



GRASSROOTS GARDENS WNY

Strategic Plan 2017-2022

Prepared for Grassroots Gardens Western New York by the Grassroots Gardens Strategic Planning Committee with Make Communities and Shaketa Redden with generous support by the Western New York Foundation.

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OVERVIEW

Grassroots Gardens of Western New York enables community-led efforts to revitalize cities and enhance quality of life through creation and maintenance of community gardens and active green spaces that beautify blocks, grow healthy food, and strengthen neighborhood spirit.

Grassroots Gardens stewards a network of 103 gardens on previously vacant and neglected land, many located in areas that have struggled with high crime and poverty rates after decades of systemic disinvestment. With their community garden partners, they collaboratively cultivate and manage more than 300,000 square feet of green space in Buffalo and Niagara Falls. Time and again, these gardens and these gardeners have shown their power to transform urban neighborhoods. This work, and Grassroots Gardens' civic engagement efforts, are rooted in providing food access and advancing environmental justice.

Grassroots Gardens of Western New York is the product of an organizational merger of Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo and Greenprint Niagara — two urban focused community garden organizations with similar strategies and goals. Combined, the organization's history dates back more than 20 years.

In early 2017, the organization began strategic planning to examine its ongoing operations and trajectory for the coming five years. The process revealed a strong commitment to the underlying principles that Grassroots Gardens has been aligned with, and a clear guiding framework for continuing, uplifting, and strengthening the organization's work going forward.

These principles can be summarized in six key elements.

Over the course of the next five years Grassroots Gardens plans to:

- 1) reaffirm its focus on people and community**
- 2) continue to support and nurture its network of community gardens**
- 3) strengthen its commitment to land stewardship**
- 4) redouble efforts to tell the Grassroots Gardens story**
- 5) work toward equity in its operations and in the community**
- 6) strengthen existing partnerships and be open to new opportunities**



A NEW CONTEXT

Much has changed since the founding of the organization. Buffalo and the region have found a new hope and optimism that was severely lacking in the late 20th century. It has also seen an influx of development, investment, and new residents in areas that were formerly experiencing little to none of these things. The organization's commitment to building community, blight abatement, and beautification certainly helped turn the tide in some of the city's neighborhoods. But with this new dynamic also comes with new challenges. Development pressure puts gardens without long term leases in perilous situations. Community gardens have too often been viewed as expendable in other communities when real estate investment has started to increase. Gardeners who may be renters are challenged with possible displacement as real estate values begin to rise. A sense of community in a rapidly changing neighborhood may also be threatened without community anchors and cohesion.

The organization has changed dramatically as well. With gardens in both Buffalo and Niagara Falls, the organization now has a regional geography. This presents questions about the nature of interaction between gardeners throughout the network, as well as questions about the internal organization and management of both these relationships and supports for the gardens themselves. The successful merger also begs questions regarding the geographic focus and continued expansion of the organization's activities. GWNY has shifted from providing a conglomeration of "freebie" materials and a basic gardening 101 workshop series to high quality, sustainable materials, tools and technical assistance for gardeners to maximize the impact of their gardens. It has also created partnerships for improving the ecological health of the region (through pollinator and native plant restoration initiatives) as well as enhancement of local food

systems and institutional partnerships (such as an ongoing and burgeoning partnership with the Buffalo Public Schools). Which of these activities provides sustainable opportunities — and at what geographic level — are questions with which the organization will continue to grapple.

Meanwhile, urban agriculture programs — and community garden programs in particular — across the country are struggling to evolve. Though a wave of support during and immediately following the Great Recession pushed forward a litany of urban agriculture and greening project in cities across the country, many of these organizations have shifted their models or, in several cases, ceased operations. Yet, some urban focused agriculture and garden organizations across the country are thriving, and more and more environmental and conservation groups are considering urban areas as overlooked and untapped components of their missions and projects.

It is within these contexts that Grassroots Gardens must view its work going forward. The considerations and priorities outlined above provide guideposts and ways to process new challenges and opportunities. But these factors do not provide a prescribed answer to all of the changes that will come Grassroots Gardens — or the neighborhoods' — way in the coming years.

