gardens or green initiatives impacted your life or the broader community?
2. What are your reasons for learning more about or getting involved in community gardens and community-led green initiatives?
3. What has helped you develop your community project?
4. What supports were needed to start and maintain your project?

Staff captured discussion points which are compiled in this report including submissions from residents and agencies unable to attend the engagement sessions and provided their feedback via email or phone.

The City met regularly with the partner organization Just Food to gather feedback on needs, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

Feedback from this engagement is summarized in the next section.





What We Heard from the Community

Feedback gathered through the engagement was consolidated under 4 themes, as described below:

Theme 1

Community Interest, Benefits, and Impact

Theme 2

Simplifying Processes and Improving Communication

Theme 3

City as a Proactive Leader & Support

Theme 4

Support and Diversify Community-City Partnerships



Theme 1

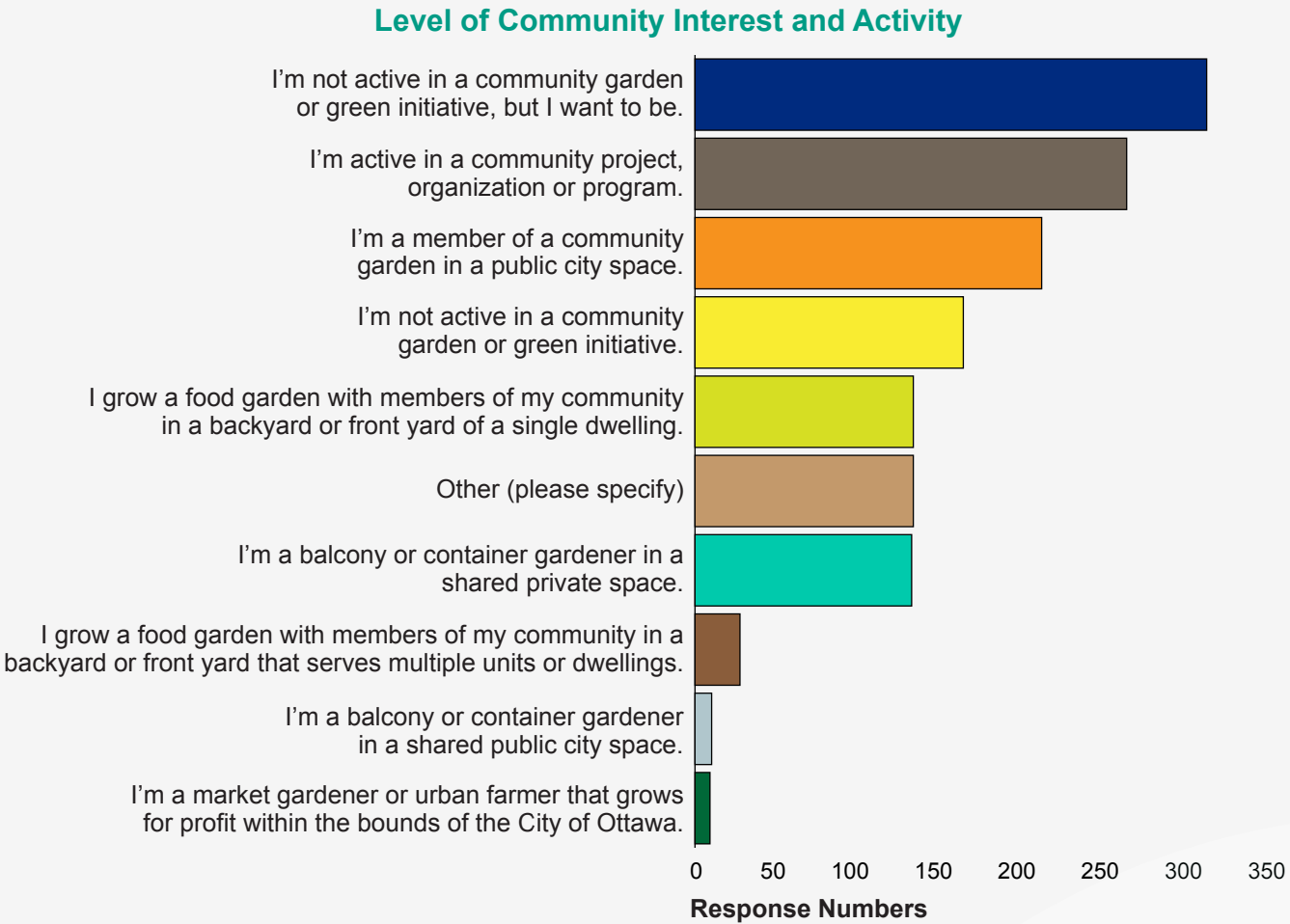
Community Interest, Benefits, and Impact

