

Grassroots Gardens of Western New York

**Strategic Plan
2023 - 2025**



Prepared by:



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Who we are. **Grassroots Gardens WNY is a dedicated group of community gardeners and activists.**

Together, we have a mission to share knowledge, power, and resources to grow healthy food, heal systemic harm, and strengthen neighborhood connections through community gardens. By working collaboratively, we will achieve our shared vision of a lasting network of land and people growing healthy communities.

Our work is rooted in the belief that a garden has the power to transform a neighborhood.

A garden creates a shared sense of purpose that empowers a community, creates environmental awareness, and improves public health. Community gardens deliver beauty and escape while many produce healthy food in unexpected places; we collaboratively cultivate and manage more than one million square feet (and growing!) of urban green space. We have over 100 community gardens in our network, and we operate from our shared values: Equity & Justice; Community Leadership; Fostering Connections; Stewardship, and Restorative Practices.

This plan builds on the more than 25 years of the organization's history, growth, and community. The challenges that created vacant land in our communities date back longer. A few examples of the systemic forces can be seen from race and class based federal and financial redlining and systemic disinvestment beginning in the 1930s; to the highways built over historic public spaces and through thriving communities; the ongoing financial exploitation and real estate commodification demonstrated by both the subprime foreclosure crisis of the 2000s and 2010s; as well as the worsening affordability crisis that harms communities traditionally excluded from opportunity (such as communities of color and working class residents, women, youth, seniors, and those with mental and physical challenges) the most.

The most recent strategic plan, covering 2017-2022 came at a time when the merger of Grassroots Gardens of Buffalo and Greenprint Niagara had recently taken place. That plan considered how to knit together and nurture a garden network across geographies — Buffalo and Niagara Falls — as well as strengthening partnerships; growing into a commitment to long-term land stewardship; working towards equity in the organization's operations; and being intentional about telling the Grassroots Gardens story.

With this plan as a roadmap — but only possible with the commitment and determination of the gardeners, staff members, and board, and with the support of cross-sector funders locally and nationally — Grassroots Gardens has continued its tremendous growth and development. This included achieving accreditation from the Land Trust Alliance — a unique and innovative achievement for a community garden organization

that includes a rigorous process of internal and external review, benchmarks and controls. In 2019, the organization took on further work to refine its mission, vision, and values and to review its policies with this sharpened perspective.

Within and beyond its core of 114 community gardens, in 2021 GGWNY worked with more than 1500 community gardeners, nearly 1700 people in its education and outreach programs, and delivered hundreds of yards of soil and compost, pounds of bulbs, gardening tools, and additional resources.

Grassroots Gardens has also been able to expand its human resources. In 2017, the organization had two full time employees. Today the staff has grown to over seven employees with a wide array of skill sets, experiences, and perspectives. The list of positions now includes Executive Director, Program Manager, Garden Education Coordinator, Community Garden Coordinator, Land Stewardship Coordinator, Food Justice Organizer & Policy Fellow, Therapeutic Gardening Coordinator, and Development Director; this growth has positioned the organization to fulfill its mission of sharing knowledge, power, and resources to grow healthy food, heal systemic harm, and strengthen neighborhood connections through community gardens like never before.

With this growth comes both new opportunities and new challenges.

Grassroots Gardens Values

1 - Equity & Justice

We believe equity is a human right. We are actively engaged in creating more inclusive, accessible and just operations, representations, and relationships across our garden network. This includes aligning with communities who have systematically been denied access to food and land in their fight for racial justice, food justice, and land justice. In our work we strive for collective liberation.

2 - Community Leadership

Our decisions are informed by and carried out by the people most directly impacted by them. Our collective work is open and transparent and we are accountable to each other in love. We are directed by the strengths and needs of our community membership.

3 - Fostering Connections

Our work is rooted in the belief that a community garden has the power to transform a neighborhood or school. Creating a garden together is empowering - it creates environmental awareness for people of all ages and improves physical, social, and emotional health. By sharing power, knowledge, and resources among our beloved community, we build collective resiliency.

4 - Stewardship

We strive to use best practices in conservation and will hold ourselves to high standards as we reclaim our cities and soil from decades of industrial pollution. To us, land justice requires collective ownership, stewardship, reparations, partnership with indigenous communities, and strong advocacy to keep the control of land in the hands of the community.

