City of Milwaukee

Fall 2013

# Vacant Lot HANDBOOK

## A Guide to Reusing, Reinventing and Adding Value to Milwaukee's City-owned Vacant Lots

City of Milwaukee

# The Vacant Lot Handbook IN SUMMARY

With the help of many dedicated citizens and professionals, we have put together this handbook of creative reuse strategies for city-owned vacant land in Milwaukee. This handbook provides a number of practical ideas to residents and community groups interested in turning city-owned vacant lots into community assets that add value to neighborhoods, strengthen bonds between neighbors and make the city a better place to live.

If you have a good idea for developing a city-owned vacant lot in your neighborhood, the City wants to hear it. If the lot is next to your house, it could be a sideyard expansion. If you have gardening skills, it could be a source of fresh food in the summer. If you want to create a neighborhood green space, it could be a gathering spot and a play area for children year-round. Perhaps you are more ambitious and want to add a building or structure to a vacant lot, the City welcomes those proposals too.

If you are interested in helping the City achieve its sustainability goals, your vacant lot could be a site for a sustainable new home or home addition. Your vacant lot could also help solve the City's environmental problems, such as stormwater runoff and urban heat islands.

Do you need help developing your ideas? There are links in this handbook to community groups and experts who will help you plan, program and organize your ideas. More links and resources can be found at the City's website: www.milwaukee.gov/DCD/VacantLotHandbook.

# The Vacant Lot Handbook WEBSITE

This document can also be found (with updates) at:

**www.milwaukee.gov/DCD/VacantLotHandbook**

# Basic PROCESS

## STEP ONE: IDENTIFY CITY-OWNED VACANT LOT

Use the posted City sign or the City's website to identify lot as City-owned. If you are not sure, call City Real Estate.

## STEP TWO: DEVELOP YOUR IDEA

Sketch out an idea for the vacant lot you plan to use. If you plan to place permanent structures on the lot, you must buy it. If no permanent structures are needed, you can obtain a temporary use permit from City Real Estate.

## STEP THREE: CHECK ZONING

Check the zoning for the lot -- either check the City's website, MapMilwaukee.com, or call the City's Permit Center.

## STEP FOUR: FIND RESOURCES

If needed, get help from the City, nonprofits, or professionals willing to donate their time.

## STEP FIVE: MAKE A PROPOSAL

Show the City what you plan to do with the lot you want to buy or use, revise the plan as needed.

## STEP SIX: BUY LOT OR OBTAIN PERMIT

Set up a meeting with City Real Estate to actually make the vacant lot purchase or obtain a temporary use permit based on the approved plan.

## STEP SEVEN: BUILD YOUR IDEA!

You are now the owner/permitted user responsible for the property. Check with the Development Center regarding permits or code requirements for your plan. Now get started on building your idea!

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CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

**The City owns and maintains more than 3,000 vacant lots. Some lots get developed, many are being used informally by neighbors for community gardens and parks, and many more lie dormant waiting for their potential to be realized.**

## Milwaukee Vacant Lots OVERVIEW

Milwaukee's current surplus of vacant lots has created issues for urban neighborhoods. Who manages and monitors activity? Who makes sure the lot is an asset to the neighborhood? At the same time, the availability of vacant lots has created new opportunities for sideyard expansions, property enhancements, neighborhood amenities, community gardens, stormwater management strategies, and residential and commercial infill development.

The process for buying or getting permits to use lots from the city is simple and help is available for planning and developing your ideas (see resources at the end of each section).

Whether you are a new property owner in Milwaukee or a longtime resident, expanding your existing property with a vacant lot (plus improvements) will not only add value to your Milwaukee neighborhood, it will enhance the City's tax base and improve overall quality of life.

# Milwaukee LEADERS

The following groups are leaders in the urban renaissance movement, actively involved in reclaiming vacant land for gardens providing locally grown healthy foods, creating community assets, offering hands-on technical support, and building social networks. They have been a significant help to many community groups and individuals, and they may be able to help you transform the vacant lots on your block, too.

**Walnut Way Conservation Corporation**

Walnutway.org

Walnut Way Conservation Corp. is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization founded by residents of the Lindsay Heights neighborhood in 1998 to foster neighborhood well-being through community organizing, property restoration, economic development, and a "back to the earth" movement of gardening, greening, and improved access to healthy foods.

In describing the neighborhood's amazing transformation on their website, LISC Milwaukee writes:
In a little over ten years, the Walnut Way Conservation Corporation and community members have successfully reclaimed the neighborhood, driven out crime, restored century-old homes, helped to construct new owner-occupied homes, transformed vacant lots into productive vegetable gardens, installed more than forty rain gardens, planted a fruit orchard, offered programming to local youth, provided social and educational resources for adults, and created a close-knit neighborhood of caring residents!

**Milwaukee County Cooperative Extension**

milwaukee.uwex.edu/agriculture

(414) 256-4606

The University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension leads a number of programs that increase access to healthy, fresh food in Milwaukee County. Through the Garden Plot Rental Program, more than 70 acres of county land are being rented to people interested in gardening. The UW Extension also manages micro farms, holds classes on beekeeping and therapeutic horticulture, and offers advice.

Alice's Garden on 21st and Garfield Avenue, one of the better known community gardens in Milwaukee, was once managed by the UW Extension. It is now an independent nonprofit organization that teaches classes, hosts programs and events, and has its own website and "product line."

**Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation**

City.milwaukee.gov/NIDC

414-286-5608

NIDC is an affiliate of the City of Milwaukee's Department of City Development. NIDC operates the Community Improvement Project program to provide matching grants and technical assistance to resident driven efforts to creatively reuse vacant lots and re-purpose them into neighborhood assets.

**HOMEGR/OWN**

City.milwaukee.gov/sustainability/homegr/own

414-286-3748

The City of Milwaukee's new HOMEGR/OWN initiative will use City-owned vacant lots and foreclosed buildings for growing, processing & distributing food, supporting the local food supply chain, increasing healthy food availability & creating economic opportunity.

# Milwaukee LEADERS

**Growing Power**

Growingpower.org

(414) 527-1546

Growing Power is a national nonprofit organization and land trust devoted to helping all communities provide equal access to healthy, high-quality, safe and affordable food. Growing Power sponsors Community Food Centers, which are local places where people can learn sustainable practices to grow, process, market, and distribute food.

The prototype for Community Food Centers is the Growing Power facility at 5500 W. Silver Spring Drive, a historic two-acre farm that is the last remaining farm and greenhouse operation in the City of Milwaukee. Growing Power's founder, Will Allen, is a nationally recognized leader in the sustainable urban farming and healthy food movement.

**Groundwork Milwaukee**

Groundworkmke.org

414-763-9947

Groundwork Milwaukee (GWM), a division of Groundwork USA, works with the community to improve the environment, economy, and their quality of life, by taking local action and by getting local people, business, government, and other organizations involved in practical hands-on projects. GWM helps people transform derelict land and wasted public space into valued community assets such as pocket parks, community gardens, recreation facilities, and nature preserves.