Residents have expressed a growing desire for both community gardens and green initiatives, with overwhelming support for expanding these efforts throughout the city.

According to the survey, 87% of respondents desire to see more community-led green initiatives and community gardens in their immediate neighbourhood.

When asked what level of involvement and activity they are currently involved in, the top response was that they themselves “not active in a community garden or green initiative but want to be”, followed closely by community members who are “active with a community project, organization or program”, and then those who indicated they “are a member of a community garden in a public space.”

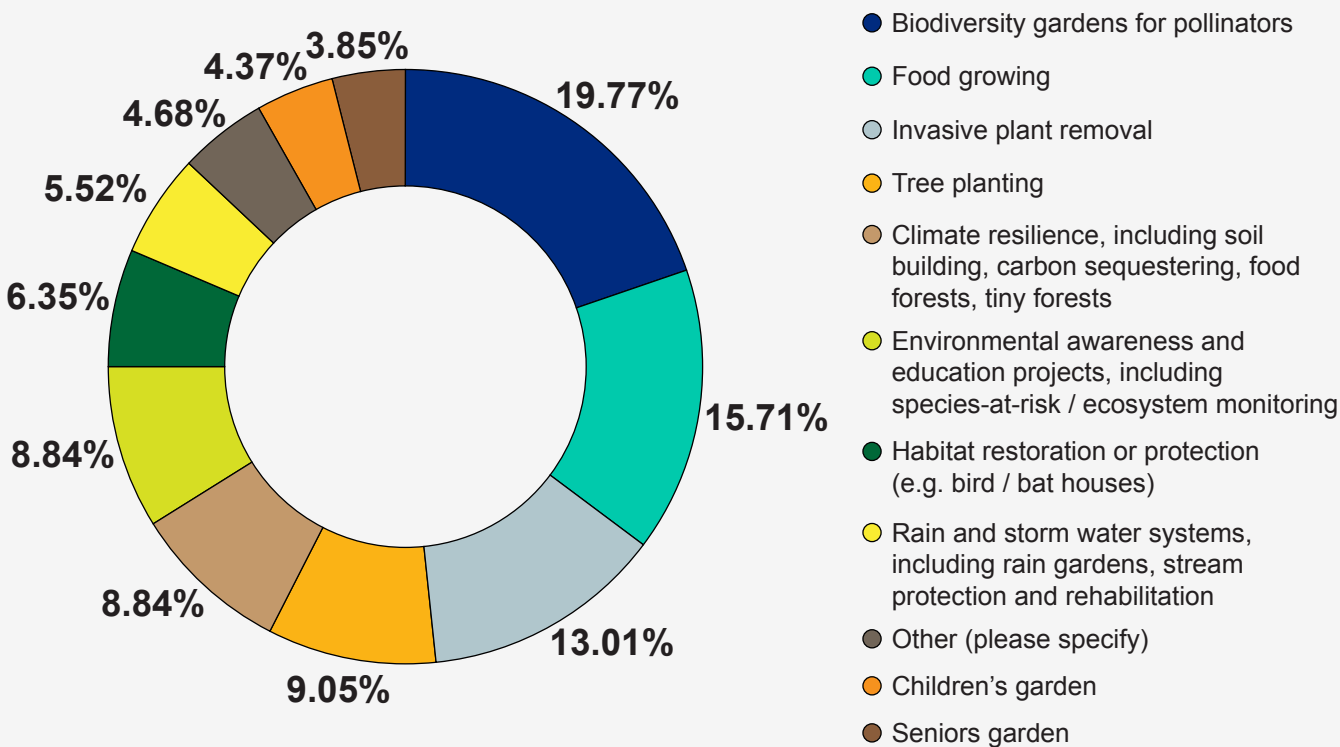
Figure 1: The bar graph below represents the varying levels of involvement and activity of the respondents in community gardens and community-led green initiatives.



