

# Take Back the Alleys: Turning Unused Alleyway Space into Gardens

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## Background

Alleyways are commonplace in both urban and some suburban areas within cities. Oftentimes, these alleys simply consist of gravel, weathered pavement, and overgrowth of either invasive or native plants. Alleys are traditionally an afterthought for most residents who live adjacent to them, and they are only utilized as an alternative access point to their homes. It is important to make use of this untapped space for agricultural potential, allowing and encouraging individuals to use alleyways as a way to either be introduced to gardening or to supplement their already existing gardens.

For example, Eugene, OR has a reputation for being an extremely active participant in sustainable living, with food production being a large proponent. Local growers and farmers are found all throughout the Willamette Valley, and Eugene itself is also home to many individuals within the community who grow their own food. From raised beds and potted herbs to full on fruit trees, Eugene locals embrace the “eat local” and sustainable mantra, but alleyways are areas that are not thought of as ideal settings for gardens.

Within the city of Eugene, there are approximately 44.6 square miles of alleyway space, according to the City of Eugene. There is also about 712 miles of roadway, with about 46 miles of alleyways to go with it. These numbers alone display that alleyways can prove to be a fantastic source of abundant land on which to grow food that most individuals do not view as available for

agricultural use. Alleyways are extremely underutilized in almost every city in the United States, not only Eugene.

Utilizing alleyways as not purely an alternative, but as an addition to already existing growing practices can be beneficial due to increased food demand, and can also encourage a more cohesive community. The areas between homes in alleyways are rarely thought of as a place for interaction, but can easily be a point at which neighbors are able to share resources, tools, food and conversation. A community effort to grow food in this communal setting can help facilitate these encounters. This extra space can be seen as a way to reduce, if not eliminate, areas that encourage maleficent behaviour in alleys, and transform images of alleys from negative to positive.

## Why Alleyways?

Alleyways are often forgotten and not viewed as a space that could be utilized in any way other than as an alternate path to travel from one location to another. However, alleyways offer a variety of possibilities, as they are located in central areas while remaining somewhat hidden. This makes alleys the perfect space for food production. Since this space is largely underutilized in many cases, it would not be problematic to start a new trend of growing food in these areas to develop necessary additional space for food production.

### Benefits of Gardening in Alleyways:

Some of the benefits of growing food in alleyways include:

- The space is usually not utilized for any other activities, and it is wasted, though it is ripe with possibility.
- These are areas with many people living around them, which would allow residents easily accessible and healthy food.
- Easy up-keep with multiple people contributing and potential for schedule rotation.
- Access to nearby water sources, as required.
- The issue of aesthetics would not exist because alleys are often hidden.
- Provides an opportunity for people to get involved with the production of their food (especially those who are unfamiliar with gardening, do not think it is important, or do not have time for it).
- Allows a place for the community to come together.

### **The Importance of Alleyway Gardening**

Over the years, large-scale food production has become increasingly harmful to the land and the body. Most large food production companies are only concerned with profit, rather than the larger effect the food production process has on the environment. Unsustainable agriculture practices currently account for a little more than one-third of greenhouse gases contributing to climate change. People must take the necessary steps to grow their own gardens and produce what they are able of their own food. Along with growing their food, supporting sustainable local farms would help decrease the amount of larger, unsustainable farms to create a healthier

environment. Becoming involved with the food system is an important step to becoming a better steward of the earth.

Growing food in alleyways provides a simple and accessible method for people to become a part of the food production process. Increasing the amount of people who grow food in alleyways will hopefully motivate them to also start gardens elsewhere, such as at the workplace, family or friends' houses, their own yards, and other spaces. At the very least, it will promote further consideration of the process food goes through from the land to the plate. This practice will also help people learn to utilize unused space that is otherwise neglected in order to make a positive impact on their health, the community, and the environment.

### **Benefits for the Community**

Through the community becoming involved in the process of taking back the alleys, it will create a tighter knit community. Residents will get to know their neighbors because the alley will provide a communal space for those living in the area. People will also become more educated on the food production process and the importance of growing food in a regenerative manner. Through these realizations, people will advocate for growing their own food and supporting local, regenerative farms. The local economy will thrive, providing better opportunities for everyone in the community. One small action can create a domino effect that will allow for a happier and more successful community.

## Potential Obstacles

The primary concern in most cities regarding alleyways is that no dwelling areas are built in alleyways. Another main regulation is that there can be nothing higher than 18 feet and the alleyway must allow enough space for passage of pedestrians and vehicles (*Land Use*). Many cities do not have any regulations regarding food production in alleyways. For example, according to Chapter 9 of the *Land Use* document for the City of Eugene, there are no specific regulations stating that alleyways cannot be used as a means of food production. As long as these requirements are met, and other requirements outlined by each city, then the edges of alleyways can be used for food production purposes.

