

## Case Study: Greening Baltimore One Block at a Time

Did you know that nearly one-quarter of the nation's trees are found in urban forests?

Why are urban forests important? Around the world, the role of urban forestry in creating "healthy" or "livable" cities tends to be underestimated. In addition to bestowing environmental benefits, planting and nurturing community trees can also address a full range of urban social issues, from illegal disposal to education to apathy to crime.

If you canvassed the city of Baltimore, Maryland, you might find as many as 40,000 vacant lots covering approximately 11 percent of the city's land area. About 12,000 of those lots fall under some type of city ownership. The lots represent a social, economic, and visual burden to the city. In many communities, they are dumped on, vandalized, and seen as a social blight rather than as a community benefit.

### What Can Be Done?

Community greening can help turn abandoned land into community-owned property through the adoption (formal or informal) of vacant lands by local residents. The lots can be given new life as parks, community gardens, tree nurseries, or cultural gardens. When urban lands look used and cared for, people usually stop their dumping and curtail their littering. A city might spend between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per year to clean up just one problem lot. Yet greening can keep lots clean for a one-time investment of between \$200 and \$1,000 per lot.

### Parks & People

Since 1984, the nonprofit foundation Parks & People has worked to enhance the health and beauty of Baltimore's communities and parks and to improve the quality of life for residents in Baltimore's neighborhoods. It encourages communities to take advantage of the city's valuable natural assets. Parks & People seeks to

improve the physical, social, and environmental quality of neighborhoods through greening activities and by forming community networks to sustain natural resources.

Parks & People's Community Forestry Program helps Baltimore residents green their neighborhoods by offering educational opportunities and technical assistance to create parks and gardens in community open spaces and schoolyards and along neighborhood streets. The staff supports the planning, organizing, and implementing of greening projects in partnership with residents, city agencies, community associations, and other groups. Since 1993, more than 200 vacant lots have been transformed into community-managed parks or gardens. More than 7,000 promising new trees are growing in 45 Baltimore neighborhoods.

### Enabling Funds

Parks & People's Community Grants Program awards up to \$1,000 to Baltimore community groups that are interested in conducting neighborhood restoration projects such as tree plantings, community gardens, neighborhood cleanups, or environmental education activities. The grants finance tools, plant material, equipment, and other supplies. Since 1996, 403 community greening projects have been funded. Some of the grants support initiatives to build connectors to the Gwynns Falls Trail, a 14-mile hiking and biking trail that is still under development and will connect 24 neighborhoods and more than 2,000 acres of parkland, recreational facilities, and historic and cultural attractions.

### What to Plant Where?

Educational opportunities include hands-on training in tree planting and pruning, soil testing, and streetscaping techniques. Classes are held four times a year on the following topics: developing greening projects and

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funding strategies, plus volunteer recruitment, implementation, and maintenance. Volunteer community activists become Tree Tribers, who work throughout the city while training others to plant trees and to clean and green neighborhoods. The Tree Tribe Training Program provides hours of useful training in plant physiology, urban ecology, community assessment, and vacant lot improvement.

Parks & People also offers an environmental education program called KidsGrow, which is for children who are 7 to 13 years old. The program runs after school and throughout the summer, training kids to become activists in their own neighborhoods.

### Other Successes

Parks & People has also developed green initiatives in housing areas that have been rehabilitated. In one such neighborhood, the community planted small trees in barrels outside doors. This action strengthened neighborhood ties and sparked similar efforts in the five surrounding blocks.

Greening in Baltimore has also been used as a catalyst to help communities fight crime. On one block, a tree planting effort led to a block watch, which led to a group called “pooches on patrol.” In another neighborhood, residents organized a tree planting at night to send the message to potential drug dealers that the community cared.

Efforts to green Baltimore have made a difference. Greening improves residents’ neighborhoods, health, and quality of life; as trees and gardens grow, so do those benefits. Community greening is more than just an interesting beautification strategy—it can be a vital part of any urban revitalization effort.

*Source:*

Adapted from Community Resource 2002 (E) and Parks & People 2002 (E).

### Questions to Consider:

- What are some benefits of greening a city? What are the costs?
- How do you think Baltimore finds enough volunteers to make this program possible?
- If you ran the community greening program, what would you do differently?
- How can a community sustain this type of program?