Milwaukee Urban Gardens, a GWM program, assists groups interested in using vacant lots, beginning with the leasing process, and continuing with organizing, volunteers, start-up, finding resources, etc.

**Center for Resilient Cities**

resilientcities.org

(414) 289-7799

The Center for Resilient Cities is a nonprofit organization that advocates for sustainable community development on the state and regional level, and works with neighbors on the local level to create healthy, robust communities through projects and programs that promote healthy, sustainable lifestyles while fostering new opportunities and social networks.

The Center for Resilient Cities' staff and volunteers also help to revitalize local parks and open spaces. Its urban resilience project and 2-acre farm (Alice's Garden), support garden plots for roughly 100 families and ten community organizations, and provide dozens of free enrichment programs, including yoga and aerobics classes, weekly reading circles, harvest-oriented cooking classes, and a youth group on environment and farming education.

**Victory Garden Initiative**

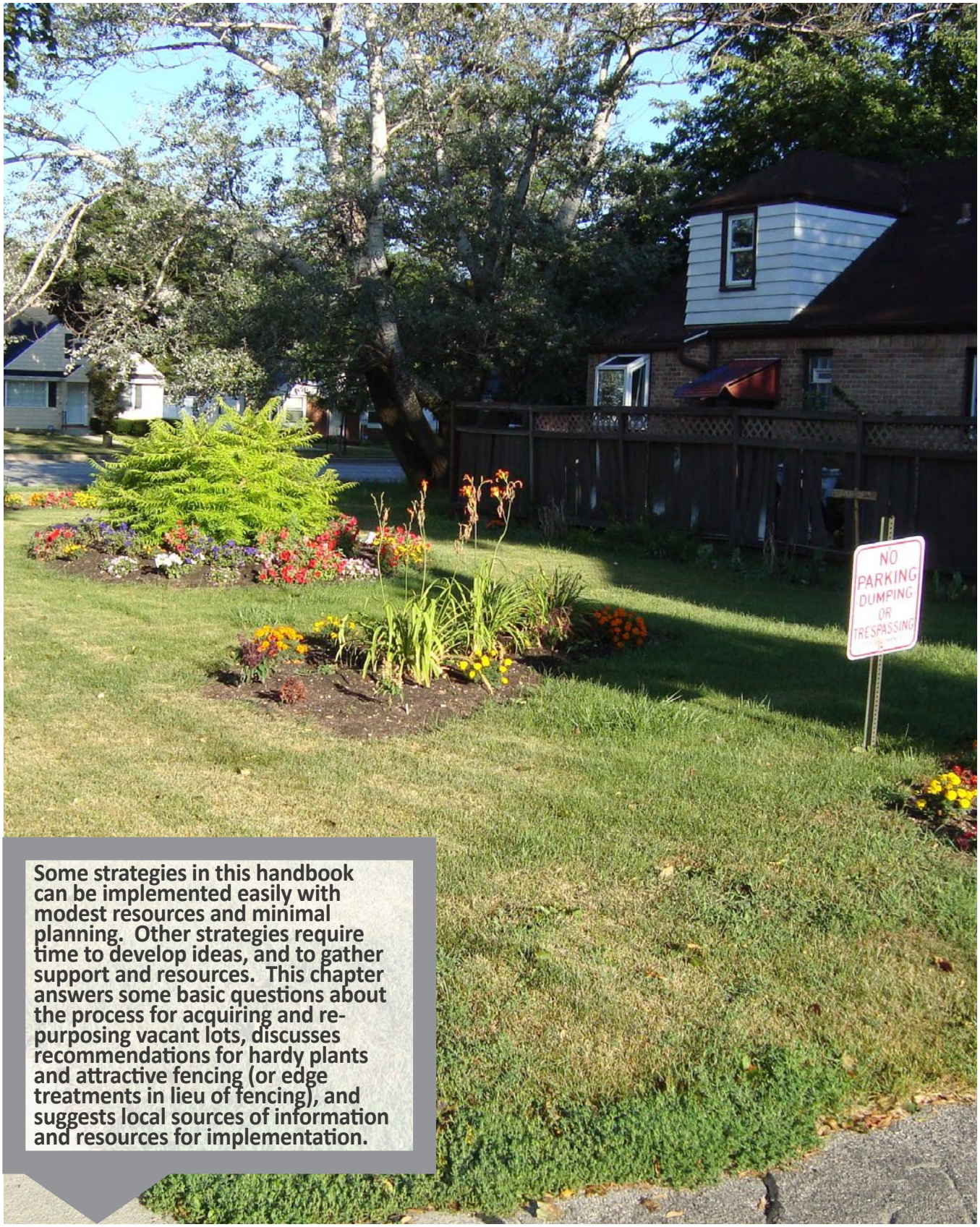
victorygardenintitiative.org

414-431-0888

Victory Garden Initiative (VGI) is a grass roots nonprofit organization that empowers communities to grow healthy food. The organization offers gardening programs for people of all ages, trains leaders to engage others in growing their own food, and organizes exciting city-wide events that change the landscape of the "food desert" into a healthy foods community. VGI manages Concordia Gardens, a community garden situated on 1.5 acres of land in the Harambee neighborhood.

CHAPTER 2

# Getting Started




**Some strategies in this handbook can be implemented easily with modest resources and minimal planning. Other strategies require time to develop ideas, and to gather support and resources. This chapter answers some basic questions about the process for acquiring and re-purposing vacant lots, discusses recommendations for hardy plants and attractive fencing (or edge treatments in lieu of fencing), and suggests local sources of information and resources for implementation.**

# Frequently Asked QUESTIONS

## Why is land vacant?

Some land is vacant because it is in a non-buildable area, such as a floodplain. Some land is temporarily vacant - for example, where a building has been demolished due to neglect or deferred maintenance. Also, as distressed properties went through extended periods of vacancy during the foreclosure crisis which began in 2008, many buildings deteriorated to a point where rehabilitation was too costly to be undertaken by current or future owners. The City has assumed ownership of many of these properties through tax foreclosure and sells those which can be rehabilitated while demolishing properties where rehabilitation is not feasible, creating "temporary" vacant lots.

## Are there restrictions on vacant lot reuse?

Before land is sold or permitted for reuse, the city wants to be sure the reuse meets the zoning code (found on the City's website under Chp. 295 at city.milwaukee.gov/ordinances) and fits the overall character of the neighborhood or commercial district. People interested in vacant land are encouraged to use the ideas in this handbook, and adapt them to fit in with the local context.

## Who maintains vacant lots?

The City of Milwaukee Department of Public Works (DPW) manages the upkeep of city-owned vacant land. Contractors mow the lawn, clear snow from the sidewalks, and remove litter and debris on a regular basis. If you either purchase the lot or use the lot through a permit agreement with the city, it then becomes your responsibility to maintain the lot by mowing, weeding, and removing snow and litter.

