Urban agriculture has been championed in recent years as a solution to a host of issues, from food insecurity in urban communities to employment and environmental sustainability. For years, farms and community gardens have continued to sprout up within major city limits throughout the United States. This trend has gained traction and generated a lot of buzz among urban planners and community organizers.

While urban agriculture is widespread and has become a hot topic in major cities across the country, “an exact picture of urban agriculture has not yet been painted.” A project titled “The State of Urban Farming in the United States: Enhancing the Viability of Small and Medium-Sized Commercial Urban Farms” will investigate more precisely where the urban farming movement is in the United States, and where it is going. The project, funded by a $453,000 grant from the United States Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture, will enable researchers from Penn State’s College of Agriculture Sciences and faculty from New York University to examine the current state of Urban Agriculture in the United States. That USDA is investing nearly half a million dollars to research urban farming and facilitate its growth speaks to the legitimacy of the movement, and may be indicative of the transformative effect it will have on urban communities and food systems.

A commonly-used definition of urban agriculture is “the practice of food production within a city boundary or on the immediate periphery of a city,” including the cultivation of crops, vegetables, herbs, fruit, flowers, orchards, parks, forestry, fuelwood, livestock, aquaculture, and bee-keeping. While the idea of farming within a big city’s limits may seem novel as it recently gained popularity, urban farming has been in practice since the dawn of cities and agriculture itself. Before the advents of chemical fertilizers, refrigeration, and mass transportation that make the current American food system possible, cities had to produce enough food to sustain themselves rather than import it from rural areas. One of the most effective methods of growing vegetables that involves adding compost to densely-planted raised plant beds and is still in practice in the United States today originated within the city limits of Paris in the 1800s.

Federal, state, and local governments have promoted urban agriculture in times of economic hardship for over a century. Local governments including the City of Detroit started “potato patches” in response to economic downturn to give unemployed residents the opportunity to grow and sell food. President Woodrow Wilson urged Americans to plant...
liberty gardens to help with the food and energy shortages in World War I. During and following the Great Depression, the federal government funded programs to promote relief gardens. Programs encouraged Americans to plant victory gardens during and after World War II in the face of scarcities of food, energy, and raw materials. An estimated 40 percent of the vegetables consumed during World War II were grown in town and city gardens. When Americans no longer had to garden for sustenance, agriculture became a “low value” urban enterprise, and city planners ceased from including agriculture in their zoning schemes. The inventions of fertilizer, refrigeration, and development of transportation systems further drove food production to rural areas and created the modern industrialized food system. Thus, altering the food system in a way that cities produce their own food rather than importing it from rural regions is not an insurmountable deviation from a long-held food system. Rather, it is reverting back to food systems that were in place a short time ago, and for a much longer period of time.

Today’s urban agriculture movement started in the 1970s after the manufacturing industry had moved many operations to the union-hostile South and more affluent families moved to the suburbs, leaving many major cities with economic deterioration, fewer job opportunities, less dense populations, and vast swaths of vacant land. For years, some residents of these cities, neighborhood organizations, and nonprofits have converted nearby vacant land into community gardens and enjoyed the benefits that flow from urban gardening. Yet, many local governments have been slow to implement a framework of policies that would allow the urban farming movement to reach its full potential.

While no two cities are exactly alike and the USDA-funded State of Urban Farming in the United States project will reveal more in-depth analysis on what is happening on the ground, there are some commonalities amongst the obstacles to the urban farming movement in major American cities. The City governments have by default become owners of thousands of vacant properties in blighted neighborhoods after they become tax-delinquent or are left vacant. Due to incessantly stagnant housing markets in these areas, the Cities’ efforts to redevelop, repurpose, or sell the property. The City of Philadelphia owns roughly 40,000 vacant lots. There are nearly 9,000 vacant lots in New York City, which comprise roughly 5.8 percent of the City’s land. Cleveland, Ohio owns over 20,000 vacant lots. There are tens of thousands of vacant lots in other cities in the Great Lakes region, including Flint in Michigan, Buffalo in New York, and Youngstown in Ohio.

Many cities have amended their public land-use policies to promote urban farming within their limits. Baltimore,
Maryland implemented a streamlined adopt-a-lot program available to residents and a policy allowing city-owned lots to be sold for $1 to qualified land trusts. Cleveland, Ohio was the first city to pass a zoning designation for community gardens, although the community garden designation does not guarantee the garden will never be lost. Chicago offers a program where residents living next to vacant lots who plan on improving the lots can purchase the lots at discounted rates. Milwaukee, Wisconsin offers one to three year leases for urban agriculture on public owned land. Oakland, California works with nearby nonprofits to offer residents space to grow produce in community gardens for a nominal annual fee, but cautions residents that selling produce grown on public land is prohibited by law. Portland, Oregon has exhibited a willingness to enter into extended leases with residents who intend to use the public land for urban farming. The City Council of Seattle approved legislation in 2011 that allows three year leases for urban farming, including uses for retail sales, which will allow the residents to sell the produce they grow on site.

A number of state legislatures across the country have recently introduced legislation that would promote the development of urban agriculture. These states include Virginia, Rhode Island, Kentucky, Missouri, California, Washington, Florida, and Texas. The United States Congress has also recently introduced legislation that would promote development of urban agriculture by authorizing the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to make grants and offer technical assistance to local governments to address property vacancy.

References

2.  http://live.psu.edu/story/60779
3.  Id.
6.  Id.
11.  Supra, note 5.
12.  Id.
13.  Id.