



WASATCH  
COMMUNITY  
GARDENS

2025

# GROWING URBAN AGRICULTURE ENTERPRISES ALONG THE WASATCH FRONT

## Key Challenges and Recommendations



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



***"This spring we received SO MANY interested, talented and qualified applicants... but we only have 3 paid positions. The interest and workforce are here! We just don't have the farms [to hire them]."***

To better understand the challenges and opportunities of local urban farming, Wasatch Community Gardens (WCG) invited small-scale commercial growers to participate in focus groups in the beginning of 2025. Over 50 attendees highlighted key needs and barriers regarding land access, business development, and other related issues, ranking them by importance. This information was then compiled and organized by WCG to gain insight into the common struggles and potential solutions shaping food production in our region.

Overall, many urban farmers feel strongly supported by the Salt Lake community, with robust consumer demand for local food, an abundance of homeowners willing to lease their backyards, and an informal peer-to-peer network of growers sharing knowledge and resources. A rich variety of local offerings, such as the New Roots Refugee & New American Farm Business Training Program and the former Green Urban Lunch Box's Small Farm Initiative, offer valuable educational support to help new growers overcome early-stage challenges.

Despite this solid foundation of support, urban farmers face significant barriers as they seek to grow their operations toward a scale that could be financially viable for themselves and their employees over the long-term. First and foremost, access to large, contiguous acreage is financially out of reach due to the development pressures affecting the Salt Lake valley. Small-scale farmers also struggle to balance food production tasks with the business and administrative aspects of running their enterprises, while also facing competition from large businesses that produce highly subsidized, mass-produced food. Although financial assistance may exist, it can be time-consuming to research and comply with reporting requirements.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



## **1. Improve land access and farm viability through public policy:**

**Advocate for urban food production incentives, preferential tax treatment, enhanced greenspace zoning requirements, and long-term leases of underutilized public lands with water access.**

## **2. Increase peer-to-peer education and training on advanced topics such as:**

- **Business Development** - Permitting, licensing, the regulatory environment, insurance, grant-writing, farm taxes, distribution logistics, building an online presence, and marketing
- **Food Production** - Soil remediation, regionally-specific water and climate resilient growing practices, food safety, maintenance of farm equipment such as walk-behind tillers, and infrastructure-building workshops for things like walk-in coolers, wash stations, and irrigation

### **3. *Expand upon existing community networks:***

Create online platforms and in-person opportunities for growers to share knowledge and resources, facilitate matchmaking between farmers and homeowners for land access, and foster a unified voice that advocates on behalf of urban growers within the halls of local government. Opportunities and resources should be accessible in different languages and offered near the communities where people live and grow food.

#### **4. Explore produce aggregation options and cooperative models:**

**Encourage the creation of food hubs or cooperatives to allow small farmers to aggregate their produce, streamline distribution, affordably make value-added processed foods, and access bulk purchasing of farm supplies.**

Salt Lake's urban farming enterprises have the potential to grow and thrive with the right support. By addressing the priorities above, we can create an environment that works for working urban farmers, ensuring greater food security, economic opportunity, and quality of life for residents. A coordinated effort among policymakers, non-profits, and farmers will be essential in making these recommendations a reality.

## GROUP DISCUSSION #1

# FOOD PRODUCTION



***“Farming is often so romanticized, but people need to realize it is actually a labor-intensive business”***



The local environment is relatively strong for beginning farmers to foster their knowledge and skill base, due to a helpful community of growers with diverse experiences and perspectives, and a range of supporting organizations that facilitate land access, the exchange of knowledge, and the promotion of culturally relevant food. Growers frequently utilize local resources for food production, including the International Rescue Committee's New Roots Refugee & New American Farm Business Training Program, the former Green Urban Lunch Box's (GULB) Small Farmer Initiative, seed swaps and seed libraries, local conferences such as Red Acre's Utah Farm & Food Conference and the Soil Health Conference, and a broad range of educational opportunities from County Extensions, WCG, the University of Utah Campus Gardens, and the Water Conservation Garden.

The business environment for beginning farmers to grow and market their food is more complicated. Due to the subsidies provided to large agricultural enterprises, food in the United States is artificially cheap. This makes it difficult to compete - and make a reasonable living - if you're a small-scale grower trying to convince consumers to pay the true cost of sustainable food. For local food production to offer a viable livelihood, growers need to be able to make enough money not only for themselves and their up-front investments in soil and infrastructure, but they also need to pay any employees a wage that can cover the high cost of living in the region. This financial reality may limit the range of people who can consider a food production career to only privileged individuals with pre-existing social safety nets or enough capital to weather the low wages of small farm work.