5 - Restorative Practices

In all our work, we do what we can to heal systemic harm by contributing to the healing of individuals, our society, and our land. The act of healing our land heals the people caring for it, and our gardens are treasured as intergenerational places to restore a right relationship with the earth and with each other.

Where we go from here.

This new plan also comes at a point of compounded trauma and loss for many within the Grassroots Gardens network. As is the case nationally for communities that have long experienced systemic disinvestment and barriers to access, the Grassroots Gardens community has endured significant loss throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to illness and loss of life, the pandemic's impacts have exacerbated financial and food insecurity for many across the network.

The white supremacist massacre that took place at a supermarket on Buffalo's Jefferson Avenue in the spring of 2022 has also had immediate and lasting impacts on our communities. For some in our communities, it has reinforced and made raw the legacy of maltreatment from broader systems that have stood between African Americans and real opportunity for generations. For some it has highlighted important issues of food security and self reliance. For others, it revealed and lifted up the deep connections, commitments, and networks of support that these impacted communities have always created and relied upon to survive and thrive in the face of ongoing oppressive conditions. For some it has heightened frustration that it took a cataclysmic event for their voices to be heard by those who have not lived these realities.

Though there is no singular 'right' response to a tragedy of this magnitude, the multiplicity of reactions, perspectives, and calls for action reveal that the spectrum of responses also touches Grassroots Gardens in multiple ways. As this planning effort kicked off in early summer, these considerations were evolving in real time.

For some, both inside and outside the community, Grassroots Gardens was seen as a bridge to connecting people across shared concerns, across shared (if unequal) pain, and across shared initiatives. While Grassroots Gardens approached this moment by relying on the guidance of its shared values, it has further highlighted the opportunity to institutionalize these values into its operations and into its decision making process throughout the organization.

These cross cutting initiatives are listed as elements of this Strategic Plan.

For Grassroots Gardens of Western New York, this planning process has become as much about what the ahead work is as how the work will be done.

As this plan aligns with a leadership transition at the Executive Director level, the next chapter of Grassroots Gardens begins as did the previous: with an appreciation and understanding of the work done to date, and a fresh excitement and commitment to continue to grow and evolve in order to create a lasting network of land and people growing healthy communities.

This plan positions the organization to cultivate five main themes:



1. Continue to align Grassroots Gardens' Operations and Outcomes with its Mission, Vision, and Values



2. Use multiple strategies to protect gardens in the face of rapid change



3. Make sure gardeners have the types of support they need to be successful



4. Recognize that not all gardens are the same, have the same opportunities, or face the same barriers, and use this understanding to further develop equitable approaches



5. Plan for long term stewardship and stability of the organization

What we did.

Throughout the planning process, Grassroots Gardens of Western New York attempted to center the voices of those closest to the gardens — the gardeners themselves — while also incorporating the perspectives of those who are responsible for the organization itself — the staff and board of directors.

To accomplish this, the organization’s consultant team from Make Communities facilitated conversations at the spring and fall Gardeners Committee meetings as well as setting up a conversation corner at the fall plant distribution. In addition, the team met with the strategic planning committee, standing committees of the organization, staff members, and facilitated a board retreat in October 2022. (The planning process and notes from these meetings are outlined in Appendix A.)

It should be noted that these groups are not mutually exclusive. Many people associated with Grassroots Gardens play more than one role within the organization. Gardeners are present on the board and committees, and staff members often also have cross cutting roles and participation. Common themes arose from all of the meetings, but different ways of framing issues, concerns, and opportunities also emerged (Figure 1).

Taken together, this input led directly to the main themes of the 2023-2025 GGWNY Strategic Plan.

