Urban Pathways to Healthy Neighborhoods

Focus on: Gardens

What are Urban Pathways?
Urban pathways go by many names, including bikeways, trails and greenways. These pathways are used for healthy recreation and—when seamlessly interconnected with pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure like sidewalks and bicycle lanes—can be ideal routes for active transportation, including biking and walking.

Part of the Solution
In many urban areas across the country, low-income populations and communities of color face disproportionate challenges of obesity, difficult commutes and scarcity of open space. Promoting the development and use of urban pathways can help address these challenges by integrating physical activity into daily routines, connecting residents with green spaces and providing cost-effective solutions to improving community health.

The Urban Pathways Initiative
Through the generous support of The Kresge Foundation, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) launched the Urban Pathways Initiative to advocate for equitable investment in vulnerable communities that promote the health, transportation and environmental benefits of trail use. Learn more at www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways.

In urban areas, trails and gardens are a kindred pair. They offer new uses for abandoned land—rail-trails revitalize former railroad corridors, and urban gardens often take root in vacant or neglected lots. Both enhance community health by providing opportunities for physical activity (gardening is exercise, too!), and gardens increase access to fresh, healthy foods. Trails and gardens also serve as neighborhood gathering spots where neighbors can interact, helping to strengthen community rapport.

Many communities are finding that gardens and fruit tree orchards are desirable trailside amenities. In addition to the bounty of fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers produced, these landscapes beautify barren spaces along the trail, provide shade for trail users and bring more people to the trail—which helps to deter delinquent activities. Establishing a successful community garden may be challenging, but the community benefits of a trailside garden can be well worth these initial efforts, as shown in the following examples from Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, Minn., Seattle, Wash., Denver, Colo., and Richmond, Calif.

This issue summary is part of a series that explores best practices and lessons learned from urban pathways across the United States. To access the entire series visit www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons.
Plan ahead and allow for plenty of prep time.

It is important to spend time planning and making preparations for a garden. There are a number of preliminary issues to consider: Will the garden be open year-round or seasonally? Will the garden produce food for consumption or provide plots for individuals to cultivate? Is there access to water? What is the soil quality? Will you set hours of operation? How will you address foot traffic from the trail? Answers to these questions will inform decisions about plants, planting beds, the watering system, etc.

**Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Branch Trail**

In 2010, a garden was installed along the Metropolitan Branch Trail. To address the lack of access to a water source, six rain barrels were constructed on-site to capture rain from the roof of an adjacent school building. The barrels are connected to an irrigation system embedded in the garden beds.

Contact: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, railtrails@railstotrails.org

**Denver, Colo.**

The Delaney Farm Park, adjacent to the High Line Canal Trail, is a small urban farm that relies primarily on volunteer labor, with a mission to improve access to healthy foods for people of all economic levels. The farm welcomes scheduled visitors and volunteer groups; visiting trail users must be accompanied by garden staff. The garden runs a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program in which participants purchase a share at the beginning of a growing season and receive produce throughout the harvest. Through a partnership with local health departments, residents who receive assistance from the federal WIC (Women, Infants, Children) Program—who are likely unable to purchase a CSA share—can receive produce in exchange for volunteering in the garden. For each hour of volunteering in the garden, they receive a half-share of fresh fruits and vegetables from the garden.


Reach out to the community.

Urban gardens provide myriad benefits, including the opportunity to grow produce in neighborhoods that lack adequate access to fresh, healthy foods. Use outreach and programming to engage a diverse range of community residents, including low-income communities and communities of color. Being inclusive creates a sense of ownership of the garden within the community. A broad sense of ownership will help ensure that the garden is well-tended and looked after for all to enjoy.

Learn more about all these projects at www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons/gardens, where you can also view RTC’s webinar, “Secrets to Gardens on Urban Pathways.”
Consider long-term use for project sustainability.

Community gardens are sometimes viewed as temporary uses, serving as placeholders for future development. Securing the long-term use of the parcel will help guarantee the garden remains an integral part of the trail for many years to come. A few options include long-term lease, purchase or acquisition by a municipal agency.