Other obstacles could include:

- “Buy in” from neighbors: Though this project can be seen as an opportunity for neighbors to interact with one another, as well as to get involved in the act of growing food for themselves, not every individual will want to be a part of tending to their own sections of the alley. The fact that there are no defined distinctions (in most cases) between property lines along alleyways can cause a bit of confusion and difficulties if individuals do not consent to being responsible for their own alleyway gardens.
- Adequate Lighting: One of the more pressing difficulties in gardening in alleyways may prove to be the lack of adequate lighting for plants to grow. Fences that border homes,

trees, and homes themselves may block ample sunlight, which limits or excludes specific plant varieties from being able to be grown in alleyways altogether.

- Upkeep: It is important for those who live along the alleyway garden to equally contribute or come up with a system that works to maintain the garden. It may be difficult to establish a system at first as people are easing into the concept of alleyway gardening. Also, people may not interact with their neighbors regularly, though they must build relationships with them in order to create a network for each person to participate in caring for the garden.

Though there are obstacles, all can be easily and successfully overcome when thoughtful groups of people unite to create a better environment and community.

## Examples of Alleyway Gardening

### San Francisco: Better Streets Program

There is a movement in San Francisco encouraging the improvement, renovation, and retrofitting of urban landscapes and streets from solely concrete areas to ones that bring back more greenery. There are several different avenues that San Francisco encourages in the Better Streets Program, with many of them placing emphasis on building community and creating spaces in which interactions can more easily take place (*SF Better Streets Program*). With program such as:

- Block Parties and Street Fairs
- Street Markets

- Street Vendors
- Sidewalk Market Displays
- Living Alleys

A lot of the work that is done in creating green alleyways and shared-use spaces in San Francisco are done by community groups, the city, or individual organizations, as the installation of these green alleyways are somewhat complicated. As a result of this being a more city-backed project, several different regulations must be considered to make sure that the area is up to code (in terms of danger of hitting underground wiring/piping, etc.), and individuals are rarely doing these projects themselves. However, once the alleys have reintroduced greenery, individuals that are housed on that property are then responsible for the upkeep, as they have to agree to maintain the area upon completion.

#### Montreal: Green Alleyway Program

In Montreal, there have been several different endeavors that are being presented by local governments, individuals, and community groups to bring green space back into the urban environment. Green roofs, sidewalk gardens, and smaller pocket gardens have been seen throughout the city, but there are still areas in which greenery is far removed (Montreal's Green Alleyway Program). This is where the Ruelles Vertes (green alleyways) program comes into play. Ruelles Vertes is working to utilize upwards of 280 miles of unused alleyways located within Montreal (Montreal's Green Alleyway Program). The program is focusing mostly on the planting of native species, providing more aesthetically

pleasing alleyways, and encouraging native pollinator activity. Currently, there are approximately 100 alleyways that have been restored and retrofitted to green areas with flora lining the edges of the once-paved areas (Montreal's Green Alleyway Program).

The work that is being completed by Ruelles Vertes is not going unnoticed. Though the 100 alleyways that the program has installed are imperative to creating a healthier environment, it seems as though the program is being restricted by lack of funding (Montreal's Green Alleyway Program). Community input and demand for Ruelles Vertes to come to their specific neighborhoods has skyrocketed, with requests for the program's presence far outpacing its scope since its initiation, notwithstanding that the program funding has doubled as well. To cope with the increase in local demand, local governments are focusing on alleyways that contribute to local heat islands first, and then once those needs are met, neighborhood alleyways will be assisted.

#### Chicago: Green Alley Program

In 2010, Richard Daley, Mayor of Chicago, released an accessible handbook for Chicago residents to green Chicago's alleyways. With over 1,900 miles in alleyways within city limits, Chicago has an incredible amount of potential for greening their city (City of Chicago Green Alleyway Handbook). The handbook highlights several benefits for individuals of what sustainable practices in their alleyways can do for the city, such as: stormwater

management, heat reduction, material recycling, glare reduction and energy conservation (City of Chicago Green Alleyway Handbook).

Though a lot of the principles that are being used in this project are extremely beneficial, such as permeable pavement installation, a lot of the work is more local government agency related, and may prove to be too difficult for an individual to install. For instance, any individual wanting to incorporate permeable pavement would run into immense costs, let alone the issue of navigating runoff problems. However, there are some avenues that the handbook does highlight, such as the creation of bioswales for homes to utilize. To date, there does not seem to be any existing work showing examples of neighborhoods or alleys that have been transitioned, but there are examples and recommendations made available for individuals in the handbook (City of Chicago Green Alleyway Handbook). The hope is that these recommendations will soon turn into action.

### **The Future of Growing Food in Alleys**

As more land in urban areas are developed into housing or other infrastructure, it will be increasingly difficult to find places for community gardens and other acts of urban agriculture. However, alleyways will always remain, which make them an ideal location to grow food. Since there are alleys behind most houses, apartments and other buildings, they provide a space that is not usually used for anything, but could provide a valuable resource for many people. In the future, if

every alleyway produced food, it would immensely reduce the amount of food people primarily purchase from less sustainable suppliers, and increase sustainably produced food. This could revolutionize the food production process and slow larger, harmful agriculture corporations. Ultimately, this would lead to the environment and people becoming healthier. One small act can create a movement that could change the direction of the future forever.

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