

How to Turn a Vacant Lot into A Garden or Pocket Park #HS-07

A guest tip sheet by Baltimore Green Space and Parks & People Foundation

So there's a lot in your neighborhood that's vacant - except for the trash, maybe rats, drug use, tall weeds, etc. - and you've decided that enough is enough. What can you do?

You can pick up the trash now and again. Or you can go a step further, and turn blight into beauty, and even food! Community greening projects are a great way to improve your neighborhood, involve neighbors, push out undesirable uses of the space, and at the same time do some good for the Chesapeake Bay.

A few examples of such projects are Our Community Garden in Sandtown and the Garden of Eden in Madison East End, and the vegetable gardens on Carmine Street Garden in Franklinton and Duncan Street in East Baltimore. They all began as creative ways to deal with problem properties - and now they are places where residents can gather and enjoy nature in the city.

This tip sheet can help you to get started. Another great resource is Parks & People's *Guide to Greening Neighborhoods: Creating and Caring for Community Open Space*. You can download a copy at parksandpeople.org, or call the office. Also feel free to call the Parks & People Foundation at 410-448-5663.

How to Start?

Here are a number of things you'll need to do before you can choose a date to break

ground. You'll probably be working on several of these tasks at once, in little bites.

◆ Learn about the Lot

Find out who owns the property. If you have the address of the lot you can call the Office of Property Location (410-396-3800), or go on-line to

http://sdatcert3.resiusa.org/rp_rewrite/.

(You can also Google Maryland Real Property, and choose the first link.) If you do not know the address of the lot you can use

<http://cityview.baltimorecity.gov>. Select the neighborhood you wish to search on the left, and, at the top where it says "Thematic Overlay," choose "Property Information" in the first drop down and "Vacant Lots" in the second. When you click on the vacant lot you are looking for the Block Lot and Address of the lot will appear on the left sidebar.

If the lot is not City-owned, try to find out if the City holds liens against the property. When owners fail to pay debts such as taxes, water bills, or the bill for demolishing a building, the City can file a lien, giving it the right to foreclose on the property to collect the money owed. The City sells these liens at the annual tax sale. Each spring, the *Baltimore Sun* publishes a list of properties to be offered in the tax sale. If someone purchases the lien, they may take ownership of the property. You can also contact your city councilor's office, or Baltimore Green Space (443-695-7504).

◆ Get permission to use the lot

While generally nobody is going to stop you from improving an abandoned lot, it is a good idea to get permission. First, you'll find out whether there are immediate plans for the site. Second, it will be much easier to get help - both the money and people-power kinds.

If the lot is owned by the city please visit http://www.baltimorehousing.org/vtov_adopt. On this website you can find applications for adopting a lot, applications for water access, and a comprehensive list of all of the city-owned vacant lots organized by neighborhood. If you do not have access to internet you can call (410-369-4111) to see if your group can adopt the lot. An Adopt-a-Lot agreement is simply an agreement with the city for you to use the lot for your own greening projects. You can choose between a 1, 3, and 5 year agreement for which you will have the rights to work on that lot. The Mayor's "Power In Dirt" initiative offers aid in adopting lots and transforming green spaces. The Power in Dirt Coordinators can help you find funds, make design plans, locate plants and trees, and guide you through the Adopt-a-Lot process. You can find their contact information on the resources page of the Adopt-a-Lot website.

If the lot is privately owned, send a registered letter to the owner. State that the property is a blight to your community and ask the owner to alleviate the problem. State your plans and when you will implement them if the lot is left in its existing condition. Save a copy of this letter. Usually the letter will return unopened. Keep the unopened letter. If you do receive an answer (and don't hold your breath), the condition of the lot is the issue. When the owner doesn't clean it up by your stated date, go for it! Understand, however, that the owner may return to the property at any time and do what he or she chooses with the land. Contact the Community Law Center (410-366-0922; www.communitylaw.org) if you would like advice on how to contact the

owner and an explanation of the legal implications of entering private property without explicit permission.