Minneapolis, Minn. The Midtown Greenway

The Soo Line Community Garden was cultivated in 1991 on a parcel of tax-forfeited land along the Midtown Greenway. Once the site of a grain elevator that serviced the Soo Line Railroad, gardeners demolished the structure to create a community garden to produce food for local residents and serve as green space for the trail system. Several years later, developers expressed interest in purchasing the land from the state. Faced with the risk of displacement, the Soo Line gardeners rallied to save their investment and years of sweat equity. They partnered with the Midtown Greenway Coalition to protect the garden, which had become an integral part of the trail experience. In 2010, the groups worked with state and local officials to transfer the property from the state of Minnesota to the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board.

Contact: Midtown Greenway Coalition, www.midtowngreenway.org

Tend to your garden regularly.

By nature, plants and fruit trees require ongoing maintenance. Local organizations and community groups can contribute additional resources and time to regular maintenance activities.

 Seattle, Wash. Burke-Gilman Trail

As part of the Urban Orchard Stewards program, a corps of volunteers tends a grove of apple trees planted along the Burke-Gilman Trail. The program—a public-private partnership between the city of Seattle and City Fruit, a local nonprofit—trains the stewards on tree pruning, pest management and fruit harvesting. The stewards adopt trees, caring for them year-round. The apples harvested along the trail are used to make cider for community events.

Contact: City Fruit, http://cityfruit.org

CASE STUDY: GARDENS AND URBAN PATHWAYS

RICHMOND GREENWAY • RICHMOND, CALIF. • LENGTH: 2.8 MILES • OPENED: 2007

Lessons:

Involve youth and residents from adjacent neighborhoods, build partnerships with maintenance in mind.

Thanks to a diverse and dedicated group of community organizations, there are gardens sprouting up all along the Richmond Greenway, once a former Santa Fe Railroad corridor. Due to the efforts of Urban Tilth, The Watershed Project, Gompers Garden and others, the Richmond Greenway is growing more food for residents with every season, and the gardens have become neighborhood destinations.

The first garden was started in 2007 between the greenway and Lincoln Elementary School. To preclude concerns about contamination from the old railroad grade, raised beds were constructed. The garden’s 48 beds are well-tended and grow a variety of produce for local residents to enjoy. Lincoln School Farmers and the Bright Futures After School Program assist in keeping the beds watered and weed free.

Urban Tilth also builds garden beds along the greenway. The organization planted a grove of berry plants, known as Berryland, and is planning an edible forest with fruit trees and a grape trellis. Urban Tilth also participates in the city’s Summer Youth Employment program, training youth in urban farming. Youth workers spend the summer on the greenway cultivating the gardens and working on other trail amenity projects.

Additionally, The Watershed Project works to enhance the natural environment. The organization developed a bioswale filled with native plant gardens to demonstrate how low-impact development (LID) management practices can be used to absorb and filter stormwater using natural landscaping. The Watershed Project also replaced weeded areas with native plants to attract birds, butterflies and bees. Students at nearby Gompers High School have also contributed to projects on the greenway. They painted a large mural on a bare wall facing the greenway to discourage graffiti. The students are now working to create interpretive signs to educate trail users about the gardens, native plants, bioswale and the history of the corridor. These community groups are also partnering to seek park bond funding for the city to invest in active play structures and a public plaza to build out the remainder of the greenway.

Inclusive and continuous community engagement has been critical to the success of the gardens along the Richmond Greenway. Neighborhood groups are recruited to adopt sections of the trail, helping with maintenance and other projects to enhance the pathway. Local residents are encouraged to participate in monthly workdays on the Richmond Greenway, which are followed by a community barbeque.

Contact: Urban Tilth, www.urbantilth.org
The Watershed Project, www.thewatershedproject.org

“I saw a father and two kids out here, walking through the area, picking fava beans and eating strawberries... The community appreciates what we’ve put together and knows that it belongs to them. That’s really exciting to see.”

—LATONYA WILLIAMS, PRINCIPAL AT GOMPERS HIGH SCHOOL