

# Detroit's urban farms could provide a majority of produce for local residents

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Transforming vacant urban lots into farms and community gardens could provide Detroit residents with a majority of their fruits and vegetables.

As city officials ponder proposals for urban farms, a Michigan State University study indicates that a combination of urban farms, community gardens, storage facilities and hoop houses – greenhouses used to extend the growing season – could supply local residents with more than 75 percent of their [vegetables](#) and more than 40 percent of their fruits.

The study, which appears in the current issue of *The Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, evaluates many aspects of the production potential of the Motor City's vacant properties, from identifying available parcels of land to addressing residents' attitudes toward blending agrarian traits with their urban lifestyles.

"What's clear from our production analysis is that even with a limited growing season, significant quantities of fresh fruits and vegetables eaten by Detroiters could be grown locally," said Kathryn Colasanti, the graduate student who led the study for the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems at MSU. "And investments in produce storage facilities and hoop houses would increase this capacity substantially."

As part of the analysis, MSU cataloged available land that had no existing structures. Using aerial imagery and the city's database of vacant property, researchers identified 44,085 available vacant parcels, which

span 4,848 acres. To paint a more realistic picture, the database excluded land in and around parks, golf courses, cemeteries, churches, schools and more, said Mike Hamm, who leads the C.S. Mott Group for Sustainable Food Systems.

"Our totals are conservative," he said. "But it may be closer to representing the quantity of land more readily available for urban farms and gardens because these parcels are publicly owned and clear of any buildings."

Along with pinpointing properties, the study also addressed public opinion on the issue. Different groups value urban farms for different reasons. Some groups see farms and gardens as a means to provide for their families and to bring in some additional income. People connected with urban agriculture organizations emphasized how such efforts strengthen neighborhood bonds. Some senior citizens and youth embraced the concept as a way to access higher-quality foods.

These attitudes could be tempered by a variety of factors related to implementing urban farms and gardens, such as increased activity and noise, perimeter fencing, free gardens used to draw neighborhoods together versus those that sell their products profit, altering the urban landscape with a semi-rural feel and more.

"These different opinions can co-exist," Hamm said. "But because they could also come into conflict, there is a need to engage in diverse communities to create a vision for the form and scale of urban agriculture in Detroit."

Provided by Michigan State University

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