## Will most vacant lot reuse strategies be small scale?

Yes. The majority of reuse strategies in Milwaukee will be small scale. Cities that are implementing large scale strategies typically have a massive inventory of vacant land (e.g. Philadelphia's "Front Door" program, "Reimagining Cleveland"). Milwaukee does not have the quantity of vacant land that creates an immediate need for large scale projects, although the city does undertake some large scale projects like subdivisions or community gardens (requiring land assembly).

## How are city-owned vacant lots identified?

The City of Milwaukee Department of City Development (DCD) lists vacant lots that are for lease, permit, or sale on the DCD website: city.milwaukee.gov/CityRealEstate.htm

People can also identify vacant city-owned lots in their neighborhoods by the standard City of Milwaukee posted sign that currently reads: No Parking. No Trespassing. No Dumping.

Those interested in permitting or purchasing city-owned lots can contact the city's Real Estate section to ask whether a specific lot is for sale and if so, propose a reuse.

## What is lot stabilization?

After a building is demolished, the City performs basic lot stabilization prior to reuse or sale:

- Debris and litter are removed.
- Soil is removed or capped if contaminated.
- Basement foundation is removed.
- Lot is re-graded.
- Grass seed is planted.
- Permanent features such as fencing and trees may be installed.
- City sign is installed.

## Frequently Asked QUESTIONS

### What is the best way to go about developing a reuse strategy?

Look at examples from around the city and elsewhere. Ask for input from community experts. Get help from architects, landscape architects, or garden designers. Here are a few tips when developing your individual strategy:

- Every lot is different. Consider which activities fit the space you have. Consider the surrounding area and external factors such as proximity to houses and buildings, lighting, etc.
- Identify people willing to help you with your project.
- Contact Groundwork Milwaukee (part of Milwaukee Urban Gardens) to assist with first steps.
- Draft or sketch your re-use strategy, and ask someone with knowledge or expertise to review it.
- Identify costs and funding sources to implement your strategy.
- Be creative when gathering resources. Businesses and organizations may donate material and manpower to a worthy cause.
- Once your project is approved and underway, evaluate it on a regular basis to ensure that it's working for the people who use it, the neighbors who live next to it, and that it accomplishes what it set out to do.

### Should I obtain a temporary use permit or purchase a vacant lot from the city?

If you plan on placing permanent structures on a vacant lot, you will need to purchase the lot from the City. If you only plan to make temporary improvements, a garden for example, a garden permit (temporary use permit) is all you need. In some instances, the City holds vacant lots for "highest and best use" but still makes them available for gardens or limited use- on a permit-only basis.

### What are ongoing maintenance considerations?

- Grass – requires planting, weeding and mowing
- Groundcover – requires planting and weeding
- Mulch – requires installation and periodic replenishing
- Trees – require planting, mulching, possible staking, pruning, treatment to resist insects, fungus or blight
- Shrubs – require planting, mulching, pruning
- Fruit trees – require planting, possibly staking, removal of stakes, pruning, spraying, harvesting
- Invasive species -- regular removal of invasives, e.g., Buckthorn, Garlic Mustard, etc.
- Benches, outdoor furniture – must be kept in good repair (choose types least vulnerable to vandalism, install with bolts where appropriate)
- Play equipment --must be kept in good repair
- Access – to provide universal access, a ramp or re-grading may be recommended for some parcels (where public access is required)
- Water – for gardening, access to water sources must be identified
- Soil preparation – top soil must be suitable for growing, free of debris

### Who handles vacant land sale and permitting?

Department of City Development (DCD) Real Estate manages all transactions for city real estate, including the sale, lease, and permitting processes for City-owned vacant lots.

If the vacant land will be used for a community garden, Groundwork Milwaukee (GWM) is a hands-on resource for everything from start-up materials and costs, insurance, filling out paperwork for city permits, to how to plan a community garden and manage volunteers.

DCD works directly with individuals and groups on sales of vacant land for larger projects: for example, identifying vacant lots for Habitat for Humanity scattered site housing.

DCD issues permits and approvals for limited and special uses, e.g., a resident living next to a vacant lot can receive a permit for limited use of the land. These types of permits are renewed based on specific performance criteria.

# Borders, Fences, and Edge TREATMENTS

Borders can both define and add interest to vacant lots. A border can be a fence, a combination of fence and landscaping, a hedge, or an informal boundary such as a rain garden or trellis.

A fence in combination with landscaping, or a landscaped edge treatment in lieu of fencing, provides an attractive boundary for a vacant lot and visually defines it as being tended, cared for, or in use. A fence can also prevent unauthorized access to the lot.

Fencing should be relatively open and "friendly" and should not be any of the following: chain link; concrete masonry unit (CMU); high-security (for example, any fence type with barbed wire, etc.). Fencing should generally be 3-4 feet in height (arched opening or trellis may be higher) and typically of a residential or low-security fencing type, such as: decorative wood; wood or metal picket; wood post and metal (wire mesh); metal post and metal (wire mesh); bollard (or post) and chain.

Temporary or easily removable fencing is recommended for leased lots or lots that have temporary city permits for use as gardens or green space. Home garden centers have temporary fences available for purchase.

An edge treatment may be used in lieu of fencing to provide an attractive natural boundary, such as hedges, rain gardens, clusters of shrubs, trees and groundcover. Other attractive alternatives to fencing (knock-down roses, garden edge pavers, trellises, and low borders for planting beds) may be a desirable approach to providing a border or boundary.

### Option One: Wood or Metal Post and Fabric Fence, or Wood or Metal Picket Fence

Use a combination wood/metal fence - either a wood or metal post and fabric (wire grid), or wood or metal picket fence. Place fence next to clusters or groupings of shrubs, trees, grasses, groundcover or flowers. You will need a permit to install a permanent fence.

### Option Two: Trellis Fence

Create a trellis fence allowing vines to grow over or through a wood or metal post and fabric (wire grid) fence. Allow vines to weave through the fence. Climbing roses may be used as an alternative.

### Option Three: Hedge or "Living Fence"

Employ a hedge as a border or fence substitute (i.e., a "living fence" or a green fence).

### Option Four: Rain garden or Bioswale

Use a rain garden or bioswale as an edge treatment in lieu of a traditional fence.

# Plant RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally, landscape professionals recommend native and other hardy low maintenance species for both private and public areas such as street rights-of-way, parks, civic areas and boulevards. The environmental benefits of using native plants are: more cost-effective and attractive landscaping for neighborhoods and commercial districts; a natural way to reduce the urban "heat island"; better contained stormwater runoff; and increased tree canopy.

Here are some flowers, trees, shrubs, vines and grasses that are will work for any reuse strategy. Varieties listed are "favorites" or commonly used species. There are also many less commonly used species (too lengthy to list) that can be just as successful and attractive.