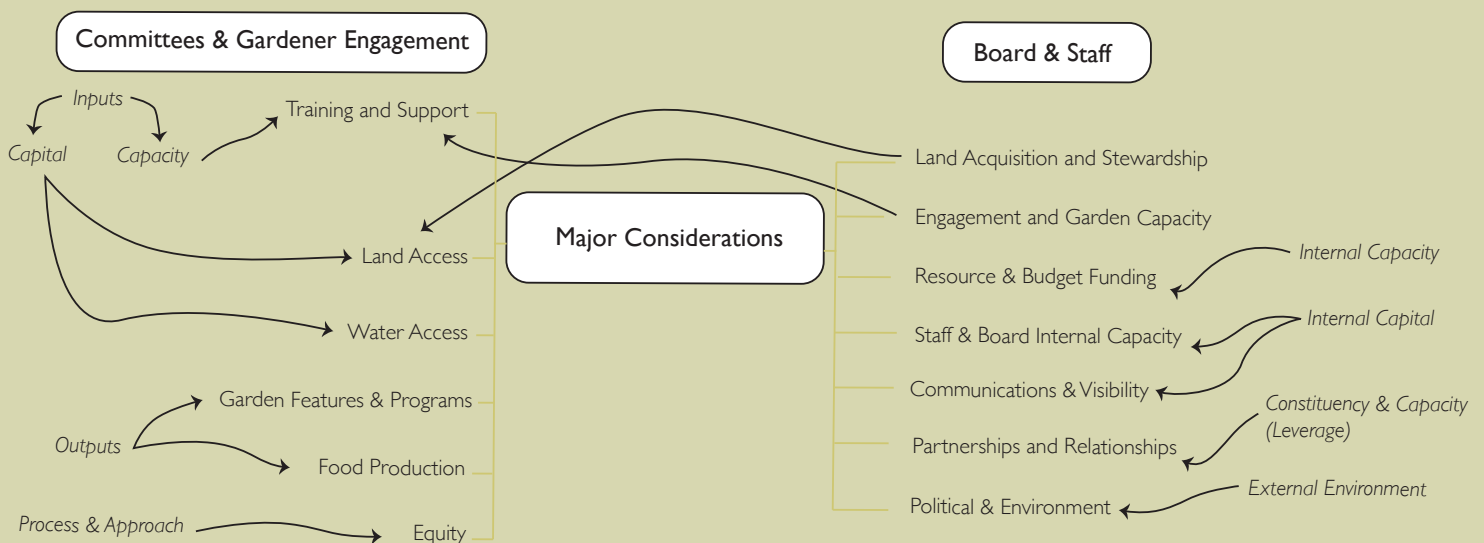


Figure 1. Topics that emerged through different GGWNY constituencies.

How we will move forward.

Theme 1: Continue to ensure that GGWNY's Operations and Outcomes align with its Mission, Vision, and Values.

Equity & Justice. Community Leadership. Fostering Connections. Stewardship. Restorative Practices. This is what drives our work and the way we work. We know through our learning and through our experiences that intentions do not always match impact. In order to ensure these do match, we need to hold ourselves accountable to our values. Grassroots Gardens has adapted and adopted an equity impact analysis to help guide our decision making. Though the organization has been employing this framework in places, throughout the course of the next three years we will implement consistent use of values based decision making in all aspects of our operations.

Even when we share values, though, if we don't share an understanding (of the conditions, policies, history, and present that have created the conditions we seek to change – food apartheid, community trauma, frayed neighborhoods), our remedies and our actions can be misaligned. It was policies that created and fostered middle class suburbanization, primarily for white identified families, while excluding, isolating,

and disinvesting in our cities specifically because of the race and class of residents. This includes government sanctioned redlining, financial, real estate, and insurance industry practices, municipal disinvestment and inequitable public services (from schools to recreation opportunities and more), highways tearing through communities of color, to name just a few.

In order to ensure our theory of change and operational decisions — even our understanding of different experiences that people in our communities and our garden network may have — we need to make consistent use (internally and externally) of a shared analysis of the barriers facing communities in Buffalo and Niagara Falls. This analysis must be specific about the systemic causes that have generated the need for community gardens as a place of healing and growth. It is within this understanding that we determine what actions, programs, and policies are most likely to leverage our internal strengths and external partnerships for real and lasting change in line with our mission, vision, and values.

GGWNY Decision Making Mission, Vision, Values Alignment Considerations

- 1. What are we trying to achieve with this action?*
- 2. Does this outcome align with our mission to share knowledge, power, and resources to grow healthy food, heal systemic harm, and strengthen neighborhood connections through community gardens? Does it align with our vision of a lasting network of land and people growing healthy communities?*
- 3. Are the methods we are proposing to achieve this goal rooted in equity and justice, community leadership, fostering connections, stewardship, and restorative practices?*
- 4. Have those most directly impacted by this proposal been a part of the decision-making process?*
- 5. Will this action impact different people or groups in different ways? Will it worsen or ignore existing disparities?*
- 6. What will be the perception of this action by those impacted by it?*
- 7. Based on the responses above, what revisions are needed in the proposal or decision under discussion?*

Looking at the following planks of the strategic plan, it is helpful to think about Grassroots Gardens priorities through the Program Pyramid. Created by Make Communities as a shorthand for considering each of the components necessary to carry out a successful initiative: Capital, Capacity, and Constituency. The Program Pyramid reminds us that none of these elements can subsist on their own, they are all equally important elements that require analysis and understanding.

