

Increasing anti-racism and equity in Providence parks community gardens

Reflections and advice for garden leaders & committees

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[Providence parks community gardens overview](#)

[Making the garden more welcoming and building cross-cultural relationships](#)

[Pushing back on economic inequity](#)

[Displacement-based gentrification and parks community garden locations](#)

[Community garden leadership and governance](#)

Providence parks community gardens overview

There are 15 community gardens located [in Providence parks](#) across the city. Over 360 gardeners tend plots in 12 traditional plot-based community gardens, while 3 communal gardens function predominantly as community and learning spaces. Gardeners produce many thousands of pounds of food for themselves and their neighbors and host a wide range of events and programs throughout the growing season!

These community gardens are very much community-run and each have their own style of governance, fund management, etc.

Providence parks department provides land for approved gardens, water turn-ons and turn-offs, free wood chips, and assistance with basic maintenance for fences, trees, etc.

Key contacts: Community Gardener in Residence (MJ Robinson in 2020), who can bring requests and issues to the right people.

Partnership for Providence Parks is another helpful organization that can assist with writing grants to assist gardens and programming in gardens, particularly in partnership with nearby rec centers. They will soon be publishing a guide to best practices for community gardens in Providence public parks.

Key contacts: Helene Miller (Executive Director), Allie Barry (Programs Director)

For grant ideas, gardeners can check out tinyurl.com/provgardengrants.

Making the garden more welcoming and building cross-cultural relationships

Vanessa García Polanco offers practical advice from her research and experience in primarily immigrant and refugee garden spaces in Lansing, MI that were successful because of 4 major themes:

- Altruistic activities and community building
- Replicating and adapting knowledge to be able to learn and teach
- Diverse incentives to bring immigrant and refugee gardeners
- Enacting vision and resources to facilitate inclusion and belonging

Please see practical advice around these ideas in my notes from Vanessa here:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1t-mqrXcWtQz_BfcBehd4g-3l85WFbvr4CP5fe9SGBdQ/edi
[#](https://www.vanessagarciapolanco.com) support and follow her work at [Vanessagarciapolanco.com](https://www.vanessagarciapolanco.com) and on twitter [@vgpvisions](https://twitter.com/vgpvisions)

It's also been exciting to see Davis Park CG and Amos & Earley Park CG applying for grants to improve physical accessibility improvements this year. Wheelchair access ramps, flat, hard, paths, and raised beds 22 inches or taller are helpful for both people who use wheelchairs and people who experience pain or limited range of motion when kneeling and bending over.

Another thing that makes our community gardens welcoming is turning what could feel like dry administrative chores or common area clean-ups into community-building events -- for example, Fox Point CG's annual seed swap party doubles as the main way that people renew their garden plot contracts and pay their fees. Attendees dropped in, many brought snacks to share, and there was a family-friendly seed bomb making table.

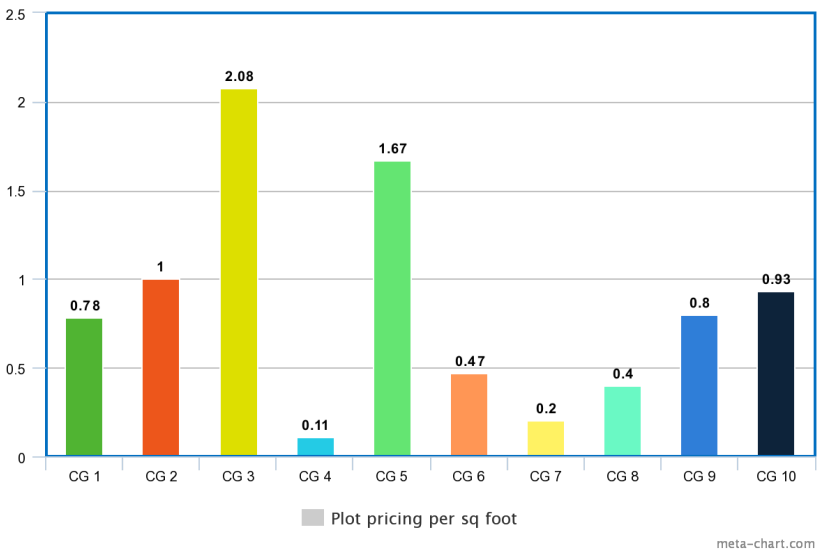
Obviously Covid-19 interrupted many of our community gatherings, clean-ups, harvest parties, and potlucks in 2020, but it's cool to see how many gardens got creative in continuing to find ways to safely share space, grow food, and generously give back to neighbors during a year where 1 in 4 Rhode Island households are food insecure.

Pushing back on economic inequity

For the 10 community gardens in our network that currently charge plot rental fees for most members, prices range from \$10-\$80 per plot and between \$0.11/sq ft (at a garden with 15'x15' plots) and \$2.08/sq ft (at a garden with 3'x4' plots). The average price is \$0.64/sq ft and the mean price is \$0.79/sq ft.

For cross-network reference, SCLT plots are currently \$25 regardless of size. Unlike our independently-run community gardens, SCLT garden costs are subsidized by the organization. SCLT is collaborating with their gardeners to consider a payment system more aligned with plot sizes, which would price plots at between \$0.09-\$0.33 per sq/ft based on their size (with larger plots generally costing less per square foot).