**Perennials**
- Butterfly Bush
- Daylilies
- Sedum
- Coreopsis
- Liatris
- Caryopteris
- Salvia
- Sage
- Coneflower
- Catmint
- Coralbells
- Hostas
- Cosmos
- Foxglove
- Butterfly Weed
- Joe Pye Weed
- Black-eyed Susan
- Asters

**Hedges**
- Spirea
- Burning Bush
- Privet
- Barberry
- Alpine Currant
- Hedge Cotoneaster
- American Cranberrybush
- Cedar
- Serviceberry
- Weigela

**Groundcover**
- Pachysandra
- Vinca (major and minor)
- English Ivy
- Clover
- Euonymous

**Ornamental Grasses**
- Panicum Grass
- Calamagrostis Grass
- Pennisetum Grass
- Miscanthus Grass
- Big Bluestem Grass
- Fountain Grass
- Blue Fescue
- Blue Oat Grass
- Maidengrass
- Ravennagrass
- Hairgrass
- Purple Moor Grass
- Cordgrass
- Canada Rye Grass

**Vines**
- Trumpet Vine
- Honeysuckle
- Hardy Kiwi
- Vinca Illumination
- Virginia Creeper

# Plant RECOMMENDATIONS

## Small Woody Shrubs

- Tigers Eye Sumac
- Annabelle Hydrangea
- Forsythia
- Gro Low Sumac
- Dwarf Korean Lilacs
- Shrub roses
- Dwarf Bush Honeysuckle
- Limelight Hydrangea
- Potentilla

## Evergreen Shrubs

- Green Velvet Boxwood
- Dwarf Mugho Pine
- Sea Green Juniper
- Mint Julep Juniper
- Calgary Carpet Juniper
- Dwarf Serbian Spruce
- Dwarf Globe Blue Spruce
- Dwarf Globe Arborvitae
- Dwarf Spreading Yews
- Green Mountain Boxwood

## Woody Shrubs

- Purple Leaf Sandcherry
- Diablo Ninebark
- Black Lace Elderberry
- Common Lilacs
- Potentilla
- Arrowwood Viburnums
- Royal Purple Smokebush
- Red Twig Dogwoods
- Witchhazel

## Evergreen Trees

- Black Hills Spruce
- Norway Spruce
- Techny Arborvitae
- American Dark Green Arborvitae
- Eastern Red Cedar
- Colorado Green Spruce
- Austrian Pine
- Scots Pine
- Colorado Blue Spruce

## Ornamental Trees

- Ivory Silk Japanese Tree Lilac
- Cleveland Select Ornamental Pear
- Thornless Cockspur Hawthorn
- Amur Chokecherry
- Autumn Brilliant Serviceberry
- River Birch
- Crabapple (multiple varieties)
- Canada Red Common Chokecherry
- Pacific Sunset Maple
- Washington Hawthorn

## Shade Trees

- Autumn Blaze Maple
- Shademaster Honeylocust
- Common Hackberry
- Swamp White Oak
- English Oak

- Ginkgo (male only)
- Common Baldcypress
- Regal Elm
- New Horizon Elm
- Accolade Elm
- Redmond Linden
- Purple Robe Black locust

**The following are plants that have proven to be particularly suited for use in rain gardens:**

## Perennials for Rain gardens

- Blue Lobelia
- Boneset
- Cardinal Flower
- Creeping Willow
- Dwarf Arctic Willow
- False Aster
- Hostas
- Ironweed
- Lavender Hyssop
- Meadow Rue
- New England Aster
- Nodding Pink Onion
- Ohio Goldenrod
- Orange Coneflower
- Prairie Blazing Star
- Purple Joe Pye Weed
- Red Milkweed
- Salvia
- Sky-blue Aster
- Siberian Iris
- Silky Aster
- Spotted Joe Pye Weed
- Sweet Black-eyed Susan
- Shooting Star
- Turtlehead
- Wild Iris

## Grasses and Sedges for Rain gardens

- Brown Fox Sedge
- Fox Sedge
- Indian Grass
- Porcupine Sedge
- Prairie Dropseed
- Switch Grass

## Shrubs for Rain gardens

- Glossy Black Chokeberry
- Northern Lights Azalea
- Red-osier dogwood
- Red Maple
- River Birch
- Swamp White Oak

## Getting Started RESOURCES

**Groundwork Milwaukee**
groundworkMKE.org
414-763-9947
Groundwork Milwaukee assists individuals and community groups in negotiating leases with the City of Milwaukee

**City of Milwaukee Department of City Development Real Estate**
milwaukee.gov/DCD
414-286-5739
The Department of City Development approves the permitting, lease and sale of city-owned land.

**City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services Development Center**
milwaukee.gov/DNS
414-286-8211
The Department of Neighborhood Services issues permits for vacant lot reuse.

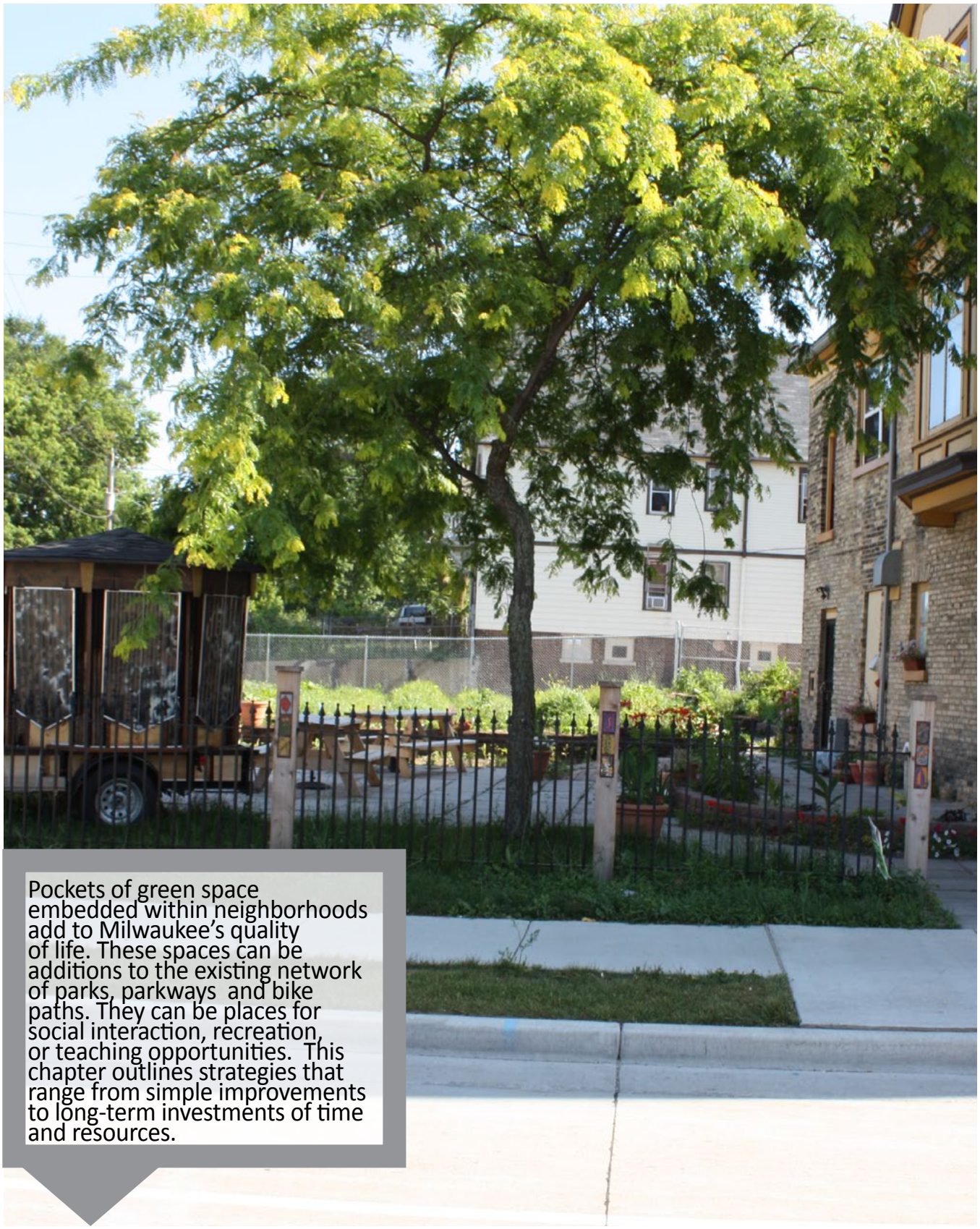
**City of Milwaukee Department of Public Works (Forestry)**
sbaran@milwaukee.gov
414-286-3531
The Department of Public Works (Forestry) maintains city-owned vacant land as well as the city's showcase beds and medians.