According to the survey, for respondents who identified as “I’m active with a community project, organization or program”, were asked to clarify the focus of their current activities. The top three areas of involvement reported are:

- 1. Biodiversity gardens for pollinators (19.77%)
- 2. Growing Food (15.71%)
- 3. Invasive Plant Removal (13.01%)

Figure 2: The pie chart above represents the number of respondents who indicated their involvement in the above activities.



When asked active participants for their motivation in engaging in these activities, the respondents' top (7) responses, with a general even level of interest, are:

1. Support wildlife and pollinators
2. To make my community greener and more beautiful
3. For recreation, health, and wellness
4. So I/we can eat local food
5. To connect with my neighbours and community
6. To protect the local environment and ecology
7. To take a personal action on climate change



When asked in an open text format why these community gardens and other community-led green initiatives were of personal significance, residents shared several key motivations they associated with when actively participating in community gardens and green initiatives. The top four (4) most reoccurring themes were:

1. Environmental and Ecological Health

Participants emphasized the role of these initiatives in supporting wildlife, increasing biodiversity, protecting pollinators, and promoting native plant species, as well as the role they play in increasing environmental social awareness of invasive and native species, composting, soil health and rainwater capture. In addition, these initiatives were named to beautify their neighbourhoods and parks and to provide important habitats for pollinators.

2. Food Security and Food Systems Learning

Participants indicated that gardens provide access to sustainable, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food for new and existing members of the community. Additionally, community members indicated that gardens provide an opportunity to learn and educate the community on how to grow food sustainably.

3. Recreation, Health, and Wellness

Participants highlighted the mental and physical health benefits of participating in gardening and greening initiatives. For some, these activities provide an opportunity to connect with nature, offering a sense of fulfillment and reduced stress. Others pointed out that gardening projects help build community connections, providing meaning and positive social interactions.

4. Cultural and Social Connections

Participants communicated that the development of projects helps to bring people together from diverse backgrounds who share a common interest in gardening, food, and the environment. Respondents noted that community gardens offer a unique space for cultural exchange where individuals are learning from one another and sharing knowledge, including exchanging plants, seeds, and gardening techniques from their respective cultures.





Theme 2

Simplifying Processes and Improving Communication

This theme captures community feedback on how to make City processes for community gardens and community-led green initiatives more accessible and more straightforward. Residents want clear guidelines, faster approvals, and predictable timelines. The community also expressed the desire for a single contact person also hope for a single contact person at the City to help answer questions and guide them through a process.

Residents have asked for a central information hub where they can easily learn about how the City permits or restricts community gardens and similar projects in Ottawa. They want a single point of contact or a centralized platform to find information, access funding or grants, and understand eligibility criteria.

Specifically, residents have requested clear and coordinated communication regarding:

- Information on how to get involved in a community garden or similar green initiatives.
- A community-led streamlined application process for joining or starting a new project, including requirements, City policies and best practices for projects on and off municipal land.

- City guidelines for partnering requirements on projects including roles and responsibilities, as well as insurance requirements.
- Clear and transparent approval criteria with predictable timelines that respect both greening initiative and community gardens seasonal needs.
- What the City can offer in terms of infrastructure, including access to land and water, funding, grants, partnerships, training, and networking support.
- Information on current, future, and past projects to encourage equitable access and community collaboration.
- Promotion of existing partnerships and community groups available through project maps.

Furthermore, respondents are asking for the promotion of existing programs, easier ways to get involved, and access to maps and information on all community gardens and similar community efforts regarding local food development and environmental sustainability.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

Community Food Gardens:

- Create a centralized platform for community gardening on City-land including information on water access, shed development, design criteria, and material requirements.
- Streamline City policies to ensure fair access to land, resources, and infrastructure such as water, soil, and insurance supports.

