

# HAVE VACANT PROPERTIES?

## *Consider a Community Garden.*

by Amanda LeFevre, Guest Writer

Chances are your community has a few vacant lots, and chances are your community also lacks the extra capital to do much with the property. There is a relatively low-cost alternative that can breathe new life into properties, as well as alleviate community and social ills. Consider giving your vacant lot a second life through community gardening. The Kentucky Brownfield Redevelopment Program is available to assist your community with gardening projects.



### Amanda LeFevre

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**A**cross the United States, there are large numbers of vacant properties in our cities. These properties hurt local governments by reducing tax revenues and creating additional maintenance costs to address crime, fires, weeds and vermin associated with the abandoned lots.

There are also food-quality and availability issues. Sometimes, fast food and convenience foods are the cheapest and most readily available, and some communities don't have local grocery stores. While quick and easy, these foods do little for the health and well-being of our citizens.

Community gardens can be a solution. Community gardens offer a way to use vacant properties while offering residents a healthy food resource and opportunities for social engagement.

However, caution should be taken with some vacant lots, as they often have an environmental past. Before embarking upon gardening projects, you should investigate the property to determine if there are any contamination concerns. For instance, are you planning on gardening around the drip line of a building where lead contamination from paint is common? Was there a fuel oil tank on the property at one time? Finding out the history is an important step in safe community gardening.




Blackacre Community Garden, Louisville

If, through your initial investigation, concerns are raised, it may be a good idea to have the property assessed. Organizations such as the Kentucky Brownfield Redevelopment Program can provide free assessment services on properties proposed for community gardening.

If there are concerns or contamination is found, it does not mean the end of your community garden. There are methods and actions that can be taken to ensure that the food produced is safe. First, simply avoid the areas where contamination is found. As mentioned before, lead contamination may only be present around the drip line of an old building, or petroleum may only be found in the general vicinity of a former tank site. Locate growing areas away from these zones, or use raised beds with barrier systems so roots will not absorb the contamination.

Plant selection can also help reduce exposure. Certain varieties of plants absorb contaminants better than others. For instance, if there are issues at the site, green leafy vegetables, which absorb some substances easily, should be avoided, but tomatoes and other fruit-bearing crops may be a viable alternative.

Finally, avoid extra exposure to soil, especially since children may be involved in the project. Simply mulching pathways and graveling areas where people can come into contact with contamination can make your community garden safer.

For more information on safe community gardening, plant selection and services provided by the Kentucky Brownfield Redevelopment Program, visit our website at [dca.ky.gov/brownfields](http://dca.ky.gov/brownfields). 

*Editor's note: Established community gardening organizations such as Seedleaf ([seedleaf.org](http://seedleaf.org)) and Northern Kentucky Community Gardens ([wellness.nku.edu/garden/nkycommunitygarden.php](http://wellness.nku.edu/garden/nkycommunitygarden.php)) are also good resources if your city is considering a community garden.*

*Make sure to establish guidelines for community gardens, such as how they are maintained and how produce is distributed.*

*In addition, always check with your insurance provider to make sure any public space is properly insured.*

## Community Gardens in Kentucky

According to the American Community Gardening Association, there are several community gardens in Kentucky, including in the cities of Berea, Bowling Green, Danville, Dry Ridge, Frankfort, Hopkinsville, Lexington, Louisville, Newport, Owensboro, Paducah, Prestonsburg and Richmond, to name a few.

Many community or neighborhood gardens are on private property and are managed by church, school or community groups, but some are affiliated with cities.

Wayne Long, who works with Louisville's 10 city-hosted community gardens, said they are a "great way to clean up a vacant lot and bring people, plus produce local food." He said, in Louisville, research shows that between 800 to 900 families or households utilize community gardens. There are probably between 50 to 70 community or neighborhood gardens in Jefferson County. Long said there is a demand for community garden space with a one- to two-year waiting list for all the city's 25 acres of garden space, which he estimates at nearly \$750,000 in retail

value. Long is an agricultural agent with the UK Extension Program through UK's Department of Agriculture. He said Louisville Metro appropriates funding to the Extension program to manage the community garden program.

Like Bowling Green's program, citizens in Louisville apply to use the garden space and sign an agreement that includes a release and waiver. The agreement states that the city or its employees hold no liability for any claims, suits or actions regarding the garden. They must also agree to the community garden rules, which include things like managing weeds; agreeing to never sell their produce on public property; and obeying all local, state and federal ordinances and laws.

Jim Parrish, Frankfort City Parks & Recreation co-director, said Frankfort uses a partnership model whereby the city provides space to Commonwealth Gardens, a local non-profit that has gardens throughout Frankfort and Franklin County at churches, schools and several other places. The city has two community gardens in its Dolly Graham and

Bellepoint Parks, which are parks located closest to town. Parrish said the urban gardens provide a positive activity that fits well within the park environment. In the fall, Commonwealth Gardens hosts a fall harvest festival with music at one of the community garden locations.

While community gardening isn't suitable for every city, it is a concept that can be easily adapted to communities of any size. There are also grants available periodically for community gardening projects through groups like Bluegrass PRIDE and other sources.

*The American Community Gardening Association is a good place to get started if your city has an interest in exploring community gardening.*