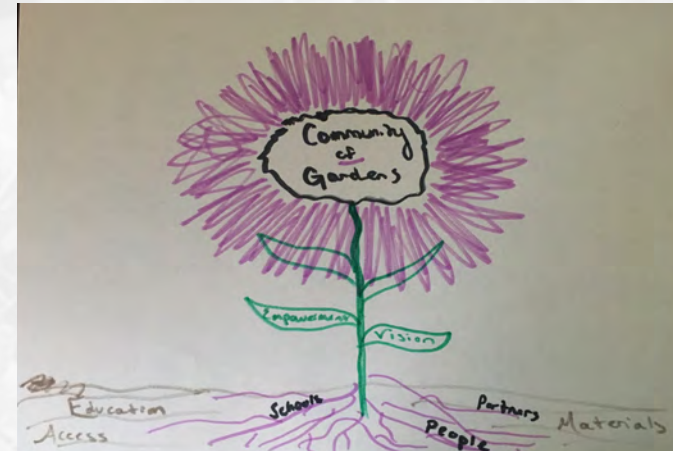


PLANNING FOR THE BIG PICTURE

Each of the six elements of the Grassroots Gardens plan are built for the current social and environmental conditions that the organization is immersed within, but are flexible to inevitable changes in the landscape. Each is a specific response to building on the successes the organization has achieved, a challenge that is ongoing, or an aspiration not yet fully realized. Throughout the course of the plan's implementation, each of these is likely to remain true to a certain extent. The fluidity built into this document, however, should not be viewed as timidity to build a stronger, more successful organization, even if that organization is not larger in scale or broader in scope than its current iteration. Rather, protecting Grassroots Gardens ability to maintain fidelity to its purpose and its aims has been perhaps the most consistent message delivered and reinforced throughout the course of this planning process.

It is also important to note the organization has acknowledged and endorsed a focus on developing and maintaining internal capacity to achieve these plan elements. This includes providing adequate and ongoing support, compensation, and development opportunities for staff while continuing to recruit, train, support and strengthen the organization's board and volunteer base.

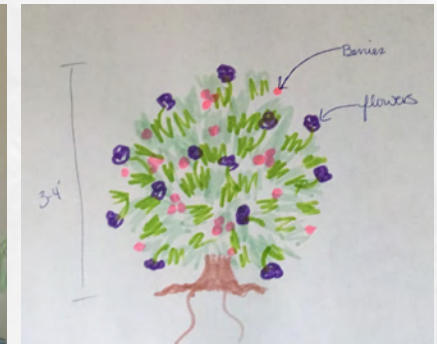
Stakeholder Visions of Grassroots Gardens Development



GGWNY as the soil and providing the nutrients; The roots are the gardeners putting through nutrients to productive use; The flower is the community of gardens resulting from this work.



GGWNY grows a natural bench to welcome people in. It taps directly into the water system for continued nourishment, and when it dies, its wood provides the frame for raised beds — a safe place to grow vegetables.



It is both productive and beautiful, produces awareness, community consistency



1) Reaffirm Grassroots Gardens' focus on people and community

Grassroots Gardens' has goals of beautification and of revitalizing communities. These outcomes are achieved by facilitating the on-the-ground work of people in neighborhoods that put in the sweat equity and individual and collective commitment to their neighborhoods. Grassroots Gardens provide many benefits to their neighborhoods, but it is the work of the gardeners within those neighborhoods that drive this change. The act of bringing neighbors together through this process is not just a by-product of these physical and visible outcomes, but is itself just as important to the organization and a major reason people join and support this work.

Many gardening organizations around the country — from large high-density urban areas to, increasingly, smaller and less dense cities — have been transitioning to a plot-based model of gardening. In this model, individuals pay an annual fee for access to a defined private plot or bed within a larger grouping of plots and/or beds. While the organizations that implement this model have multiple reasons for doing so (demand, management, capacity, resources), Grassroots Gardens does not believe this model to be best aligned with its joint goals of revitalization and community building or the local needs and conditions in the region. Other urban greening organizations actively manage gardens or clean and green strategies on vacant properties or formerly blighted lots through paid staff, contracts, or volunteers. While these organizations are also providing a valuable service to the neighborhoods they work in, Grassroots Gardens also does not see this method as most conducive to achieving its goals.

For these reasons ***Grassroots Gardens model should continue to be community driven community-run gardens*** that foster interaction and cooperation between community members and build social capital.

2) Continue to support and nurture the Grassroots Gardens network

Given the choice between more gardens and more gardeners, Grassroots Gardens would choose more gardeners. It is people that make the gardens and as neighborhoods change — and as the gardeners who have been with Grassroots Gardens from the outset age — the ability to sustain community gardens is increasingly dependent on the ability of the organization and its gardeners to maintain existing gardens both on-the-ground and the relationships required behind the scenes. Behind the scenes may mean anything from checking in on other gardeners to facilitate garden work flow, identifying additional garden resources, or meeting and recruiting new people to work in the garden.