Community-Led Green Initiatives:

- Develop clear and consistent policies to determine eligibility for community-led green initiatives, access funding, and establish a well-defined application review and approval process that is fair for all.
- Designate a single point of contact to connect the various departments involved in these projects, along with clear guidelines for community groups and volunteers.
- Provide support for community-led green initiatives, similar to that offered for community gardens, including accessible insurance options.



Theme 3

City as a Proactive Leader and Supportive Partner

This theme highlights the community's desire for the City of Ottawa to take a leading role in environmental sustainability by integrating sustainable practices into urban planning, policies, public-private partnerships, and operations.

Respondents envision Ottawa as a model for urban agriculture and environmental stewardship and are recommending the City to take a more proactive role in public promotion, outreach, and education for sustainable practices on and off City-owned land.

Incorporate Sustainable Policy in Urban Planning and Maintenance Operations

Respondents seek to embed sustainability into all aspects of urban planning, ensuring that new developments contribute positively to an urban biodiverse ecosystem.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

- Mandate the inclusion of community gardens and urban agriculture zones in City planning to enhance local food security.
- Mandate that new developments incorporate native plants to support local wildlife and pollinator habitats.
- Switch the City provided trees to local tree species trees to promote local pollinator biodiversity.
- Allow residents the right to have “naturalized” lawns to promote biodiversity and reduce maintenance costs.
- Enable the creation of community-led pollinator gardens in City parks to provide essential habitats for bees and other pollinators.

- Ensure that all new urban development projects incorporate sustainability, access to green spaces, green roofs, community gardens, and native plant landscaping as standard practices.
- Prioritize the inclusion of community gardens and urban agriculture zones in City planning to increase local food production and security. Promote edible landscaping in parks and public spaces.
- Adopt a policy of not cutting dandelions in the city street median areas.

Resource Support for Equitable Access, Accessibility, and Inclusion

Respondents emphasized the importance of ensuring equitable access to green spaces, City-land, and local food opportunities, especially in priority neighborhoods.

Feedback highlighted disparities in access to resources such as insurance, infrastructure, water access and approved installations. Many pointed to the need for targeted outreach to marginalized communities, newcomers, immigrants, and Indigenous groups, ensuring equitable access to resources, gardening education, and participation opportunities. The community is looking to the City to support strategies for proactive inclusion of underrepresented and equity-denied communities.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

- Provide access to City-owned land for local food development and green spaces with a focus on priority neighborhoods, and community housing.
- Sheds remain a complex and arduous process for community members, who are requesting permission for shed installation accessible and cost-effective storage solutions.
- Community members have identified water access and maintenance as a barrier to the development and success of a community gardens and green initiatives, indicating that resources are provided for some gardens but not others. Requesting that all gardens are given equal access to water sources and maintenance services when approved on municipal land.
- Participants have identified challenges with the level of insurance requirements requested by the City, particularly for community-led green initiatives and have indicated it as a barrier for involvement.

According to the survey, 40 respondents reported that either they or someone in their community or family faces accessibility barriers in using community gardens and green spaces.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

- Mandating features for seating/benches, shade coverage, pathways, walkways, parking, and bike storage.
- Adding more wheelchair-accessible paths and designated parking spots.
- Installing raised garden beds and kneeling benches for those with arthritis or mobility challenges.
- Increasing the availability of public toilets and washrooms.
- Improving security and lighting for safer evening access.
- Providing better storage options for bikes and gardening tools.
- Creating paved walkways and bike-friendly areas.
- Ensuring easy access to water for garden care and relief during heat waves.
- Enhancing road conditions to accommodate smaller vehicles and bikes, especially in wet weather.

Public Promotion, and Education

Respondents emphasize the importance of education and outreach to foster a culture of sustainability.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

- Requests for the creation of demonstration gardens in public spaces to showcase sustainable gardening techniques and provide hands-on learning opportunities.
- Launch campaigns to educate residents about the benefits of local plant species plants, urban foraging, and sustainable gardening practices, encouraging community participation.