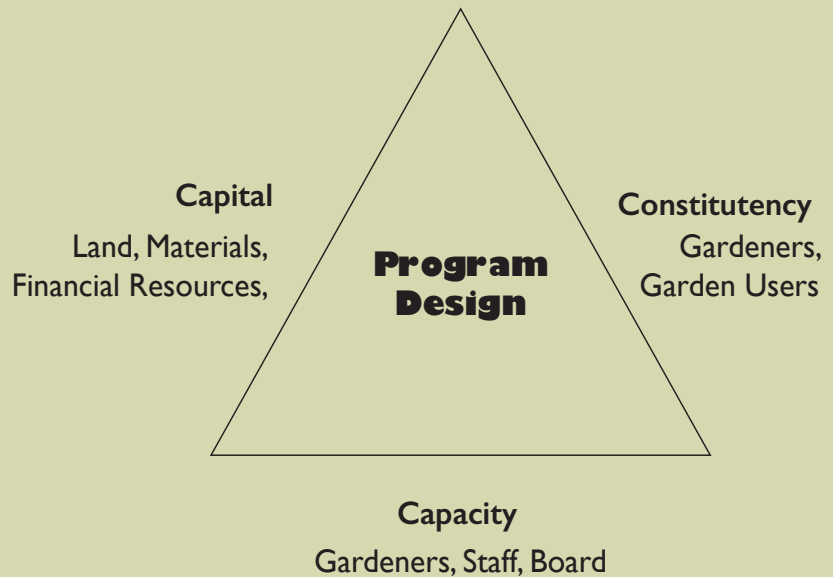


Figure 2. Program Pyramid © Make Communities 2021.

Capital is the physical and financial resources necessary for the initiative. Do we have them, or do we still need them? What are their potential sources? Land, garden materials, and fiscal resources to run the organization rise to the top of GGWNY’s capital needs.

Capacity is our ability to implement. Do we have the skills and people power to get this initiative done? If not how can we increase our own capacity or partner with others to make it happen. Staff, board members, and gardeners themselves all make up aspects of GGWNY’s capacity, as do external partners and consultants.

Constituency is the people who want to see this happen. These are our end-users, and ultimately the true test of an initiative’s relevance. If we do not have people interested in our initiative we may need to rethink what it is we are doing. GGWNY’s constituents are the gardeners themselves, and other members of the community who use or benefit from the gardens.

Because of its commitment to community leadership, Grassroots Gardens can note the presence of Gardeners in its Constituency and in its Capacity. This is an important feature of the way Grassroots Gardens operates and is structured. It reinforces the need for both ongoing input from and support for Grassroots Gardeners.

Through this framework, several critical needs emerged. This plan responds to those needs across each of the areas of the Capital, Capacity, and Constituency framework in the gardens themselves.



Figure 3. The Organizational Arc © Make Communities 2021.

Theme 2: Use multiple strategies to protect gardens in the face of rapid change

Grassroots Gardens was formed at a much different time in the region's history.

Following decades of industrial decline and racialized segregation, the city of Buffalo and the city of Niagara Falls were both deep in ongoing severe cycles of population loss and disinvestment. In the ensuing decades, investment has begun to return and population levels have at least begun to stabilize if not rebound. There are many reasons for these changes, including generational lifestyle preference shifts, state investments, the globalization of capital and the commodification of real estate along with an increasing wealth disparity. These trends have been uneven, both geographically — by neighborhood — and demographically — by who has seen this as a benefit and who has seen this deepen challenges.

As conditions change, policies must respond. This requires that GGWNY continually consider the impacts of neighborhood and market dynamics. Some of the neighborhoods where Grassroots Gardens has a footprint have seen the vacant land that dots these communities (because of government and financial, insurance, and real estate industry practices such as redlining), suddenly become targets of land speculators and wealthy real estate developers. This has artificially inflated real estate prices, creating new challenges for these neighborhoods and threatening ongoing survival of many of the gardens that have become staples of community regeneration. Recognizing this threat, Grassroots Gardens has become an accredited land trust, and for the first time has begun to purchase property in order to ensure its permanent protection.

