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City Farms on CLTs

How Community Land Trusts Are Supporting Urban Agriculture

Customers shop for vegetables, herbs, and perennials at Southside Community Land Trust's (SCLT's) annual plant sale, held at City Farm in Providence, Rhode Island.

Jeffrey Yuen

Despite the growing popularity of urban agriculture, many city farms continue to face the challenge of insecure land tenure and overly restrictive public policies. Some researchers and policy makers have identified the need for an updated framework for the movement that would support urban farmers as they navigate land use, zoning, and property tax regulations. Community land trusts (CLTs) are contributing to this structure, providing a locally controlled approach to land use that fosters community activism and engagement while responding to evolving market conditions and neighborhood needs.

The State of Urban Agriculture

“Urban agriculture” refers to both commercial and noncommercial activities, within or near a city center, that produce food and non-food items to serve an urban area (Mougeot 2000). While city

farms and community gardens are often the public face of urban agriculture, small-scale backyard growing spaces and edible landscapes also yield a significant portion of production.

Urban agriculture has afforded communities diverse environmental, economic, and social benefits, including improved nutrition, heightened food security, ecological restoration, the creation of open spaces, and opportunities for education and job skills training (Bellows, Brown, and Smit 2004; Kaufman and Bailkey 2000; Smit, Ratta, and Nasr 1996). City farming also has the unique ability to bring together diverse populations, build social capital, and promote empowerment through community building (Staheli et al. 2002). In legacy cities—older industrial centers that have suffered from sustained job and population losses and ensuing financial, social, and political changes—urban agriculture has been extensively used as both an interim and a permanent development tool to strengthen social cohesion and catalyze progress

in disinvested neighborhoods. The process of repurposing vacant and abandoned lots into growing spaces can be a relatively quick and inexpensive strategy that yields highly visible impacts and improves public safety.

Given these wide-ranging benefits, urban agriculture has enjoyed a renaissance as a social movement. In recent years, some cities and local governments have updated public policies to make them more supportive of urban agricultural practices. The movement is not without its challenges, however, including environmental safety concerns and insecure land tenure (Brown et al. 2002). Land insecurity in particular is frequently cited as the greatest barrier to the implementation and sustainability of city farming (Lawson 2004; Yuen 2012). A 1998 national survey of more than 6,000 urban agriculture sites found that 99.9 percent of gardeners saw land tenure as both a challenge and a vital element to the future success of the movement (ACGA 1998).

In these instances, land insecurity occurs when the cost of market-rate land exceeds the income generated from agricultural activities. Ultimately, the hidden hand of the market presses for the allocation of land according to its highest and best use. Due to this dominant conceptualization, planners and policy makers have historically viewed urban agriculture as an interim measure to keep a site active until higher and better uses can be developed. Scholars note, however, that urban agriculture sites can produce many positive spillover effects related to public health and community wellness, and these benefits are difficult to monetize (Schmelzkopf 1995). Traditional exchange valuations of land rarely reflect a community garden's contributions to healthy food education and the physical wellness of residents. This disconnect between social worth and market values has been the impetus for both public and private interventions.

Local governments typically respond by purchasing tracts of urban agricultural land, effectively insulating them from speculative market forces while also holding them off the tax rolls. While this public sector approach has been critical, it sometimes fails to provide long-term security, especially when administrative changes in local governments lead to shifts in priorities and strategies, as when New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani proposed to auction off 850 community gardens across the city in 1999. Therefore, researchers have focused on

the need for alternative strategies that can complement public sector efforts to support the security of land for urban agriculture.

CLTs as a Framework for Urban Agriculture

A CLT is a nonprofit, community-based corporation with a place-based membership, a democratically elected board, and a charitable commitment to the use and stewardship of land on behalf of the local population. CLTs typically retain permanent ownership of land and lease it to individuals or organizations that own the improvements upon the land, such as residences, commercial buildings, and agricultural or recreational facilities. The CLT model offers a way to retain ownership of land stewarded by and for the community, so that the highest or best use of property can remain community-defined, community-controlled, and adaptable to changing conditions.