**Graham-Martin Foundation**
Grahammartin.org
(608) 226-2553
The Graham-Martin Foundation is dedicated to the preservation and restoration of natural ecosystems and the promotion of environmental education.

**Milwaukee Zoning Code (Chp. 295 in Code of Ordinances)**
milwaukee.gov/tableofcontents
414-286-CITY (2489)

CHAPTER 3

# Neighborhood Amenities and Green Space



Pockets of green space embedded within neighborhoods add to Milwaukee's quality of life. These spaces can be additions to the existing network of parks, parkways and bike paths. They can be places for social interaction, recreation, or teaching opportunities. This chapter outlines strategies that range from simple improvements to long-term investments of time and resources.

## Sideyard Expansions and PROPERTY IMPROVEMENTS

A well-done sideyard expansion or property improvement can enhance the beauty of a neighborhood. An mini-park next to a school, church or community organization can provide a recreational or gathering area with a shelter, benches, performance or play space.

The simplest way for the City to return a vacant lot to productive use is to sell it to the owner of the adjacent property for a sideyard expansion.

- Sale of city-owned vacant land is always contingent upon the purchaser's presenting a reasonable and appropriate proposal for use, financial ability to complete the project, and "good standing" with the city (lack of tax delinquency, code violations, etc.)
- The new owner of the vacant lot assumes responsibility for maintenance and upkeep--mowing, weeding, debris and litter removal, sidewalk snow removal--as well as monitoring the use of the property.
- A vacant lot sale can be split in the event that neighbors on either side of the property have an interest in acquiring it.
- Note: In cases where the City is holding property for "highest and best use" (e.g., industrial land banking, commercial district development, or residential infill), the property may be made available for green space or community gardens on an interim use or permit-only basis.

Residential sideyard expansion typically allows for a larger garden, deck or lawn, and can increase the value of the home and enjoyment of the owner. Commercial sideyard expansion typically allows for a pocket park, outdoor cafe or courtyard. The adjacent lot can expand or add to the current use of the building, for example, an outdoor patio that expands restaurant seating.

Adjacent property owners interested in using vacant lots on a private temporary basis may take out a garden permit through Department of City Development Real Estate. The homeowner with a permit for private use of city-owned land takes on the responsibility for regular maintenance and monitoring of the property.

## Neighborhood Pathways AND GATEWAYS

Neighborhood pathways can provide a pedestrian link between blocks, streets and individual properties. The pathway can be a "shortcut" one parcel long or can connect multiple parcels. Pathways can become a park-like amenity with the addition of benches, trees and plants.

Informal neighborhood pathways already exist in Milwaukee. With assistance from Groundwork Milwaukee, community groups can make them a neighborhood asset by adding a walking surface (mulch, pavers, or crushed granite) and gardens defining the pathway.

Installing a neighborhood gateway is another good way to enhance and identify a neighborhood. Gateways can be planter beds, art objects, or structures that welcome people to the neighborhood. Highly visible vacant lots, strategically located at entry points, are ideal. If the gateway is successful, it can become a long-term feature of the neighborhood. Local architects and artists can assist neighborhoods interested in establishing a gateway.

## Food Forests and EDIBLE PARKS

An edible park (sometimes called a food forest) is a public space with food-producing perennials, where anyone can enjoy the "fruits" of the park. For example, Seattle's Beacon Food Forest has apples, pears, plums, blueberries and more.

This is a long-term strategy that requires a dedicated steward of the land to manage the park. A partnership also needs to be established with an organization that can harvest the excess food and distribute it to people in need.

Edible parks and food forests do not need expansive stretches of land and can be incorporated into other vacant lot reuse strategies. For example, a pocket park becomes an edible park (or food forest) if the managing group decides to plant peach trees and raspberry bushes in lieu of non-food bearing plants.

## Outdoor CLASSROOMS

Using vacant lots for outdoor classrooms incorporates multiple reuse strategies, from urban agriculture to various environmental strategies. Depending on the theme or focus, outdoor classrooms can promote creativity, physical activity, as well as nutritional and environmental awareness.

In 2010, The Center For Resilient Cities (with help from partners), transformed a sterile asphalt parking lot into a lively Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom™ at Brown Street Academy. MPS's Garfield School used a butterfly/ hummingbird garden to teach children about adaptations between plants, animals, and insects.

Though schools have an advantage in taking on this kind of project (e.g., science teachers who can absorb the classroom into the school curriculum), other groups can try this strategy with success. With some creative planning and financial support, outdoor classrooms on vacant lots can be a reality for all groups, levels of education and various disciplines.

## Neighborhood Amenities and Green Space RESOURCES

**The Center for Resilient Cities**

resilientcities.org

(414) 289-7799

The Center for Resilient Cities is a nonprofit organization that teaches sustainable community development practices.

**Milwaukee County UW Extension**

9501 W. Watertown Plank Road, Building A

414-256-4661

The UW Extension offers training and hands-on practical advice for gardeners at all levels.

**Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation**

City.milwaukee.gov/NIDC

414-286-5608

NIDC can provide matching grants for resident-driven projects that will transform vacant lots into neighborhood assets.

