

# Taking Action to Build Capacity for Urban Agriculture

The Neighborhood Gardens Trust leverages data and resources to protect gardens that support community

## THE ISSUE

**COMMUNITY GARDENS SERVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE** in Philadelphia, PA communities. These open spaces provide numerous benefits, including: community building; access to green spaces; intergenerational educational opportunities; and providing fresh fruits and vegetables for community members, many in low-to-moderate income areas. It has been documented that gardeners formally and informally distribute significant produce in communities. Jenny Greenberg, Executive Director for The Neighborhood Gardens Trust (NGT) shares that “recently, calls from community residents affected by food insecurity have moved beyond emergency requests for food to residents creating long-term solutions by determining how they can obtain land access to grow produce for their families.”

Similar to many urban areas, Philadelphia’s real estate development market continues to expand and could potentially displace community agriculture taking place on vacant land across the city. Information was needed to build a case for preserving community gardens and determining what resources were needed to build capacity to support community gardens in securing permanent land access.

## THE QUESTIONS

**NGT EXPLORED** the following healthy food environment questions as part of their Environments Supporting Healthy Eating (ESHE) Community Measures Pilot Project:

- What gardens are producing and distributing healthy fruits and vegetables, specifically in low-to-moderate-income areas with limited supermarket access?
- Of the gardens identified throughout the City, which are in jeopardy of being sold or redeveloped and should be prioritized for support and preservation to enable them to continue to enhance their community’s healthy eating environment?



North Marshall Street Garden in Philadelphia

**“Creating and sustaining a healthy food environment includes having secure land access where community residents can grow their own food.”**

—JENNY GREENBERG, *Executive Director*  
The Neighborhood Gardens Trust



## THE SOLUTION

**THE NEIGHBORHOOD GARDENS TRUST (NGT)** is Philadelphia's largest nonprofit land trust and an affiliate of Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. It preserves community gardens and shared open spaces to enhance quality of life in Philadelphia's neighborhoods.

NGT works with community residents to preserve their gardens by securing ownership or long-term leases so that these spaces cannot be sold or developed. NGT has preserved 35 community gardens and plans to preserve 100 gardens within the next few years.

In summer 2015, NGT conducted a garden acquisition study to strategically identify gardens for future preservation. The study was completed with technical support from The Reinvestment Fund, using data previously collected by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and the Garden Justice Legal Initiative of the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia. The study focused on target areas in Philadelphia that met two or more of the following criteria: limited supermarket access; limited access to walkable green space; high real estate market pressure; concentrations of low-to-moderate income households, and concentrations of vacant land.

Seventy-three active gardens were identified in priority neighborhoods for further assessment. The work was conducted over a two-month period and included assessments of the physical site, community capacity to sustain the garden, and willingness to be included in the final study report as a priority site for preservation. The qualitative survey tool that NGT utilized was based on the criteria that NGT uses to assess the readiness of a community garden for permanent preservation. The questions focused on the number of committed gardeners, the age of the garden, the existence of organizational structures within the garden as well as its ties to community institutions and civic groups. The survey tool created the opportunity for neighborhood by neighborhood data collection.

The ESHE Index County and State scores (available at—[eshe.engagementnetwork.org](http://eshe.engagementnetwork.org)) for Philadelphia County and Pennsylvania were utilized with NGT's stakeholders as a complementary tool to describe factors impacting healthy food environments. The ESHE Index also provided the evidence base to support the need for increased access to healthy foods in low-to-moderate income communities. Although Philadelphia County's ESHE Index score ranks high as a "most supportive food environment," neighborhood level food environments within Philadelphia vary greatly; hence the need for neighborhood data collection to support local advocacy efforts and change initiatives.

## THE IMPACT

**NGT WAS SUCCESSFUL** in engaging local residents and organizational partners in exploring the role community gardens play in the larger picture of food access across Philadelphia, PA. The data from this project are helping to guide and shape internal discussions about the role and direction of NGT as the organization continues to grow and expand. The project findings also supported the following advocacy activities:

- NGT is actively pursuing preservation of over close to 30 community gardens. In fall 2015, NGT permanently protected a garden as well as securing a long-term lease for another where community partner agencies are building a Green Resource Center in a low-income community.
- NGT has provided the relatively new Philadelphia Land Bank with a list of the highest priority gardens, to serve as test cases as the City operationalizes this agency dedicated to streamlining the return of vacant land to productive reuse.
- A public meeting was held in fall 2015 wherein the findings from the garden acquisition study were presented to an NGT steering committee, including public officials, community leaders, gardeners, and other stakeholders. The steering committee is currently engaged in ongoing planning to build capacity within the gardens.

For more information on The Neighborhood Gardens Trust visit: [www.ngtrust.org](http://www.ngtrust.org)

This case study was produced in April 2016 by the Council on Black Health (CBH). To learn more about ESHE and the Council's ESHE technical assistance services email: [ESHEHub@gmail.com](mailto:ESHEHub@gmail.com)