Growing food in an urban context poses additional challenges. For example, the short-term land leases that most growers depend upon incentivize a focus on immediate production at the expense of long-term soil health. Soil contamination is also commonplace, but there is a lack of information available about remediation, and testing can be very expensive. Pest pressures in urban areas are just as significant as rural areas, but crop insurance protection is generally not accessible to small growers, leaving urban growers with higher financial risks each season. Strong concerns remain over food production in our increasingly hot summers and unpredictable weather, and the impact on agriculture's most consequential resource - water.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ***More in-person opportunities and online platforms that:***

- Build community and share resources among growers
- Foster a unified voice that advocates on behalf of urban growers within the halls of municipal government, so that policy makers can better understand and support these entrepreneurs



## ***Advanced food production-related educational offerings, including farm tours, opportunities to volunteer and apprentice, and workshops that pertain to:***

- Remediation of contaminated urban soils
- Regionally specific practices for no-till methods and other soil building practices
- Regionally specific practices and indigenous techniques for dealing with climate and water resiliency, including plant breeding programs
- Post-harvest practices for food storage and food safety



## GROUP DISCUSSION #2

# INFRASTRUCTURE



***“Growing healthier food is expensive. How do we advocate for subsidy change away from Big Ag?”***

With different climates favoring different crops and production systems, agriculture is inherently a regionally-specific occupation. Growers rely heavily on the experience and assistance of other small agricultural entrepreneurs in their area. This peer-to-peer support network constitutes one of the strongest elements of the local food production “infrastructure,” and is fostered at events such as community mixers, agriculture conferences, and seed shares.

These networks extend outward into the community at large, translating into an abundance of customers, volunteers, homeowners willing to share land, and organizations promoting local sustainable agriculture. The diversity of farmers markets offered nearly every day throughout the valley also presents an opportunity to sell one’s produce while networking with other food-related small business owners.

In regards to the physical infrastructure of a farm operation, resource and tool sharing is facilitated to some degree through tool libraries offered by WCG and the former GULB. Grant funding opportunities can also help bridge the high upfront costs of farming at a larger scale, including Salt Lake City microgrants, National Resource Conservation Service grants, Utah Department of Agriculture grants, and other subsidized funding for fresh vegetables such as the US Department of Agriculture’s Local Food Purchasing Assistance Program.

Despite these supports, small farmers are already stretched thin with the numerous demands of their agricultural enterprises, and financial assistance can be time-consuming to research, apply for, and comply with reporting requirements.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ***Build upon the strong community networks that already exist, by:***

- Creating platforms for growers to share funding opportunities and resources, and troubleshoot any food-production or business-related issues they're dealing with
- Provide matchmaking between urban farmers and owners of land with water access



## ***More peer-to-peer educational opportunities on subjects such as:***

- Grant writing and reporting
- Safety and maintenance protocols on tools such as walk-behind tillers
- “Build-It” workshops for wash stations, walk-in coolers, and farm-scale irrigation installation



## ***Support cooperative models such as food hubs, local-friendly cooperative markets, and new digital platforms for:***

- Aggregating limited and inconsistent volumes of produce from multiple small-scale growers
- Providing a straightforward distribution or processing route to prevent produce waste
- Sharing commercial kitchen space to enhance profitability through processed food production
- Purchasing supplies in bulk with other growers and organizations



## GROUP DISCUSSION #3 LAND ACCESS

***“The biggest challenge is not starting a farm. The biggest challenge is keeping - and scaling up - the farm.”***



Land access for small-scale agricultural enterprises is commonly secured through informal networks of residents sharing underutilized backyards with growers for short term use. To achieve adequate acreage, growers may use multiple non-contiguous plots in a season, and often practice area-intensive growing methods to maximize yields in those small spaces.

Such a model is feasible in the early stages of an enterprise, but it is not without its challenges. For example, control over site management is limited when a grower shares land use with a property owner. The grower can also be displaced at any time, even though investment in soil health and farm infrastructure are long-term endeavors (and extended tenure is sometimes required for grant/loan qualifications). Additionally, multiple locations increase transportation costs and reduce a grower's ability to respond quickly to crop developments.