Grassroots Gardens will work to secure lasting protection to gardens under threat of displacement. Though initial land trust efforts have seen important successes, these efforts have also faced challenges. Grassroots Gardens has yet to be able to purchase as many gardens as it had hoped for a variety of reasons, many of them related to the escalating price of land - both privately held and public land and the inability to come to terms with the host municipalities on policies that would make more land permanently available for public use. Grassroots Gardens will continue to pursue purchasing land for permanent protection, but also recognizes that this may not be the answer for every garden. Grassroots Gardens will need to be nimble in pursuing a variety of methods for gaining long-term protection of properties. This will include expanded contact with county and state departments such as Erie County Agriculture, New York State Ag & Markets and the New York State Department of Natural Resources. The Governor's Task Force on Community Gardening was also convened in late 2022 and is considering recommendations to better protect community gardens across the state when they are at risk of sale for speculation or development.

Critical Needs

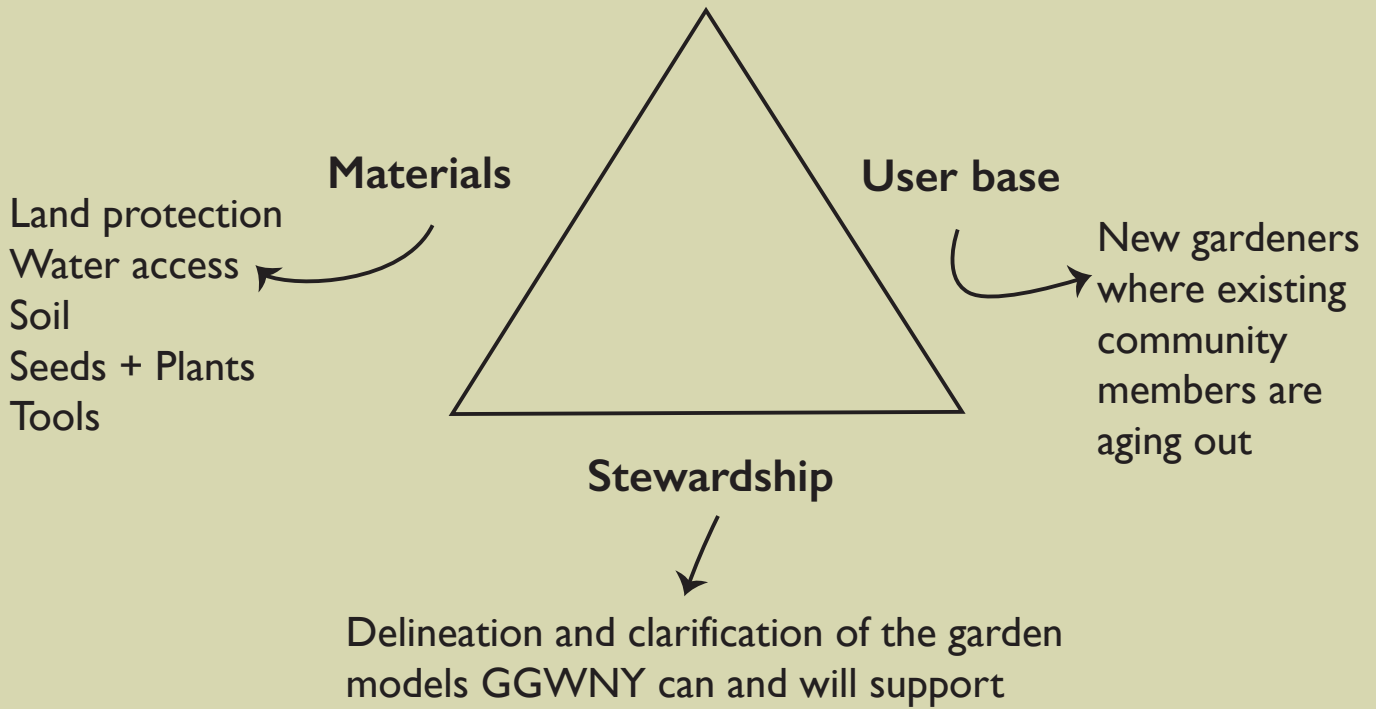


Figure 4. Critical Needs Assessment

One necessary component of land access is public policy regarding publicly held land. Grassroots Gardens will continue to work with community based partners to shape municipal land access and disposition policies in Buffalo and Niagara Falls. This includes leveraging its deep knowledge base and networks of practitioners locally and across the country.