Through the Adopt-a-Lot program, you can gain access to water for a flat rate of \$120 for the 9 months of the growing season, or March through November. This service is available to both city owned and privately owned lots. Upon receipt of your water access application and the \$120 check, DPW will come out for free and install the device needed to hook a hose up to the water meter pit. Once installed, let the greening begin!

Once your open space has been around for several years, and the neighborhood has gotten the swing of maintenance, you can call Baltimore Green Space (443-695-7504) to see if they can help you preserve your green space forever.

◆ Find Allies

Some vacant lots have been transformed and maintained by a single person - but the most successful projects are rarely the work of one (tired) person. Who might be interested in the project? People with a personal reason to care about the project.

Community Members. Talk about the project with your community organization. Churches and schools in your neighborhood might also be interested.

Your Neighbors and Friends. The biggest reason people don't volunteer is because they aren't asked. So talk about your project with enthusiasm, and don't shy from asking for help.

To find people, you could make and distribute flyers to neighbors, and post some in public places like the corner store. You could get some kids to draw a poster and put it up on the lot. And you can just talk to people you see on the street - after all, you know they spend some time in the neighborhood.

Local Businesses. They might help -- it's their neighborhood too. You might be able to get donated refreshments, in-kind services, or volunteers.

◆ **Develop a Vision**

What should the space become? Maybe you want to develop a vision with your allies. Or maybe you will be looking for allies to create something you've already thought of. Here are a few ways that people have transformed vacant lots:

Vegetable Garden. These truly bring people together, and fresh veggies are good motivation for lot maintenance and longevity.

Pocket Park. Would your community enjoy a place to relax under the shade of a few trees, and maybe a small park, complete with benches and a wood chip walk? This could also take the form of a sculpture garden or rock garden.

Flower Garden. A butterfly garden is planted with native flowers and shrubs that attract butterflies and insects. A cutting garden is meant to provide fresh flowers to take home. There are many other possibilities too, and it is always a good idea to consider using plants that are native to Maryland.

Tree Park. Open land with trees provides a place for walking, and the trees are beautiful and help cool your neighborhood.

Mix it Up: There's no reason you can't have vegetable plots in one place, and benches and decorative plantings in another spot.

◆ **Design the Space and a Maintenance Plan**

This would be a great time to enlist some help from Baltimore's greening organizations, if you haven't already. You can call Parks & People to talk over what you want to do (410-448-5663; www.parksandpeople.org). You can also call the Cooperative Extension and ask to be put in touch with the Master Gardeners (410-856-1857, ext. 121). The Neighborhood

Design Center can also provide site concepts and drawings for open spaces, and sometimes advises on small design issues (410-233-9686; www.ndc-md.org).

Visit other parks and open spaces. Talk to people and find out what works for them, and what they'd change. Don't hesitate to borrow ideas.

Think about the current problems on the lot. Is there dumping or undesirable traffic? Could a fence, lights, or appropriate landscaping control these problems? But remember, you might not need so much security once the space is in use by the community.

What resources are available in your neighborhood? A sculptor might want to donate a work, a carpenter could build benches, and the third grade class might grow flowers. Community parks become an artistic expression for neighborhoods, giving people the opportunity to reshape their urban landscape, even incorporating "found" materials such as bricks, old pipe, bathtubs...

How much money can your group spend? This will obviously influence your design!

Think about long-term maintenance before you pick up a shovel. Why? Without people to care for the project, it will degenerate into its former self - a vacant, blighted lot. The maintenance needs will vary with what you've designed. For example, vegetable gardens are high-maintenance - but provide people with vegetables that keep them coming. A flower garden might need significant work about once a month, with less upkeep between. Trees and grass will generally require less work - but there's still the mowing. So as you design the site, think about what you and your allies are motivated to care for.

Now, sit down with your co-workers and your pencils. Have fun dreaming - and keep in mind what will be needed for maintenance, and what materials are available to you.

◆ Long-Term Maintenance

The three most important forms of maintenance are picking up trash, watering trees and plants, and keeping the weeds and grass down.