Although CLTs have focused on the development and stewardship of affordable housing in recent decades, the movement originated in response to agricultural land issues in rural Georgia during the 1960s. Even earlier agricultural influences included the kibbutzim in Israel, the Gramdan

BOX 1

2012 Survey of U.S. CLTs

In the fall of 2012, the National Community Land Trust Network (NCLTN), in partnership with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, commissioned a study of urban agricultural and commercial projects conducted by U.S. CLTs (Rosenberg and Yuen 2012). The inquiry examined the role of CLTs in implementing nonresidential projects and assessed the benefits and challenges of such ventures. Researchers distributed a web-based survey to the 224 organizations in the NCLTN database; 56 CLTs (25 percent) completed the questionnaire, and 37 CLTs reported agriculture activities. Twelve CLTs were selected for in-depth data collection, which captured a diversity of projects with varying levels of success in different locations. A case study approach was used for data collection, which included gathering organizational documents and secondary sources as well as interviewing CLT staff. The final working paper is supported by an additional project directory resource that highlights the projects and organizations in the study (Yuen and Rosenberg 2012).

This article draws on that research to examine the benefits, challenges, and considerations for urban agriculture activities by CLTs. It also explores how such interventions can support comprehensive community development efforts, particularly in legacy cities.



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The Somerset Community Garden in Providence, Rhode Island, was the SCLT’s first urban agriculture project, started 32 years ago.

villages in India, and the Garden Cities of Ebenezer Howard (Davis 2010). The strength of the CLT model lies in its ability to balance local land control and long-term, stewarded development that addresses changing community needs. Thus, CLTs are well positioned to tackle a diversity of land uses through comprehensive development strategies. Legacy cities may be especially ripe for CLT engagement, as the widespread availability of vacant land has spawned a flourishing urban agriculture movement, but with less emphasis on long-term land security.

Our research found that CLTs have supported urban agriculture projects in three distinct ways: by securing access to agricultural land, providing programmatic support, and engaging directly in food production.

Securing Access to Agricultural Land

The core competencies of CLTs best lend themselves to the task of securing growing space. A central mission of CLTs is to secure land for community development opportunities. To carry out this role, CLTs have utilized diverse tenure arrangements, including fee-simple ownership, ground leases, easements, and deed restrictions (table 1). These arrangements are not mutually exclusive; organizations can employ multiple techniques to secure land both within and across agricultural projects.

FEE-SIMPLE OWNERSHIP

Fee-simple ownership allows a CLT to hold the greatest number of sticks in the bundle of ownership rights and provides a high level of land security, as long as it meets all mortgage payments and tax obligations. For example, Dudley Neighbors Incorporated (DNI), a CLT in Roxbury, Massachusetts, redeveloped the contaminated site of a former auto garage into the 10,000-square-foot Dudley Greenhouse, which functions both as a commercial farm and a community growing space. DNI secured the land through fee-simple ownership and leases the greenhouse structure at a nominal charge to a food-based nonprofit that handles all agricultural programming and maintenance. Harry Smith, Director of Sustainability and Economic Development at DNI, notes, “Growing food is a whole different thing, and we are not looking to take that role.”

TABLE 1 Securing Access to Agricultural Land		
Tenure Arrangement	Advantages	Disadvantages
Fee-Simple Ownership	Long-Term Security High Level of Control	Cost to Acquire Property Taxation Management Obligations
Ground Lease	Low Cost High Level of Control	Legal Complexity Transaction Costs
Easement	Low Cost Ensures Agricultural Use	Transaction Costs
Deed Restriction	Low Cost Ensures Agricultural Use	Enforceability

GROUND LEASES

While fee-simple ownership is an uncomplicated, highly secure tool, it is often prohibitively expensive for CLTs to purchase urban land outright for food production. Given this challenge, some CLTs have utilized ground leases to secure growing land. The Southside CLT (SCLT), for instance, has a 10-year ground lease with the State of Rhode Island on a 20-acre farm in Cranston. In turn, the Southside CLT manages the farm as the master tenant and subleases plots to seven start-up farmers at nominal rates. The affordability and security of the ground lease creates opportunities for young farmers to incubate new businesses and participate in the local food system. A strong ground lease, with rigorous standards for performance and conditions for renewal, can provide comparable or greater security than fee-simple ownership. However, longer-term ground leases can be challenging to draft and implement, especially when the title-holding entity desires long-term flexibility.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

CLTs have also secured access to land through conservation easements, or voluntary restrictions that permanently limit the uses of the land. Most commonly, the CLT holds an easement donated by a private owner. The private owner retains title

and can even sell the grounds to another party without compromising land security, as the conservation easement ensures long-term access to the agricultural space. Easements can also reduce the management burden on the titleholder, as the recipient of the easement often provides land stewardship services as part of the exchange. This strategy can financially benefit titleholders, who receive local and federal tax benefits for donating conservation easements. While easements can effectively sustain access to growing space, the relatively high legal cost may be expensive, especially for smaller tracts.