Performance and Improvement Tracking

Residents desire transparent metrics to assess the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives and community gardening and community-led stewardship efforts.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

- Request for establishing clear metrics to evaluate the impact of community gardens on food production, biodiversity, and community engagement over time.





Theme 4

Support and Diversify Community-City Partnerships

The City as Networker and Connector

Many participants viewed the City as a key connector, facilitating collaboration between community organizations, networks, and partners. There is a desire for the City to provide continued support and connection opportunities for groups engaged in community gardens and community-led green initiatives.

Feedback recommended the City to be proactive in connecting private organizations, schools, universities, and nonprofits with community gardening and green initiatives to enhance awareness and engagement,

especially among youth and newcomers. Community members see these partnerships as crucial for addressing larger environmental and food security challenges.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

- Respondents expressed a desire to increase supports for social housing with community gardens, fostering stronger links between affordable housing and food production.
- Libraries and heritage lands were also seen as potential hubs for environmental and food sustainability, programming, and expanding educational opportunities across the city.
- Connecting and collaborating with organizations like Hydro One and Hydro Ottawa, education institutions, school boards, Ottawa Community Housing, and National Capital Commission (NCC) to streamline the process of establishing gardens.
- Introduce policies for tax breaks or subsidies for developers who incorporate green spaces like rooftop gardens and permeable pavements into their projects.

Building Partnerships for Environmental Stewardship and Increasing Food Growth on City-Owned Land

Community feedback highlighted a strong desire to enhance partnerships between the City and community groups to support environmental stewardship and growing food on municipal land. Respondents called for the City to take a more coordinated and structured approach to blending City resources with community-led initiatives.

Suggestions identified by the community include:

1. A supportive Framework for Community Stewardship on City-land

- Respondents are asking for a formal framework and process that would allow vetted organizations and groups to be trusted caretakers of municipal green spaces and increase land capacity to grow food.
- Respondents are requesting for an ecosystem management plan that integrates community feedback and involvement in operational areas such as invasive species management, native species supports, biodiversity enhancement, edible trees and landscaping and the overall maintenance of green spaces and parks.



2. Capacity Building for Collaborative Solutions

- Continue to support and partner with Just Food for their role in coordination, training, administration, and mentorship.
- Respondents are requesting that the City create spaces for collaboration between the City and community groups on important issues like biodiversity, urban greening, and sustainability. They are asking for a shift toward more traditional, sustainable land management practices.
- Additionally, they suggest using local knowledge to support the training of City parks employees in recognizing and managing invasive and native species to improve local biodiversity.
- Residents also highlighted the need for partnerships, focusing on mentorship, leadership, and diversifying partnership models – allowing for the growth of diverse organizations to develop the skills and knowledge to enhance the engagement of the community in urban food, environmental stewardship, and community development.
- Explore Public, Private, Plural Partnerships (P4) to achieve broader social, economic, and environmental impacts.

3. Reducing Risk Lens and Cutting Through Red Tape

- Residents are requesting the City to adopt a higher risk tolerance to these projects in exchange for community trust by reducing barriers related to liability, regulations, and access to resources.
- Allowing easier access to City land for invasive plant removal and biodiversity efforts, reducing stringent requirements for volunteer efforts.
- Commit to practical supports like compost bins at all community gardens and ensuring water access and maintenance to City water infrastructure for these spaces.
- Allow permission of the additions of biodiversity-enhancing features, such as bird houses, bat hotels and bee hotels and subsequent signage for social awareness and learning.



Thank you for engaging with us!

Dear Community Members,

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to you for attending our Community Garden and Community-Led Green Initiative virtual events and feedback on the Engage Ottawa Survey. Your participation and insights are invaluable to us.

Your contributions have provided us with a wealth of knowledge and perspective.

This What We Learned Report will inform City staff and council about the recommendations for community gardens and similar initiatives on City land, including scope, leadership, processes, and required resources.

For the latest information on progress, next steps, and ways to get involved, visit the Ottawa Community Gardens and Community-Led Green Initiative page on the [Engage Ottawa Platform](#) (available in French and English) where you can find updated information on communications to council, and upcoming opportunities to consult and engage on development of this report.

If you have questions, please contact communitygardens@ottawa.ca.



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