Theme 3: Make sure gardeners have the types of support they need to be successful

Grassroots Gardens believes in its core model of community gardens developed and stewarded by residents of the neighboring community. However, the garden network has expanded and our organization has been responsive to accommodating additional ways of ensuring people have access to gardening for healthy food, making connections, healing, and learning. To date this includes school based gardens as well as gardens facilitated or maintained by agencies and organizations, such as non-profits or religious organizations. As gardens enter the GGWNY land trust, it is also necessary for our organization to consider the permanent stewardship of these properties even as gardeners age out of participation or as neighborhood conditions change.

This array of configurations means that people throughout the network have different relationships to their gardens — and different capacities for maintaining and stewarding these special places. The needs that these garden stewards have are different, and Grassroots Gardens needs to remain proactive yet nimble in ensuring each type of garden has the resources necessary to succeed. Whatever relationship a garden steward may have to a garden (community, agency and staff), GGWNY will focus on growing the capacity of garden stewards.

For GGWNY internally, this means a focus on what it means and what it requires to have more active staff capacity for garden maintenance, and defining the times or circumstances where that capacity will be applied or prioritized.

Many gardeners have shared that they need more hands for upkeep of their gardens. While engagement in many other gardens remains strong, several have noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly set back engagement, and even kept many long time gardeners from participating or returning to the garden. Some noted that at times throughout the season — planting and harvesting for instance — garden interest can be strong, but it can diminish in the summer growing season in between. Some gardens that were started by agencies and organizations rather than neighborhood residents, have yet to attract or retain people from the neighborhood as active gardeners.

Grassroots Gardens cannot be - and has never been intended as - the hands-on steward of the bulk of gardens within the network. The primary model will remain that the constituency of gardeners is self-perpetuating. In other words, the community is the garden, and ideally that community grows itself in addition to the plants in the garden.

At times Grassroots Gardens has provided direct support for engaging new individuals in their local community gardens. However, as many gardeners have noted, they themselves would be able to be more proactive and have a greater impact building their community if they had the capacity to more intentionally bring new members into their gardens. Grassroots Gardens can facilitate this growth by seeking to invest in community organizing training to expand the skills of gardeners to attract new garden members.

In addition to building gardeners' capacity to attract additional people to their gardens, building the horticulture skills of gardeners is another important consideration. Grassroots Gardens has always made it a priority to provide gardener education opportunities, both directly and in partnership. As the types of gardens and gardeners continue to diversify, as technology continues to change the way people receive and respond to information, and as the challenges of accessibility and in-person connection have been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, over the next three years Grassroots Gardens will need to deploy multiple methods of garden education and training tailored to various constituencies, needs and learning methods (i.e., popular education/peer-to-peer, video, written, hands on and in-person methodologies). This skill building and education must also recognize the full spectrum of gardening knowledge experience that is present — and welcome — in the GGWNY network. From beginners to master gardeners and everything in between, what role can we play in continuing to nurture life long garden learning for every member of the network.

In other words, the community is the garden, and ideally that community grows itself in addition to the plants in the garden.

Theme 4: Recognize that not all gardens are the same, have the same opportunities, or face the same barriers, and use this understanding to further develop equitable approaches

Grassroots Gardens must be responsive to aspirations of individual communities and gardens, because there is no cookie cutter Grassroots Garden. The gardens that make up the network are diverse and unique, each with their own set of strengths and challenges, their own set of aspirations and limitations. Being responsive requires continually gaining a deeper understanding of underlying systems shaping access and opportunity, and understanding how individual gardens find the most value in their spaces.

However, there are also commonalities among them that are baseline supports of success. Grassroots Gardens is in a challenging but rewarding position of accommodating gardens with different individual visions and outcomes through a range of types of support.