DEED RESTRICTIONS

Deed restrictions can effectively place limitations on the uses of land and are often tied to specific funding sources. While a deed restriction can ensure that land is reserved for a specific use, it does not necessarily offer secure tenure for a specific grower or farmer. Further, deed restrictions are effective only when all parties and external agents choose to enforce the contract. Each tenure

Sandywoods Farm encompasses 50 units of affordable, eco-friendly rental housing in Tiverton, Rhode Island. Free-range hens and ducks roam the hilltop orchard.



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Ethel Collins sells produce from the Athens Land Trust community garden in Athens, Georgia.

arrangement has relative strengths and weaknesses and is best utilized when tailored to a project-specific context. In Wisconsin, for instance, the Madison Area CLT was required to grant a deed restriction to the City of Madison as a condition for funding the Troy Gardens mixed-use development site. A deed restriction was placed over a portion of the site, limiting uses to agricultural and conservation projects. The CLT's failure to abide by the terms of the deed restriction, however, would trigger immediate repayment of all subsidy funds provided by the city.

Programmatic Support

As the task of securing agricultural land can be very challenging, it may not be a suitable undertaking for every organization or community. Some CLTs have supported urban agricultural efforts through other means, such as program management, technical assistance, and other agricultural services. In Georgia, for example, the Athens Land Trust is a dual-mission housing and open space land trust that has engaged in urban agriculture exclusively through program assistance. Athens Land Trust chose to take on this role because of

the high holding costs associated with property taxation policies in Georgia, which assesses CLT land at the unrestricted market value. The Athens Land Trust partners with public- and private-sector landowners to provide support for local agricultural projects. For instance, the Athens Land Trust staff worked with the Hill Chapel Baptist Church congregation to design a community garden on church-owned land and provided support services, such as testing and tilling of the soil, organizing workdays, and providing plant materials and instructional gardening workshops.

Agricultural Production

Finally, some CLTs have participated in agricultural production, directly and actively farming land. For example, the Southside CLT operates a three-quarter-acre commercial farm in Providence, Rhode Island, growing greens and selling produce directly to local restaurants. Many CLTs support agricultural production indirectly as well, by providing residential properties where the residents themselves grow food in backyard gardens. Hence, many CLTs have unknowingly supported urban agriculture for years, simply by offering affordable

and secure access to tillable land in cities. Some groups, such as DNI, specifically design larger home ownership lots to enable opportunities for backyard urban gardening. Harry Smith of DNI explained, “As we did our community planning, people were very clear that they wanted to see open spaces and attention paid to the residents’ quality of life. We are trying to build [agriculture] into the housing itself.” In this way, the scope of CLT agricultural production can also include innovative design features, such as edible landscapes, food forests, and other permaculture concepts that are intentionally and systematically incorporated into a development plan.

Benefits of CLT-Supported Urban Agriculture

Ultimately, the study found mutual benefits between urban agriculture and CLTs. City farms enhance the value of CLTs by helping organizations expand their development vision to include a more comprehensive set of neighborhood needs and priorities. All communities have a variety of needs beyond affordable housing, and agricultural projects can create linkages to other key issues, including food security, health education, vacant land remediation, and neighborhood safety. Agricultural projects can even be seen as neighborhood amenities, potentially increasing demand for nearby CLT properties or residences in the conventional market. For example, the Church Community Housing Corporation (CCHC) developed the Sandywoods Farm project in Tiverton, Rhode Island, to include a mix of residential, agricultural, and arts-related programming. The CCHC initially marketed the development solely as an arts community, but prospective residents expressed strong interest in the community garden and in farmland preservation. Consequently, CCHC rebranded the project as an “art and agriculture” development. Brigid Ryan, senior project manager of CCHC, explained, “The agriculture has taken off much more than we ever thought it would. The garden is actually drawing some people [to the rental housing units]. They never thought their kids would be able to grow their own food.”

Beneficial connections between agriculture and housing were also present at DNI’s Dudley Greenhouse. Harry Smith of DNI notes, “The project certainly helps the marketability of our homes. People are not just getting a house, they are getting

a community, and it’s based on fresh, locally grown food.”