CHAPTER 4

# Urban Agriculture & Community Gardens

Growing food on vacant lots, and teaching people how to manage gardens, improves access to fresh food, beautifies neighborhoods and builds stronger communities. From small-scale community gardens to Will Allen's internationally renowned Growing Power movement, Milwaukee is proud to be involved in urban agriculture initiatives.

# Educational OPPORTUNITIES

The following organizations in Milwaukee offer classes, technical assistance and hands-on training in urban agriculture, community gardens, and other land stewardship practices.

**Urban Ecology Center**
Urbanecologycenter.org
1500 E. Park Place; 414-964-8505
1859 N. 40th St.; 414-344-5460
3700 W. Pierce St.; 414-431-2940

The Urban Ecology Center began when a community of concerned citizens organized to "take back" a neglected neighborhood park and make it a platform for outdoor recreation, nature study, and environmental programs geared toward restoring environmental awareness to children (and adults) who hadn't had that exposure at home or in school. Twenty years later, UEC operates in three locations in the city, has a loyal following, and offers a number of volunteer and educational opportunities.

Classes on gardening, native plants and animals, healthy food preparation and more are available for all ages and for both members and non-members.

**Victory Garden Initiative**
Victorygardeninitiative.org
414-431-0888

Victory Garden Initiative is a grass roots nonprofit organization that empowers communities to grow food. The organization offers classes on edible gardening and a permaculture design certification course. Mobile gardening classes are also available, upon request, where the organization teaches a class to a group of friends, or a family, community or religious group.

**Milwaukee Recreation Department**
Milwaukeerecreation.net
414-475-8811

The Milwaukee Recreation Department, a division of the Milwaukee Public Schools, has year-round gardening classes for people of all ages. Milwaukee residents and non-residents can for a nominal fee learn the basics of gardening, how to preserve a harvest through the winter and more. Classes are held throughout the city.

**Groundwork Milwaukee (GWM)**
groundworkMKE.org
414-763-9947

GWM partners with the community to transform vacant land (often blighted or derelict) into community assets, such as Grow and Play lots or community gardens. Through its Milwaukee Urban Gardens (MUG) affiliation, assistance is available to start and maintain community gardens. Classes include "How to Start a Community Garden," "Grow Your Own Groceries," and canning/food preservation classes.

**Milwaukee County UW Extension**
9501 W. Watertown Plank Road,
Building A
414-256-4661

In addition to the Horticulture Help Line, the Milwaukee County UW Extension offers training in a range of topics, such as high yield micro farming, beekeeping, and Master Gardener classes for anyone interested in nurturing plants and sharing that knowledge with others. Level 1 training is held September to December each year.

## Community GARDENS

Milwaukee already has a number of community gardens, large and small, for profit and not-for-profit throughout the city. Some are sponsored by community-based organizations or faith-based groups. Some are friends and family who have transformed a vacant lot into a place to grow tomatoes, zucchini, and cucumbers; or a place to host a barbecue with neighbors.

**What makes a good garden?**

Gardens should have maximum exposure to the sun, good soil and drainage and access to a water supply. Most importantly, a successful community garden is managed by people who are willing to commit time and resources. Ideally, gardens should be close to where the gardeners live. But above all, successful gardens need to be active places where people can congregate and that the neighborhood can support.

**What if I need help getting started?**

Groundwork Milwaukee regularly assists people interested in creating gardens by helping with start-up tasks, navigating the garden permit process with the city, organizing volunteers and finding resources.

**Are all city-owned vacant lots for sale as gardens?**

No, some lots are held for future development. Some lots are available for gardens on a temporary permit-only basis. In locations where development is unlikely, the City will sell vacant lots for gardening or similar uses to individuals or community groups with proven records of good land stewardship.

## Hoop HOUSES

Hoop houses are temporary green houses that extend the growing season and protect gardens from animals and extreme weather. With hoop houses, juicy tomatoes, home grown vegetables, and delicate produce that normally cannot withstand Milwaukee's weather extremes, can be enjoyed late into the Fall.

The size of a hoop house can vary with land available. They can be small enough to cover an individual planter box or big enough to protect multiple planting beds. Full-sized hoop houses such as those at All Peoples Church (N. 2nd St. and Clarke St.) will require special approval from the Milwaukee Department of City Development.

## Orchards and VINEYARDS

With some basic knowledge about growing fruit (peaches, apples, cherries, etc.) and a long-term commitment, dedicated gardeners can manage orchards and vineyards in the city.

**What is a long-term commitment?**

Generally, this means owning the land (as opposed to leasing) and and being willing to take 10-15 years or more to develop the orchard or vineyard to its full potential. Also, orchards produce a lot of fruit depending on how many trees are planted that require harvesting. Anyone interested in this strategy should develop a plan for harvesting that meets the need for additional manpower.

Groundwork Milwaukee can assist community groups interested in orchards and vineyards. The City will consider selling vacant lots to individuals or community groups with proven track records of good land stewardship.

## Other OPTIONS

If you have an idea that is not included here, it may be because it is not permitted by zoning, or it does not fit most of the neighborhoods where the City's vacant lots are located. For example, while non-intensive urban agriculture (chickens, bees) may be found in traditional neighborhoods, intensive urban agriculture (small-scale urban farming) is typically permitted by zoning in areas away from traditional neighborhoods.

For follow-up questions on options not included in this handbook, please consult the city's zoning ordinance or contact the Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services for questions about a specific use in a specific location.

## Seasonal Markets

With a little organization, a group of growers, artists and craftsmen can turn a dormant vacant lot into a thriving market where neighborhood residents and visitors can purchase locally grown food, arts and crafts. Seasonal markets, such as Riverwest's Garden Market at Locust and Bremen, provide homegrown produce, entertainment, a place for neighbors to socialize, and an additional source of revenue for local merchants. Vendors (food trucks, carts or stands) can also be a welcome addition to the mix.

Seasonal markets are best located in neighborhood shopping districts so they are easily accessible to customers and vendors. Other considerations for seasonal markets are customer parking, proximity to other markets and vendor accommodation.

Markets can be temporary or permanent, but a successful market needs dedicated management to attract vendors and customers (building a loyal customer base over time), organize entertainment, and to work with the City of Milwaukee on obtaining the necessary permits. Call the Milwaukee Department of City Development (Real Estate) for more information on setting up a seasonal market.

## Urban Agriculture and Community Garden RESOURCES

**Groundwork Milwaukee**

groundworkMKE.org

414-763-9947

Groundwork Milwaukee assists individuals and community groups in negotiating leases with the City of Milwaukee.

**City of Milwaukee Department of City Development**

milwaukee.gov/DCD

414-286-5739

The Department of City Development issues permits, and approves sale and lease of city-owned property.

**City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services**

http://city.milwaukee.gov/DNS

414-286-8211

CHAPTER 5

# Active Multi-Use Spaces

With a modest capital investment, vacant land can be transformed into an active community asset that Milwaukee residents can enjoy for years to come. For example, a playground might need surfacing and equipment. A community garden might benefit from a vegetable cooling shed and a place to store equipment. A park can be improved by benches, planters, walkways, pavers, lighting and public art. This chapter suggests some long-term investments and outlines ideas for more intensive vacant lot reuse.