Educational programming has been a mainstay of Grassroots Gardens' operations for many years. Recently, these education initiatives have included a community organizer series, a growing-focused education / workshop series in conjunction with Urban Roots Community Garden Center, a fitness and nutrition series, and the Safe Roots series aimed at introducing urban gardening to refugees and immigrants in the City of Buffalo. As part of this strategic planning process, Grassroots Gardens hosted a workshop and commissioned an organizing manual with the intent of helping its gardeners better define and communicate the vision and benefits of their gardens to help engage and interest additional community members in participating in their gardens.

To continue and build on these efforts, over the next five years ***Grassroots Gardens will help its gardeners with gardening-capacity building (on-the-ground and back end capacity) and social capacity building.***

In addition to building the capacity of individual gardens, Grassroots Gardens will continue to build connections across the network of gardeners. In addition to general shared interest in gardening, there are many additional sub-interests or commonalities shared by various gardens and gardeners throughout the network. With the combination of Buffalo gardens

and Niagara Falls gardens into a single network, new calculations of geographic distance and within-network access and connections have produced fresh considerations and opportunities.

For these reasons ***Grassroots Gardens will create opportunities for geographic and affinity (typology) sub-networks amongst its gardeners.***

To fulfill its role as facilitator across this expanded geography, Grassroots Gardens will also need to continue to evaluate its operational methods both in resource distribution as well as in the explicit process of network development.

While throughout this planning process a preference for a cluster model of organizational operations that is based on gardens' geographic proximity [see Planning Supplement for an analysis of the various management typologies the organization explored], the specifics on how this will transform the day-to-day operations for staff, as well as educational, event based, and resource distribution opportunities for gardeners, will need to be developed and will be evolving over time.

The various typologies of community gardens create opportunities beyond — or in addition to — networks based on geographic proximity. Fruit producing gardens, ornamental gardens, and passive gardens, for instance, may each have special workshops, knowledge sharing, or celebration events that would help build connections across the full network of gardeners. Typology groupings also include school gardens, which is the most fully developed approach to affinity groups that Grassroots Gardens currently has.

In addition to structure or use, though, there is also a possibility of clusters of the longevity of gardens, for example where they are in their developmental stage, whether early in the process or facing challenges of gardeners phasing out.



3) Strengthen Grassroots Gardens' commitment to land stewardship

Though Grassroots Gardens developed as a lease holding organization for municipal properties, and has also provided insurance and support for community gardens on privately held properties, recently the organization has acted to purchase a small number of its garden properties.

This move to land ownership is a new phase for the organization, one which it will continue to grow into over the next five years. To strengthen its commitment to land stewardship, **Grassroots Gardens will pursue Land Trust Alliance standards and accreditation.** This will require the continued development of sound policies and procedures as they relate to board governance, fundraising, and land acquisition and stewardship. It will also require resources in the form of staff time and application and accreditation fees to obtain. Grassroots Gardens has been a key participant with the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) on its urban policies and standards development, and has an important and vital partnership that it wishes to maintain and develop, while also enjoying the benefits of LTA membership. [See Planning Supplement for additional LTA information.]

Grassroots Gardens will continue to evaluate additional properties for potential acquisition through its land stewardship committee. A thorough review of each property will be necessary as the organization will need to have capacity to maintain any properties that are purchased. Land Trust Standards will continue to be helpful to inform and guide the work of this committee and its recommendations to the board.

The majority of garden properties in the organization's portfolio, however, will continue to be leased properties, a large portion of which will continue to be municipally owned land. For this reason **Grassroots Gardens will monitor and, as appropriate, solidify and strengthen its lease arrangement in the municipalities where it works.**

4) Redouble efforts to tell Grassroots Gardens' story

Grassroots Gardens provides valuable support to community members and produces tangible impacts, both in neighborhood revitalization and building social capital. Though these benefits are clear to the organization and those it works with, the understanding of the purposes and outcomes of its efforts are not necessarily well understood outside of this circle. Participants in the planning process pointed to misperceptions about the organization (including an apparently commonly held notion that it is a garden club of some sort). To reach and grow the various constituencies needed to continue to sustain and strengthen the organization, Grassroots Gardens will take a multi-faceted approach to expanding and sharpening its messaging and outreach.

