



CITY FOCUS

Seattle

Growing Food, Cultivating Communities



Seattle's Beacon Hill Food Forest.

Access to food intersects with a complex range of other issues faced by urban centres worldwide. Adopting a multi-faceted food strategy, the city of Seattle is drawing together partners from across government, businesses and the community to nurture an urban food system that is secure, sustainable and accessible to all.

Not everyone living in a city enjoys the same access to safe, nutritious food. This may be compounded with effects such as hunger, malnutrition and obesity, with dire consequences across individual lives and communities. The challenge of ensuring equitable and secure access to food is further complicated by the many issues cities face, from climate change to social inequality.

This intersection of concerns means that cities must take a multi-faceted approach to food access. One urban centre that has adopted this approach is Seattle, a North American city of more than 700,000 people. As a rapidly growing city, Seattle seeks to balance a limited land base, a burgeoning population and rising costs of living with a strong commitment to environmental sustainability and local food production.

In 2013, Seattle adopted a Food Action Plan, with the aims of securing affordable, healthy, local and culturally appropriate food for Seattle residents, removing barriers to urban food production, strengthening the local food

economy and cutting food waste. Each of the Food Action Plan's goals is supported by a range of initiatives and programmes.

“Our food security strategies span safety net programmes, access and affordability programmes, urban agriculture and community gardening programmes, as well as supporting state and federal policy that strengthens the hunger safety net,” says Sharon Lerman, a food policy manager at Seattle’s Office of Sustainability & Environment. She adds that the city’s approach allows for “multiple access points for healthy food—whether people are visiting a food bank, growing their own, or shopping at a farmers’ market”.

To realise its Food Action Plan, the city works with a diverse array of non-profit and educational organisations, businesses and other partners. For example, the Farm to Table initiative, the Good Food Program and the Fresh Bucks to Go Program provide healthy local food through educational and community institutions, as well as subsidies for fruits and vegetables.



Besides supermarket chains, Seattle also works with neighbourhood grocers and informal farmers markets to ensure multiple avenues of affordable fresh produce for the Fresh Bucks to Go programme.

Participants of the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods P Patch Community Gardening Program can also earn an income by selling their produce at markets.



Alvin Chua is a writer and researcher in the fields of sustainability, urbanism and heritage.

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“Partnerships can greatly increase our impact and allow us to do things we couldn’t do alone as a government,” explains Lerman. For the Fresh Bucks food access programme, the city partners with Seattle’s farmers’ markets, small neighbourhood grocers, a large supermarket chain, as well as many community-based organisations, to improve access to affordable food.

Lerman believes that food security is intertwined with social inclusion and environmental sustainability. “Our food system intersects with so many other issues. Our many community gardens build connections and promote inclusivity. Our urban agriculture projects intersect with wetlands and foster biodiversity,” she adds. A dedicated group of policy and programme staff from across different City departments meets regularly, bringing together a broad range of expertise to work on different aspects of food policy. This has led to collaborative initiatives, such as between Solid Waste and Human Services to increase recovery of wasted food, and between Human Services and Education to increase healthy, local food served in preschools.

One of Seattle’s priorities is to make it easy for residents to grow food within the city, and to provide opportunities for residents to engage with nature and food systems. An initiative that supports this goal is the community-stewarded Seattle Department of Neighborhoods P Patch Community Gardening Program, which has more than 6,800 P-Patch gardeners producing food on urban allotments (“P-Patches”) for their families and food banks. People from disadvantaged backgrounds can earn an income by selling this produce in the city’s markets. The Program’s Beacon Food Forest, a seven-acre free food commons initiated and managed by the community, has some 200 types of edible plants, boosting the city’s biodiversity, nurturing community cooperation and providing a sustainable food source.

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“P-Patches provide so much more than food. They connect people to their neighbours, preserve cultural traditions, spark connections to nature, provide a different form of public open space and recreation, and make people feel connected with their food and the food system,” says Lerman, adding that “P-Patches are sites of learning, education, hands on exploration, and community building”.

With a growing population, competing demands for land has become a challenge for the city. Seattle remains committed to

maintaining space for urban agriculture and community use. Programmes such as the Seattle Department of Neighbourhoods P Patch Community Gardening Program, the Orchard Steward Program and the city’s urban farms help safeguard green space for urban agriculture and community use. “We think about them as an extension of our park land,” says Lerman.

The city is also encouraging its residents to be creative about where they can grow food. For instance, the Transportation office led the



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Planting in the Right of Way programme to show residents where and how they can use the planting strips in front of their homes. The Seattle Public Utilities also led a multi-agency collaboration to produce the guide Growing Food in the City, a comprehensive resource on growing food in the urban environment. The guide is now available in 19 languages.

Seattle’s local food scene and its attractive proximity to nature have long been core to the city’s identity and culture. Building on

its strengths, the city’s institutions, businesses and communities have come together to create innovative urban food production and food access programmes that address the intersections between urban concerns. Its multi-pronged strategy grows the city’s food, economic, environmental and social resilience, ensuring that Seattle’s abundance can continue to be enjoyed by all. ●

01 Urban farming programmes do not compete for land space, but provide green places for people to gather.

02 Leafy collards, broccoli and squash are grown on the roadside of this Seattle neighbourhood.