You will need to find the individuals or institutions that will care for the open space.

- Neighbors and users are the easiest to find.
- Local schools or businesses will often agree to cut the grass or pick up trash twice a month.
- On hot days, kids can easily be encouraged to water plants and trees - and usually themselves as well! Adults can leave out gallon containers of water -- and kids can take them to the garden and water the plants.

Keep on top of it: The better the green space is maintained, and the more often it is done, the easier it will be. If a lot looks uncared for, it will be dumped on. When bulk trash is dumped, call 311 right away. If possible, put the trash in bags.

◆ The Work Day (or Days)

Unless you have a lot of experience, you'll probably want some advice - either in the form of *Parks and People's Guide to Greening Neighborhoods*, or in person. Many projects get off the ground with mentoring from Master Gardeners or Parks & People. Here are some basics of organizing a work day:

Choose a day and time: Saturday mornings at 10:00 is good; earlier might work well in the warmer months.

Publicize: The people working with you on the project should commit to being there weeks before the event. Tell others about the event about a week ahead of time, and then again the night before. Use fliers, banners, phone chains, etc. If you can provide on-site child care, you will likely get more volunteers. You can call the television stations and newspapers to tell them what you are up to.

You can also notify your elected officials, and make sure your community association knows.

Delegate responsibility: This is a biggie - one person cannot do everything.

Have one person in charge of the site plan and implementation. He or she should know where the materials are and where everything goes. This person makes sure that plants are planted properly, and materials are laid out according to the plan.

A second person should recruit participants - telephoning before the event, inviting people off the street, having people sign waivers, and taking pictures all day.

A third person should be available to deal with any small problems that come up. Someone with a truck or large car is best.

Party! Finish the day by thanking your hungry, thirsty, tired volunteers with a party. You can get hot dogs and sodas donated. Or ask your committed members to bring along a potluck dish in the morning. In the colder months, a crockpot of chili is welcome and inexpensive.

◆ Kick-Off Celebration

Once you have cleaned and restored your park or lot, you should plan and have a kick-off celebration to invite people to use the park and to get people signed up for maintenance of the site. Make this an annual event, because the more use the site gets, the more likely it is to survive.

Have a potluck cookout. Borrow a grill and have people bring their own grill food. Have games for kids.

Ask churches or local businesses to sponsor the celebration, and invite those who work in the area.

Encourage everyone to make use of the open space for picnics, games, and relaxing.

Resources: Information, Materials, Money

City Government

Baltimore City information, 410-396-3100. Baltimore City's operators will connect you to the right city department. Memorize this phone number and use it.

City resources for adopted vacant lot greening are available on a limited basis. Things such as mulch are available seasonally and can run out quickly, for example. For larger city services such as large machinery (e.g. Bobcat) are available to groups as they become "Shovel-Ready." "Shovel-Ready" means your group has compiled the following four components: 1. A Design Plan for the space (Measurements, What plants will be used, What plants will go where), 2. Budget (How much of each tool or material you need, how much each costs), 3. Schedule (When will you break ground? What time of year do the trees need to be planted?) and 4. Leadership In-Kind (Whoever is spearheading the project has put forth something such as personal funds, finding volunteers, applying for a grant, or personal time working on the lot).

Don't let these things overwhelm you! It's okay to have a budget if you don't actually have any funds yet...it's okay to change a design plan if you find a *beautiful* plant that you *must* plant in the center of it all! These are just guidelines to ensure the success of your community managed space!

The city's **Adopt-a-Lot** program lets residents research and adopt city-owned vacant lots. In addition, you can also apply for water at the flat rate of \$120 over 9 months. 410-369-4111 or www.baltimorehousing.org/vov_adopt.

Power In Dirt is a mayoral initiative that builds capacity in Baltimore City communities to adopt city-owned vacant lots and turn them into community gardens and open spaces. Their coordinators can help you find funds, make design plans, locate plants and trees, and guide you through the Adopt-a-Lot

process. Find their contact information on the resources page of the Adopt-a-Lot website.