For these reasons, this model becomes less manageable as existing growers seek to scale up their business. For such growers, land ownership or long-term leases on contiguous lands is the most viable option to sustainably increase sales and staffing. However, public policy has not prioritized green space preservation, and land in Salt Lake is simply not affordable - particularly on a farming income. This reality imposes a limit on the growth of individual enterprises as well as the growth of the number of urban farmers serving Salt Lake residents.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

***Policy makers should address the needs of small, diversified farms, making it easier for these businesses to thrive:***

- Expand food production incentive and support programs for urban growers such as water credits, lawn reduction incentives, preferential tax treatment like greenbelt programs, greenspace requirements for new developments, and other favorable zoning changes
- Make underutilized public lands available for long-term farm leases. Even a 50 acre site with water access could make an outsized impact by supporting farmers working 1-2 acres each
- Incentivize rural and suburban communities to protect green spaces for use by farmers aiming to scale up

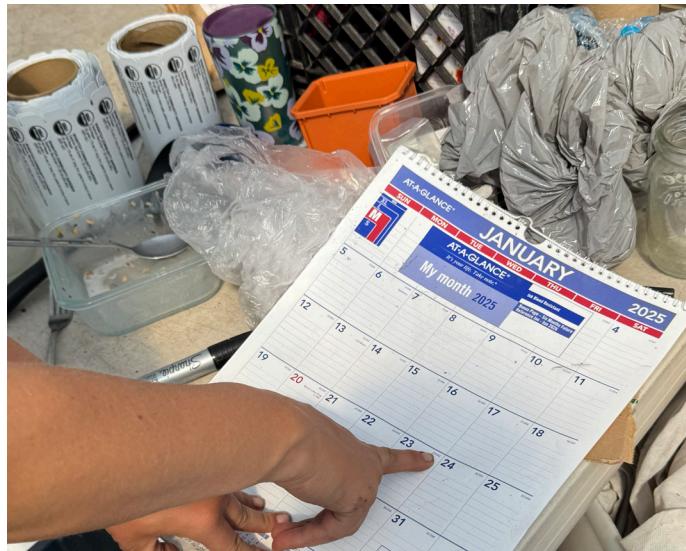
***NGOs can also play a critical role by leveraging their resources to:***

- Purchase land, securing it in agricultural conservation easements and then offering it back to farmers through low-cost leases or lease-to-own arrangements
- Provide educational guidance and support for aspiring urban growers who often struggle to navigate the legal and financial complexities of real estate transactions, permitting, and liability insurance
- Compile such information into “blueprints” for how to start a farm in Salt Lake so that growers are not starting from scratch and figuring everything out for themselves