The material inputs to the gardens include items like land, water, soil, tools, plants, and seeds. Distributions of soil, tools, plants, seeds, and other garden materials happens on a regular basis and Grassroots Gardens works hard to ensure it is meeting as many of these needs as possible for each of its gardens. While the land on which to garden was noted in a previous portion of the plan, access to water is another element that was a frequent concern of gardeners throughout the planning process. GGWNY has previously made arrangements for access to municipal water, however, these agreements are not streamlined and do not work for all gardens or gardeners. In addition, longstanding or permanent gardens may be appropriate places for long term or permanent water solutions (and the capital costs they require), while beginning gardens that may not yet have established an enduring presence in their community may require a different approach that reflects the 'start up' phase that they are in. The many differing situations that gardens and gardeners are in demonstrate the adaptive challenges that we face in supporting each of our gardens' varying needs and circumstances.

While the water access issue continues to require additional attention over the course of 2023-2025, it points to a broader theme of this plan that GGWNY will facilitate supports for gardens that respond to their usage and tenure, with particular attention to land security and water access.

In addition to these baseline material supports, GGWNY will also continue to differentiate support to gardens equitably in proactive and responsive ways. Most of the gardens in the network support cultivation of food in some way. However, others are ornamental gardens that primarily support a place for community gathering or passive recreation. Others are program forward gardens that are primarily a place of respite or healing. Though none of these functions are mutually exclusive, the intent of the gardens and gardeners influences the types of supports that are necessary.



The underlying conditions of communities (i.e., the level of investment or disinvestment they have seen due to public and private policies and practices; the race, class, and ethnic compositions of neighborhoods, and the social and economic means and power of people in these communities — also driven by public and private sector systems) must also be considered. These types of impacts are individual and collective. In other words, a garden that faces additional barriers because of one or more of these factors will present differently in a setting where it is the only garden challenged by these barriers than if it is one of many facing these barriers. When considering the network then, the geographic concentration of gardens in systemically disinvested communities, such as Buffalo’s East Side or Niagara Falls, requires a set of specialized considerations for collective advancement that is nuanced to these local conditions. The GGWNY decision making framework outlined in Theme 1 of this plan provides a tool for these considerations, and it should be implemented in the organization’s internal policies and in its actions.