## Active PARK

An active park is a park that requires some capital investment for features such as swing sets, picnic tables and sandboxes. Investment could be low-range (swingset, sandbox, etc.) or high-range (playscape, climbing structure with rubberized turf, etc.).

An active park could be planned by the neighborhood in cooperation with the city, the county, individuals or groups. These groups could purchase vacant land to develop the park, and would then be responsible for maintaining and monitoring use of the space.

Active parks can be planned for a range of activities and user groups. They can be low-key spaces for neighbors—young and old—to socialize. They can accommodate different interests by providing space for organized leagues or groups who skateboard, play soccer, bocce ball, do tai chi, play chess, etc.

Anyone interested in using vacant land for active parks should consult a landscape architect in order to design a space that is safe and focuses on the needs of the neighborhood and the user groups.

## Small PLAYGROUNDS

A small playground is a neighborhood-oriented play area or "playscape" for young children located within a neighborhood park or residential area, ideally open to the public, visible and accessible from surrounding streets. (Not all small playgrounds are open to the public. Churches, schools and day cares often limit public access.)

The city and county maintain many public "tot lots" located in neighborhoods, commercial districts, and parks. Typically, they are designed so that children with disabilities have easier access to, and use of the play equipment, creating greater opportunity for interaction with other children.

Some neighborhood play areas have a dual purpose as a gathering space where adults can socialize and watch children play at the same time. Seating and sightlines are important features in the design of these spaces. Typically play structures are simple and imaginative, for example, a boat that children can sit in, a maze they can run through, or a cluster of simple climbing structures.

Groups or individuals interested in developing a vacant lot into a small "playscape" or neighborhood-oriented playground should discuss their ideas with the Department of Public Works, the Department of City Development, if possible, a landscape architect who has expertise in playground design, and in some cases, the Alderperson for the district.

## Public Art and OUTDOOR GALLERIES

The reuse of a vacant lot for public performance, sculpture, or interactive public art is a great way to activate a neglected, under-appreciated or under-used green space. As with other vacant lot reuse strategies, this strategy needs to fit the surrounding context. It generally works best in a high-traffic, pedestrian-friendly area, such as a neighborhood shopping district or farmers market and is often coupled with a community garden or pocket park.

In parks or park-like settings, performance space can range from a low-key amphitheater on a grassy slope, to a high-tech band shell. Public art on vacant lots in commercial districts can range from temporary sculpture to wall murals. More formal settings generally call for a sculpture garden, outdoor gallery or art walk. For example, the Peck Pavilion and the Chestnut Grove fit in well with the more formal setting of Milwaukee's Performing Art Center.

Please consult Milwaukee's zoning ordinance when developing performance, entertainment-related or public art strategies for vacant lots.

## Grow and PLAY LOT

Image Credit: Benny Sieu, JSOnline

A grow and play lot is an active space that combines multiple activities, such as a gathering space for neighbors, a play area and a community garden, which can also be an opportunity for teaching young people how to grow vegetables and flowers.

Grow and play lots can either be managed by community groups or residents in the neighborhood, or both. For example, the Harambee Cluster Two Play and Grow lot at 3347 N. 3rd Street, a finalist for a 2012 MANDI (Milwaukee Awards for Neighborhood Development Innovation), is operated by the Cluster Two Neighborhood Association working in cooperation with Groundwork Milwaukee.

## Active Multi-use Spaces RESOURCES

**Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation**

City.milwaukee.gov/NIDC

414-286-5608

**Department of City Development Real Estate**

http://city.milwaukee.gov/CityRealEstate.htm

Phone: 286-5762

CHAPTER 6

# Environmental Strategies

The environmental strategies covered in this chapter can all be used in combination with other reuse strategies. For example, a pocket park can incorporate a rain garden. A new house addition can be set off by a newly planted tree and native garden. A community garden can have a compost bin on-site. Or a parking area can be surfaced with pervious pavers.

By coupling the tried-and-true strategies mentioned here with creative approaches to vacant lot reuse, we can strengthen the urban ecosystem in Milwaukee.

## Native GARDENS

Diverse, native, hardy and regionally adapted plants are encouraged for any reuse strategy for vacant lots. Native plants help reduce stormwater runoff and can be a beautiful addition to a community garden, pocket park or neighborhood. Once roots are established, native plants require minimal maintenance.

Some native plants can actually reduce contamination in soils, sludges, sediments, surface water and ground water. Milwaukee's Redevelopment Authority has used phytoremediation --the use of plants to stabilize and reduce contamination—in a demonstration project on E. Nash St. to clean up a contaminated brownfield site (two vacant lots formerly owned by an electroplating company). Using funding from The Environmental Protection Agency, contaminated soils were excavated and removed. Then poplar trees were planted to cleanse and improve groundwater.

## Tree CANOPY

Trees are important components of any vacant lot reuse strategy, whether it is a simple sideyard expansion or a more ambitious community garden or outdoor classroom. Please refer to Chapter Two for a partial list of trees recommended for vacant lots.

Milwaukee is home to over 200,000 trees, but we still need more! A healthy and robust tree canopy reduces the "urban heat island" effect, reduces stormwater runoff and helps filter carbon emissions from the air. In addition to being environmentally friendly, trees make neighborhoods, commercial districts, streets and parking lots more welcoming and attractive.

Because of these benefits, the City has the goal of increasing its tree canopy 40% by 2035. Between 1996 and 2008, the city's tree canopy grew from 16-22% primarily through the efforts of the Department of Public Works Forestry Division.

## BioSWALES

Vacant lots present an opportunity to use bioswales to contain runoff, thus cleansing and reducing rainwater that overcharges the sewer system, causing overflows. This strategy can be combined with other vacant lot reuse, provided there is sufficient land available.

Bioswales are troughs or shallow channels that are filled with plants that slow down and cleanse stormwater runoff from roads and nearby developments. This process prevents dirt, oil and other contaminants from washing into nearby drainage ditches, storm sewers, streams, and eventually larger bodies of water.

Bioswales can be attractive landscape features if planted with vegetation similar to a rain garden. They can be installed as meandering or straight channels along transportation corridors or parking lots. They can end in a rain garden, depending on the land available. However, they are all designed to maximize the time stormwater runoff spends in the swale.

## Rainwater CAPTURE

Rainwater capture and storage (harvesting) is a smart low-cost method for watering gardens and lawns that has the added benefit of relieving pressure on combined sewers. Barrels connected to downspouts from houses are the most common way to collect rainwater. However, people with larger gardens and yards can use cisterns that hold more water than barrels. Rainwater capture is a strategy that could be combined with other vacant lot reuses such as community gardens and sideyard expansions.