In order to maintain and improve existing gardens while supporting current gardeners, ***Grassroots Gardens will grow neighborhood interest in joining and supporting existing gardens.*** This approach will be multidimensional, both through messaging and awareness activities carried out by the organization directly, and by supporting current gardeners efforts to tell the story of their gardens (including their visions and reasons for being involved) and to reach out to additional community members

Additionally, ***Grassroots Gardens will grow interest in starting new gardens by spreading awareness of the resources it can provide.*** Though the organization does not take the approach of direct organizing to form new gardens, the organization can strengthen its efforts to bring awareness of the services and supports it provides to communities that may be good candidates for, or are currently underserved by, community gardens.

To advance internal organizational capacity, ***Grassroots Gardens will grow its donor base by highlighting its impacts within communities.*** These impacts include not just the number (or square footage) of gardens cultivated, but also the amount of food produced, people reached and partnerships formed. However, where the Grassroots Gardens story is perhaps lesser known are the human elements, including the bonds that are created and the neighborhood revitalization efforts that have been sparked by these interactions, connections and shared commitment.

Because of its multiple initiatives, projects and partners, the organization has an opportunity to reach a built-in and receptive audience. ***Grassroots Gardens will continue to expand its messaging and outreach through existing and new partnerships and community venues.***



5) Work toward equity in Grassroots Gardens operations and in the community

The Western New York region is one of unequal resources and unequal need. Grassroots Gardens has a history of working in communities experiencing outsized needs, helping to activate and build on the resources that these communities possess. The notion that differential resources will be needed to make gardens and gardeners that are differently situated succeed has been an unstated but understood principle of the organization's operations. However, in making this principle explicit, this plan provides some action items for the organization to pursue to memorialize this principle as the organization evolves going forward. Endorsing equity as a principle rather than a formula or a matrix allows the organization to be responsive to developing needs and emergent situations. Yet, the organization may continue to develop more explicit policies and review its existing practices through this equity lens to further this commitment over time.

Grassroots Gardens will explore ways to supply tools, methods and materials in ways that “meet gardeners where they are”. In other words, the organization will seek to provide adequate resources that are appropriate to the capacity and the need of its gardens and its gardeners. The notion of equity-based support means that gardens may receive unequal resources, but the notion that the level of support is appropriate to the level of need will ensure that resources (materials, staff time, technical support, etc), will be distributed equitably.

Grassroots Gardens exists to facilitate neighbors coming together to create shared and productive spaces within their communities. Though the organization has implemented a system of evaluating gardens that benchmarks performance against each garden's own progress and expectations,

Grassroots Gardens will explore ways to implement community driven standards and accountability. By giving community members a greater say setting expectations and evaluating performance, the organization will continue to move from arbitrary or external expectations and will create additional dialogue and interaction while building accountability within the community.



Inclusion and diversity within the organization itself are critical elements to furthering equity in its operations. ***Grassroots Gardens must continue to develop an organizational culture that welcomes and elevates voices and experiences representative of the organization's constituency.***

6) Value and strengthen existing partnerships and be open to new opportunities

Grassroots Gardens has core strengths in facilitating community connections and urban growing for neighborhood revitalization, nutrition and wellness, and social capacity building. The organization brings these core competencies into partnerships with many other organizations and institutions in order to enhance its impact in the region. **Grassroots Gardens will continue to value and further existing and potential partnerships that expand its impact within its stated mission.**

The recent merger of Buffalo and Niagara Falls gardens will provide an opportunity to test the scalability and geographic range of a centrally administered effort. However, the organization holds closely the notion that what matters is the strength and success of the gardens it facilitates and the ability to support additional gardens that wish to be a part of the network, not that it continues to grow geographically or numerically by any arbitrary targets.

Recognizing its strengths and the necessity of following the existing model in order to preserve its fidelity and effectiveness, **Grassroots Gardens will remain a facilitator of community driven projects.** This means the organization will not impose arbitrary target numbers of gardens or geographies and will not pursue projects that do not have support and ownership from within the communities they are located.

Yet, **Grassroots Gardens will maintain a willingness to play similar or different roles in additional communities (including new geographies and institutions) throughout the region.** The organization's participation in new initiatives, however, must be predicated on a) the resources that are available (or likely) being sufficient to sustain the new initiative; and b) the work aligning with and/or promoting the organization's model — including community buy-in and support.