How does your garden stack up to others in our city? Do you have any formal or informal systems in place that welcome or restrict access for lower income residents, who are more likely to be food insecure and not have access to land?



Practical ideas for gardeners:

- Organize a planning session with other gardeners to do a big picture look at your finances over the past few years. A few questions to explore:
 - How do your plot fees stack up to other gardens'?
 - What could be done differently in terms of how you raise, collect, and use money? (For example, some gardens run fundraisers or apply for grants to help lower plot costs, garden improvements, or tool purchases)

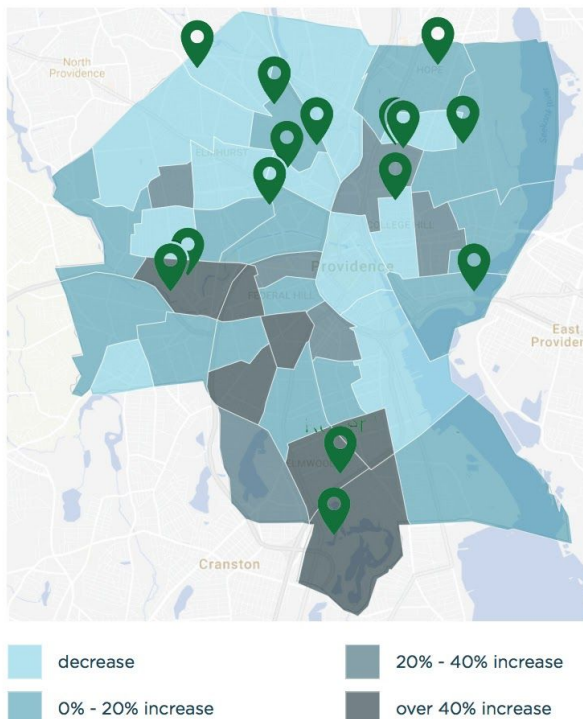
- What non-monetary resources, connections, and in-kind donations do you benefit from? (For example, some of our gardens have support from local non-profits in the form of paid staff helping with garden administration or grant-writing)
- Are there any resources you use that you can share with other gardens in our network? (We've been grateful for gardeners offering their expertise across gardens, like Michael, a compost professional, giving free consultations.)
- What non-monetary resources would you like access to?
- Plot fee flexibility ideas already implemented at some gardens: sliding scale plot fees (based on income, for example), workshare option to reduce or eliminate plot fee, payment plan option for those who can't pay a plot fee all at once.

Displacement-based gentrification and parks community garden locations

12 out of 15 parks community gardens are in neighborhoods that have seen increases in white residents in recent years. Community gardens can enable or be a tool against displacement-based gentrification. Are there any formal or informal systems that exist in your garden to prioritize residents of color, especially renters, and push back on eco-gentrification? What more can you do?

GENTRIFICATION

Percent change in number of white people over five year period (between 2006-2010 and 2011-2015). (Data from American Community Survey [ACS] databases.) Portions of southwest Providence (such as in the West End, Olneyville, and South Elmwood neighborhoods in particular) have seen an increase in the number of white people by over 40%.



Source 1: [Community gardens and gentrification: Exploring the connections in Minneapolis, MN](#)

Source 2: [Brownfields to Greenfields: Environmental Justice Versus Environmental Gentrification](#)

Source 3: [Fresh food, new faces: community gardening as ecological gentrification in St. Louis, Missouri](#)

Source 4: [Closed Doors: RI ranks dead last in non-white home ownership](#)

Community garden leadership and governance

Running an inclusive garden takes a lot of time, neighborhood knowledge, and cross-cultural communication skills.

Governance and leadership varies widely across gardens; most function with formal and informal co-leadership. To my knowledge, up to 4 community gardens use plot fees to pay someone either seasonally or year-round to bottomline garden management, several are assisted in part by someone in a paid position at a neighboring nonprofit that supports their involvement, and about half are entirely volunteer-run by an individual or committee.

Out of the 15 gardens in parks, 3 have BIPOC leaders, 2 are transitioning toward BIPOC leadership for next growing season, and 1 or more are run by a multi-racial committee. At this time, a majority of gardens have majority white leadership.

It's important to note that racial diversity in leadership does not necessarily or automatically lead to a more inclusive garden, but the more we can support long-term community members with strong relationships in the neighborhood and a commitment to inclusivity, the better.

It's also worth considering the structure of your garden's leadership / governance and how welcoming that is to people with different cultural, racial, class, and educational backgrounds, familiarity with and access to technology, abilities, etc. Who may be excluded by this style of coworking? Experiment with new ways of working and multiple modes of involvement.

Practical suggestions toward diversifying leadership:

- For gardens unable to pay a garden leader, consider offering free plots to garden managers
- Have experienced garden leaders overlap and co-lead for a season to train up their successors (while also being open to new ways of doing things)
- Recommend possible leaders to continue developing their gardening and leadership skills with [NRICD Urban Growers Leadership Program](#), a paid training that happens yearly (deadline has already passed for 2020)