## GROUP DISCUSSION #4 BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

***“For me, buying a good product means buying within my own community.”***

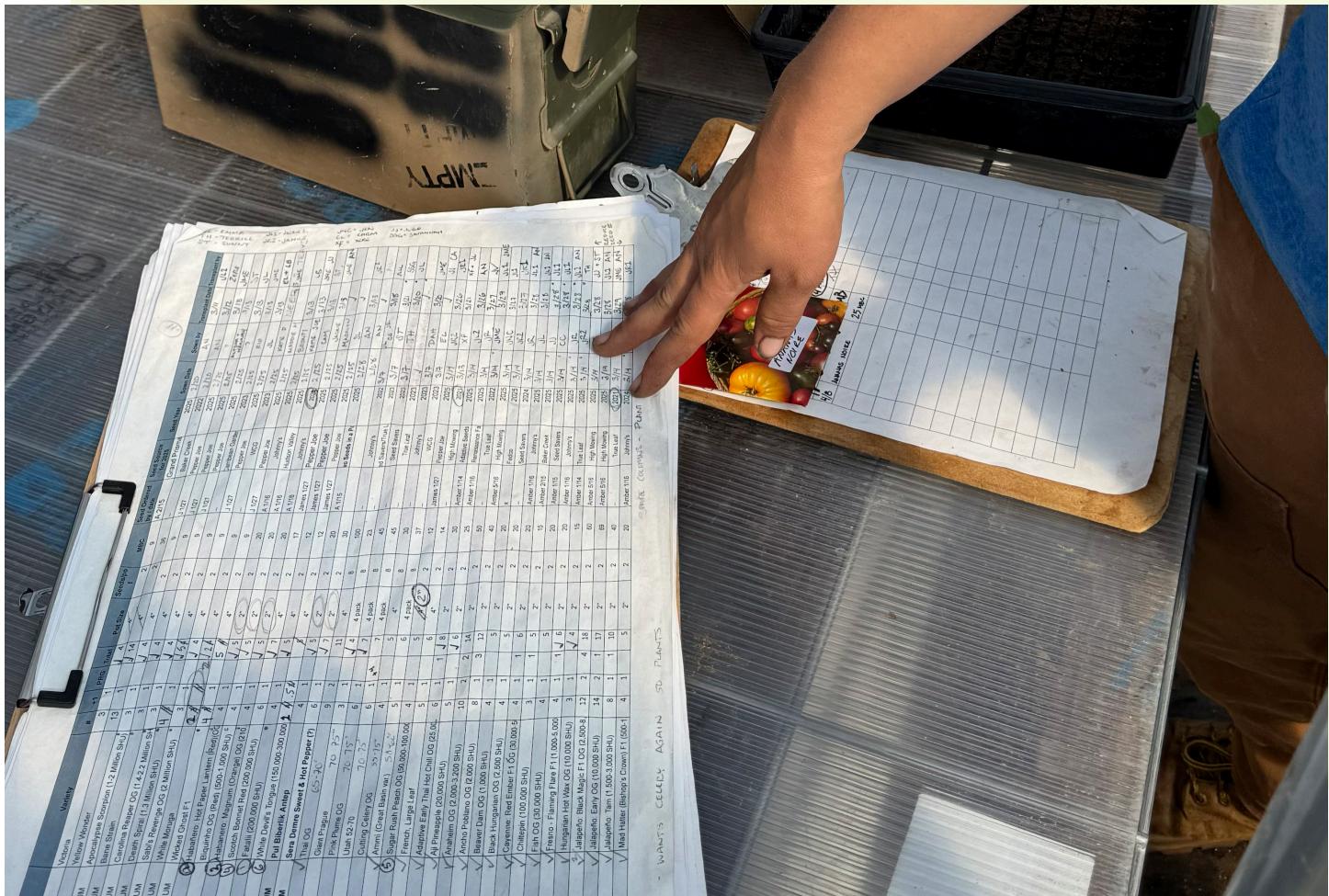


The fundamental requirement for any business to succeed is consumer demand, and in this respect, the Salt Lake valley is fertile ground for urban farming entrepreneurs. Through social media, word of mouth, and farmers markets, growers can foster a network of returning customers (including restaurateurs) who appreciate the value of buying and eating local. The popularity of multiple markets around the valley, particularly the Downtown Farmers Market, and organizations such as “Utah’s Own,” aid in raising the profile of local products.

However, growers often struggle to find the bandwidth to balance their time between the production aspects of farming and making the sale, which entails numerous additional efforts (and skill sets) like building a website, finding the best avenues for distribution, staffing farmers market booths, and social media promotion. Finding appropriate pricing guidelines for their produce can also be time consuming, as resources for pricing aren't often accurate or up-to-date, the range of prices can vary broadly, and growers are cautious to not under-cut their peers.

And for growers ready to scale up a business from farmers market vendor to supermarket supplier, the task can be daunting, as the higher labor costs, limited quantities, and more irregular harvests of non-industrial farming makes it difficult to provide the consistency and pricing needed to compete at that level. And while the “Buy Local” buzz can clinch the sale with certain demographics, particularly those with higher incomes, many consumers still resist paying the true cost of sustainable food due to the artificially low prices of the mass-produced, mechanized alternative. These financial pressures can squeeze profit margins and leave farm owners and workers with low pay, no benefits, and high turnover. In such a business environment, higher sales volumes are even more necessary to ensure financial viability.

# RECOMMENDATIONS



***Help growers develop as business leaders, with educational resources that provide:***

- Regulatory and financial guidance pertaining to labeling requirements, which licenses to get, rules for having employees, distribution logistics, marketing, insurance, and taxes
- More learning opportunities held in the communities where people live, in multiple languages

***Develop an agriculture-specific platform in both the digital and physical world to:***

- Network with other growers, share opportunities, and pool resources - similar to the current efforts of [utahsmallgrowers.org](http://utahsmallgrowers.org)
- Partner with local businesses to facilitate easier access to sellers, with real-time information about where to sell/buy foods, similar to the Farm Fresh 24/7 app
- Have a seat at the policy-making table, so that food safety rules reflect the interests and involvement of small scale growers and producers, such as the Home Consumption and Homemade Food Act

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

***Thank you to our collaborators for all their support throughout this process, including the Glendale Community Learning Center, the SPARC Environmental Justice Lab at the University of Utah, the Salt Lake City Sustainability Department, and the community of local urban farmers and aspiring growers who participated in the focus groups.***