Challenges for CLT-Supported Urban Agriculture

Despite the benefits, CLTs implementing agricultural projects still face many challenges. In particular, financial profitability continues to be a major struggle across the entire urban agriculture sector, as revenues generated from produce sales are relatively modest, even in commercial operations. The Southside CLT covers only 8 percent of its operating expenses through commercial produce sales to local restaurants. Additional revenue sources, such as membership fees and seedling sales, bring the CLT’s earned income to only 20 percent of its expenses. CLTs continue to rely heavily on grant funding to make up the difference.

A second potential challenge is that some projects require a high level of agricultural knowledge and may test the capacity and experience of CLT staff. Even Athens Land Trust, which has staff experienced in agricultural land preservation and growing techniques, acknowledged the initial difficulties in learning the nuances of local zoning

Traditional exchange valuations of land rarely reflect a community garden’s beneficial effects on healthy food education and the physical wellness of residents.

Schoolchildren learn to create raised beds at the Dudley Greenhouse in Roxbury, Massachusetts.



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codes related to commercial agriculture. As a result, some of the CLT's pipeline projects were delayed until workable zoning solutions could be found. The risk is compounded for commercial agricultural projects that require significant understanding of processing and distribution systems

“People are not just getting a house, they are getting a community, and it's based on fresh, locally grown food.”

Sara Smith, a local resident and gardener in SCLT's Somerset Garden.

and local market conditions. At Sandywoods Farm, for example, the CCHC initially planned to use preserved farmland for livestock and cattle grazing, only to discover that the sole Rhode Island butchering facility had closed. The nearest facility

was across the state line in Massachusetts, making it prohibitively expensive to process meat. Brigid Ryan, senior project manager at CCHC, noted, “When you end up having to learn these specialty niches, it becomes so important to find partners who know what they are talking about.” Given the challenges and potential pitfalls, CLTs need to consider the following issues to improve the feasibility and sustainability of agricultural projects.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As community-based organizations, CLTs should always be driven by neighborhood needs and concerns. However, strong community planning processes are particularly vital to the success of urban agriculture, where CLTs often rely on local residents and partners to carry out agricultural production. Harry Smith of DNI emphasizes this point: “I would say the work of a CLT is not just to manage the properties and get more land into the trust, but to really engage the community in what they want besides housing—whether that's commercial operations, or a greenhouse, or agricultural land.” Further, CLT engagement around agricultural projects can catalyze broader community organizing efforts and help residents push for more supportive public policies.

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT

CLTs can support nonresidential projects in a variety of ways, and organizations should systematically assess internal capacities as well as local stakeholders who could serve as potential partners on projects. In this way, CLTs can develop complementary collaborations and build on existing assets



and capacities in the community. A CLT that lacks growing experience can support urban agriculture in alternate ways to better align with local partners, by securing land, helping to develop urban agriculture zoning codes, or serving as a fiscal agent for grant funding.

MANAGING RISK

CLTs should minimize their financial risk in agricultural projects, especially given the modest revenues and future uncertainties associated with food-related grant funding. In response, some CLTs have front-loaded anticipated capital expenses owing to agriculture projects. Similarly, CLTs can manage risk exposure by avoiding debt financing on agricultural projects. Several CLTs have found debt service to be extremely challenging, given the modest revenues from produce sales and the nominal lease fees that CLTs typically charge for agricultural land. For instance, DNI was able to acquire land and construct the Dudley Greenhouse without incurring long-term debt, while its local property tax-exempt status allowed for minimal holding costs. The resulting low-risk financial structure became critically important when DNI was unable to secure its initial greenhouse tenant. Even though the greenhouse was subsequently vacant for nearly five years, DNI was well positioned to absorb the unexpected vacancy loss.

Conclusion

While the urban agriculture movement has gained much momentum in recent years, it still needs coherent, long-term strategies to protect growing spaces against speculative market forces. The fundamental relationship between land and community is at stake. Within the urban agriculture movement, land insecurity highlights the pressing need for a reconceptualization of land as a finite, shared resource that should be held in stewardship to meet the requirements of present and future communities. Further, the notion of the highest and best use needs to be expanded to include nonfinancial outcomes and avenues for substantive community engagement. CLTs are ideally suited to tackle these critical issues and, in doing so, can help community development processes become more inclusive, equitable, and responsive to changing local conditions. 

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