MMSD's Rain Barrel program makes barrels available at local retailers in the Milwaukee area for a minimal cost. For more information, go to www.mmsd.com.

## Composting

Compost produced from yard materials and food scraps is a form of recycling that saves gardeners money, is environmentally friendly and diverts yard materials from Wisconsin landfills into productive reuse.

- Compost is a high quality soil "amendment" or supplement.
- Compost replenishes vital organic matter, microorganisms and nutrients.
- Compost is used widely in horticulture and agriculture.
- Compost is beneficial as a soil conditioner, fertilizer and natural pesticide.

Composting on vacant lots can be done in combination with many of the reuse strategies outlined in this handbook. Most community gardens in Milwaukee already have compost bins available for use.

Those interested in learning more about the benefits of composting should visit the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources website. There are also a few restrictions to keep in mind. For example, only certain food and yard waste can be composted, and only what is produced on-site. There are also specific rules for large-scale composting that need to be followed in Milwaukee.

# Rain GARDENS

A rain garden is a depressed or lowered area filled with deeply rooted plants that collect, store and filter stormwater runoff, allowing it to be slowly absorbed by the soil. Rain gardens typically cost less to maintain because native plants require only rain water once roots are established. Plantings can vary but all thrive in wet conditions and will hold and filter water, which reduces local storm surge and flooding, relieving pressure on combined sewers.

Many Milwukee residents have disconnected their downspouts from the sewer system to divert stormwater to rain gardens. Guidelines need to be followed when creating rain gardens that are directly connected to downspouts. Gardens need to be large enough to accommodate the rain water and placed far enough away from structures so excess water does not damage foundations.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has a how-to manual for homeowners interested in creating rain gardens. Groundwork Milwaukee can assist you in creating rain gardens on vacant lots. Also, you can apply to the MMSD Rain Gardens Project to receive plants at a reduced price. Any homeowner, local non-profit group, or business owner can apply for this grant. For more information about rain gardens, go to: www.h2ocapture.com.

## Porous PAVING

Combined sanitary and storm sewers in Milwaukee and Shorewood poured a total of more than 1.1 billion gallons of untreated wastewater into local rivers and Lake Michigan during two overflows in 2013. In addition to sewer overflows, homes and businesses in Milwaukee's near suburbs of Shorewood, Whitefish Bay and Wauwatosa had messy sewer backups into basements. A major contributor to these overflows are the hundreds of square miles of paved (impervious) streets, alleys and "sea of asphalt" parking lots that during heavy rainfall, cause flooding and send stormwater runoff directly into combined sewers.

Porous paving is one technique for capturing rainwater and allowing it to slowly filter or percolate through the paving into the ground, which reduces stress on sewer systems during heavy rains. Porous paving not only reduces the risk of basement backups and sewer overflows; its slow filtration can improve water quality and replenish groundwater. Some paving systems even store water for reuse. If paving is needed to support new construction, a pocket park or community garden, porous paving is a good environmental strategy to pursue.

The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District's goal is to have no sewer overflows by 2035. MMSD's Green Infrastructure (GI) Partnership Program is currently looking for partner organizations that will implement and help MMSD evaluate natural stormwater management practices, such as green roofs, rain gardens, rain barrels and porous pavement. The program offers up to 50 percent cost reimbursement for eligible GI expenses.

## Environmental Strategies RESOURCES

### Watershed Forestry Guide

forestsforwatersheds.org/

### Greening Milwaukee

www.greeningmilwaukee.org

Greening Milwaukee is a non-profit organization conceived by the Mayor's Beautification Committee and established in 1996 by Preston D. Cole, City Forester, to promote greening activities that improve the urban environment, educate and train citizens, and increase community wealth.

### Rain Gardens: A How-To Manual For Homeowners

http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/Stormwater/documents/RgManual.pdf

### Composting

http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/Recycling/Compost.html

### GI Partnership Project

http://h2ocapture.com/learn/funding-programs/gi-partnership-project

### Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation

City.milwaukee.gov/NIDC

414-286-5608

CHAPTER 3

# Residential and Commercial Development

Vacant lots are by definition gaps in development. Where the market is viable, Milwaukee's vacant lots present a good opportunity for new residential and commercial development that fills in the gaps and puts property back on the tax rolls (a priority for the city). This chapter outlines the process of purchasing vacant land for development.

## Residential DEVELOPMENT

Source: AIA Milwaukee

Vacant lots if not properly maintained and monitored, disrupt the life and activity of neighborhoods. Building new houses on these lots is a way to restore life and activity, support the tax base and strengthen the neighborhood. The City of Milwaukee's website outlines a step-by-step process for purchasing city-owned vacant lots for new construction. Preference is given to buyers willing to build single-family owner-occupied homes because they represent a greater long-term investment in the neighborhood.

The City offers original house plans for free when a vacant lot is purchased for single-family home construction. These plans:

- Represent high quality design.
- Meet City building standards and can be fast-tracked for permitting.
- Complement the existing architecture of Milwaukee's neighborhoods.
- Have been designed with energy efficiency, sustainability and future expansion in mind.

The City also has a "Preservation Portfolio" of building plans for residents interested in building a reproduction home based on classic homes from Milwaukee's past.

Plans with accessibility variations are also available to accommodate residents and visitors with disabilities and allow them to age with dignity in their homes.

The City regularly partners with developers and non-profit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and WHEDA to create large-scale or scattered-site residential development in neighborhoods where multiple vacant lots are available.

## Small STRUCTURES

Building small structures on vacant lots can complement and enhance other reuse strategies. For example, a greenhouse can extend the growing season for a community garden. Rain barrels can be attached to a tool shed to collect rain water. A new garage with an upper level apartment can add an additional dwelling unit plus parking to an existing residence.

Garden sheds, tool sheds, workshops, garages and greenhouses, or small structures such as gazebos or trellised patios, can be good additions to sideyards or gardens.

Accessory buildings and dwelling units usually require a building permit, and may, depending on the use, require special approval from the City. Typically, these are an expansion of an existing principal building or use. Check with the DNS Permit Center to find out which permits are neded.

## Commercial DEVELOPMENT

The City has a limited number of vacant lots along its commercial corridors. A good way to locate city-owned lots for commercial development is to use Map Milwaukee, the City's online resource for geographic information and data. Typically, the City prefers to sell its vacant lots for development as "infill" buildings that fill in gaps on a commercial corridor, preferably creating a stronger business mix. After that, priority may be given to any strategy that will support the existing mix of businesses, for example, a landscaped patio that will expand the seating area for a restaurant.

## Development RESOURCES

**Map Milwaukee**
http://gis.milwaukee.gov/website/mm1/viewer.htm

**Department of City Development Real Estate**
http://city.milwaukee.gov/CityRealEstate.htm

Phone: 286-5762

**City of Milwaukee Department of Neighborhood Services (Permit Center)**
http://city.milwaukee.gov/DNS

414-286-8211

**Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation**

City.milwaukee.gov/NIDC

414-286-5608