Good Organizations to Know

The **AFRO's Clean Block Campaign** is an annual program and competition to encourage residents to beautify Baltimore through cleaning and greening projects. Contact the AFRO at 410-554-8243.

Baltimore Green Space is a land trust for community-managed open spaces. They help communities preserve their treasured open spaces, and can also help you learn who owns or controls the property. 443-695-7504.

CPHA can provide one-on-one assistance with many community problems. If you want to change something in your neighborhood but you just don't know how, CPHA can help. 410-539-1369 or www.cphabaltimore.org.

Civic Works' "Community Lot" team of AmeriCorps young adults works with community groups in the planning and installation of ornamental and other gardens. Call Civic Works at 410-366-8533 to see if your group and site qualify. Civic Works also has a perennial flower give-away to community gardeners a couple times per year. Visit www.civicworks.com

Community Law Center provides legal counsel to community organizations. 410-366-0922, or www.communitylaw.org

Maryland Cooperative Extension Service and the **Master Gardeners** can provide technical assistance for community gardens and beautification projects. They can also help with plant selection, and often with volunteers. The Home and Garden Info Center website is www.hgic.umd.edu and the phone number is 1-800-342-2507. To get in touch with the Master Gardeners program, call 410-856-1857 ext. 121.

Miss Utility marks underground utilities call before you dig so you don't damage gas and other utility lines. In Baltimore there can be a charge. 1-800-257-7777.

Neighborhood Design Center provides landscape and architectural planning. 410-233-9686, or www.ndc-md.org.

Parks & People Foundation provides technical assistance for community greening projects, from gardens to street trees, and publishes the *Guide to Greening Neighborhoods*. Their twice-yearly small grants program has benefited hundreds of greening projects throughout Baltimore. 410-448-5663, or www.parksandpeople.org.

Materials and Tools

The **Community Greening Resource Network**, a joint program of Parks & People and the Cooperative Extension, provides community gardens in Baltimore City with seeds, plants, tools, networking opportunities, and educational workshops. To join CGRN or learn more about it, visit <http://www.parksandpeople.org/greening/resource-network>, or call Parks & People (410-448-5663).

Wood chips and leaf compost: **Baltimore City's Horticulture Division** may be able to provide leaf compost and wood chips. Calling in the winter is best so that you can avoid the busy spring and fall seasons. 410-396-0180.

Tools: Shovels, picks, hoses, work gloves, hammers. These are in your neighborhood. You can also borrow tools from **Parks & People** and from the **Pitch In Program**.

Plants and Trees: **Civic Works** distributes flowering plants in the spring. You can also ask for donations and/or apply for grants. Sometimes there are end-of-season sales or give-aways. The City can provide trees for schools and public right-of-ways.

The Loading Dock sells salvaged surplus building materials that are otherwise headed for landfills. You may be able to find lumber or fencing materials. 410-558-3625, or www.loadingdock.org.

At **Second Chance** you may be able to find fencing, heavy duty outdoor planters, and outdoor art like sculptures and birdbaths. They also often have bricks, pavers, and lumber. www.secondchanceinc.org. or 410-385-1101.

Money

Fundraise: sell hot dogs, hold a flea market. Try local businesses - it's their neighborhood, too! Your community organization may have additional fundraising ideas.

Parks & People Foundation has twice-yearly greening grants. See above.

Baltimore Office of Promotion and Arts coordinates a grants program for community events. 410-752-8632 or www.bop.org.

Baltimore Community Foundation provides grants of up to \$10,000. 410-332-4171, or www.bcf.org/.

Chesapeake Bay Trust funds grants of up to \$5,000 for projects that focus on native plants and water quality improvements. 410-974-2941, or www.cbt.org. Or Google "Chesapeake Bay Trust Mini Grants."

If you live in a "Healthy Neighborhood," your project may be eligible for small grants. To learn more, including which community organization to work with, visit www.healthyneighborhoods.org or call 410-332-0387, ext. 148.