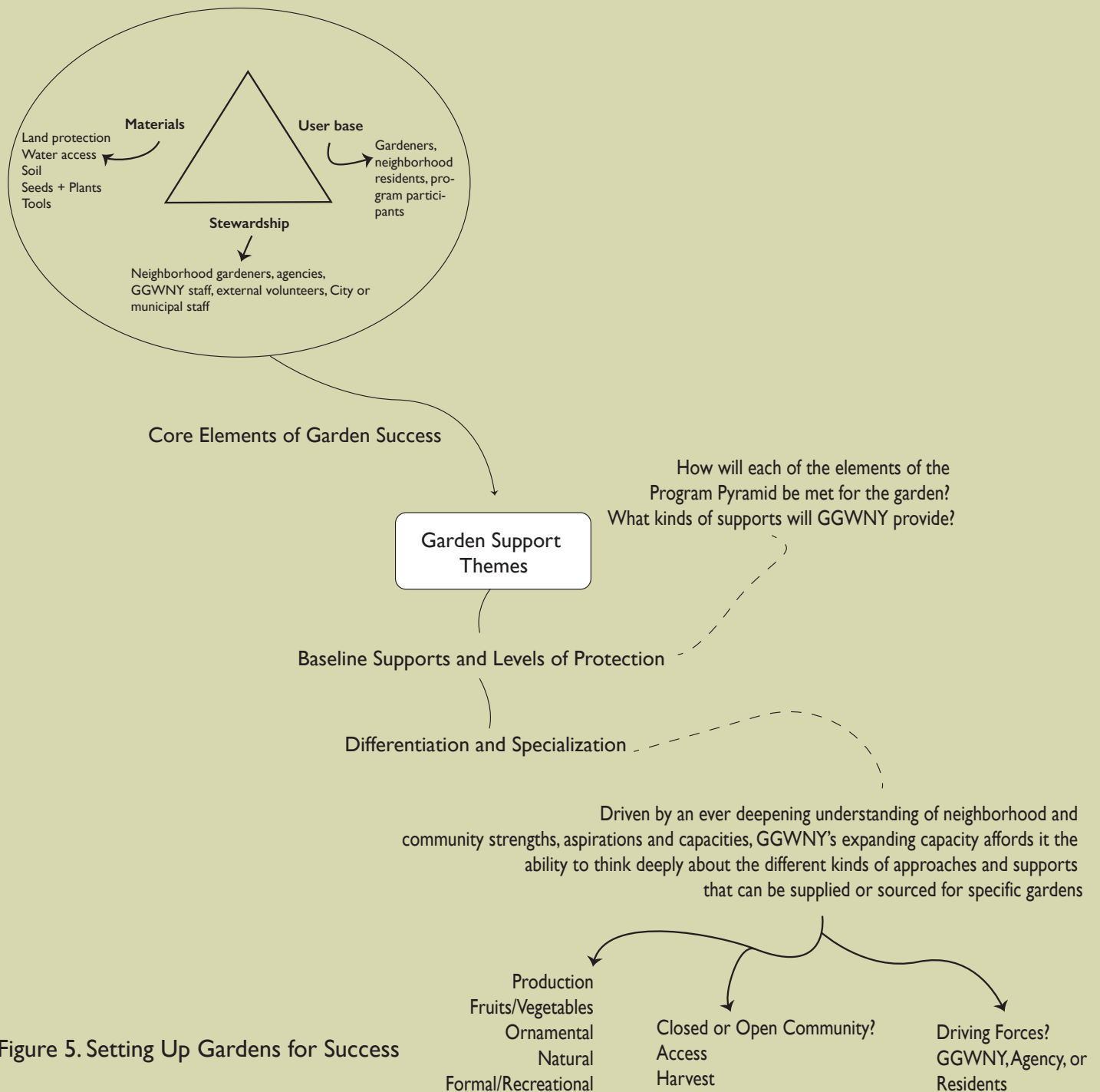


Figure 5. Setting Up Gardens for Success

Theme 5: Plan for long term stewardship and stability of the organization

While Theme 1 focuses on how Grassroots Gardens of WNY will approach its work, and Themes 2-4 consider some of the pressing issues impacting the gardens themselves, Theme 5 theme is directed internally. This theme considers the health of the organization today and into the future, ensuring that Grassroots Gardens can both preserve its legacy of supporting communities and adapt to a differentiated role and way of collaborating that reflects its worldview and its communities.

Throughout the subprime foreclosure crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s, organizations across the country sprung up or rose in profile in response to the growing crisis of vacant property throughout the country. Even if it did not previously gain headlines, this built on a long-standing history of vacancy in cities, particularly those that — like Buffalo and Niagara Falls — experienced deindustrialization, systemic disinvestment, and large scale population loss. The financial crisis, though, generated interest from various funders at a local and national level and community gardening, vacant land reclamation, and food access organizations enjoyed a bit of a boom in profile and financial support. Much of that was temporary, however, and many of these organizations have either downsized, merged, or folded in the absence of sustained support.

Grassroots Gardens has managed to survive and thrive, however, in no small measure due to the strength of its community connections, its broad range of partners and local supporters, and the innovation and dexterity of its staff.

Grassroots Gardens currently has more staff capacity than it ever has had. However, this also comes in the face of once again increasingly foreboding economic headwinds, and an uneasy social and political environment nationally and even globally. This current moment of capacity strength creates the opportunity for Grassroots Gardens to dedicate effort to diversify funding sources and ensure dedicated staff capacity for resource and donor development (help protect against funding cycles, economic downturns, administration changes, and shifting philanthropic priorities).

The increased staff capacity has also created an opportunity to leverage internal knowledge, skills, experience, and perspectives in new and exciting ways. In order for the organization to fully benefit, and in order for the staff to fully thrive, Grassroots Gardens must now consider ways to decentralize and democratize our organizational structure to ensure stability, resiliency, and a representative diversity of perspectives, skill sets, and knowledge. The aspiration to create an environment where everyone can bring their whole selves to Grassroots Gardens is about both nurturing this as an organizational culture and institutionalizing this in practices, policies, procedures, and structures.

Ultimately, this plan is about reaffirming and connecting every aspect of Grassroots Gardens to its core beliefs. Our shared values of Equity & Justice; Community Leadership; Fostering Connections; Stewardship; and Restorative Practices must apply internally as well as externally. Acknowledging and affirming that Grassroots Gardens of Western New York has a rich legacy of community support does not imply that this has been or should be static. The depth of institutional experience — both successes and missteps — provide opportunities for reflection and continual growth. The upcoming chapter of Grassroots Gardens is the next in an ongoing story of sharing knowledge, power, and resources to grow healthy food, heal systemic harm, and strengthen neighborhood connections. By working collaboratively, we will achieve our shared vision of a lasting network of land and people growing healthy communities.

