

CASE STUDY:

City of Decatur, Georgia



DECATUR AT A GLANCE

Population: 20,086^a

Land Area (in sq. mi): 4.27^b

Median Income: \$73,679^c

Population in Poverty: 14.3 percent^d

Additional Resources: City of Decatur 2010 Strategic Plan; City of Decatur Community Garden Guidelines; City of Decatur Environmental Sustainability Plan

a U.S. Census Bureau, 2013.

b U.S. Census Bureau, 2010.

c U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

d U. S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2009-2013.

Located just outside of Atlanta, Decatur, Georgia, is the county seat of DeKalb County and one of the state’s most densely-developed cities. Decatur spans just 4.27 square miles and has been built out since the 1950s. The city’s location at the top of four major watersheds creates an opportunity for the community to protect local waters, but it also means that much of the remaining greenspace is in areas designated as floodplain. Decatur is home to Agnes Scott College and Columbia Theological Seminary. Most of its residents commute to nearby Emory University, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or downtown Atlanta for their jobs.

Decatur has seen significant demographic change over the past 20 years. In the 1990s, the city’s median household income was \$35,558;¹ by the 2010 Census, the average income had more than doubled.² The city’s exceptional school system has attracted new residents, which has increased demand for the city’s already limited housing and land stock.

As of 2014, an acre of land in Decatur is worth, on average, \$1 million.³ As a result, property values have risen and the city’s demographics have shifted. In 1990, the city was 59.5 percent white, 38.4 percent African American, 1.1 percent Hispanic/Latino, and 0.9 percent Asian.⁴ In 2010, Decatur was 73.5 percent white, 20.2 percent African American, 2.9 percent Asian, and 3 percent Hispanic/Latino.⁵

Despite its limited usable land, Decatur has seen an increase in community gardening over the past few decades. These efforts have arisen through partnerships between Decatur’s government and residents, and lower-income populations in nearby communities, and are rooted in the City’s Strategic Plan, which supports the entrepreneurial spirit of the city.

History

Early local foods efforts

The city’s first community garden in the plot now known as [Scott Garden](#) was established more than 30 years ago by the residents of Phillips Tower, a senior high-rise community. It was later moved to city property located adjacent to Phillips Tower, and behind the Decatur Recreation Center. Over the past decade, the garden has opened up to the general public and gone through a renovation to incorporate walking paths and an irrigation system.

The garden, which is roughly 1,800 square feet, has an application process for city residents who want to join; the 27 small garden beds are leased for \$25 a year. By the city’s own admission, the guidelines for membership have been onerous in the past, and they have been updated recently to create a more social and manageable endeavor. As of January 2015, monthly

workdays will be held on the third Saturday of each month, with three or four of those events featuring a speaker and potluck meal meant to be shared among the full garden membership. The city's involvement with Scott Garden became a model for the level of its engagement with other plots that have been established.

During the renovation, Decatur's Public Works Department staff helped clear the site and prepare it to be gardened; the city also provides the water that residents use to tend the gardens. The city, however, stops short of actually weeding or watering the plots. Establishing these parameters early on—and maintaining them over the years—has been important in managing expectations of residents who are interested in working with the city on these initiatives.

Educating Decatur's youth

In 1993, Decatur resident Sally Wylde had recently moved to town and began noticing children trampling her neighbor's garden each day as they left school. Instead of calling the police, she got together with several neighbors and invited the children to care for the garden. The children reacted positively to the experience, and Sally decided to expand the garden to a nearby site.

This small project turned into the Oakhurst Community Garden, which was renamed the [Wylde Center](#) in 2012 in honor of its founder, and the multiple garden locations that have become part of the project. The Wylde Center serves as community garden, nature center, neighborhood meeting space, and wildlife habitat that is open for all. Local schools use the space for field trips; local organizations host events to raise awareness for their causes. One significant source of funds for the Wylde Center is its plant sale. Staff and volunteers grow plants in a greenhouse on the premises. The plants are then potted individually and placed in the center's front yard, along with a price sheet and container to collect



Plants grown at the Oakhurst Community Garden.

Source: Stephanie Van Parys and the Wylde Center



The Oakhurst Community Garden is a popular destination for school field trips and a gathering place for the whole community.

Source: Stephanie Van Parys and the Wylde Center

the funds due.

The city supports and partners with the garden to support several of their initiatives. Direct financial contributions have been made to their capital campaign in recent years to preserve and repair the residential home that serves as their administrative offices. Sugar Creek Garden, the second greenspace established by the Wylde Center, is located entirely on city-owned property. While Sugar Creek was initially supported financially by the city, it has become entirely funded by the Wylde Center. The Decatur Earth Day Festival is hosted each year as a collaboration between the Center and several city departments. It is one of the primary outreach events centered on environmental education.

A city supported farmers market

Decatur is home to a 10-year-old farmers market held on Wednesday and Saturday each week. More so than community gardens, the farmers market has felt the impact of Decatur's limited available land and has frequently changed locations as private property owners changed, to increase visibility, and to coordinate with other public uses. The market has strived to establish itself in the face of the complications created by a dense urban environment. It requires space for vendors to load and unload, parking for shoppers, and room for dozens of stalls, which makes it more challenging to situate.

Despite the moves, the market continues to be a strong presence in the community and serves people from varying income levels, whether they reside in Decatur or nearby. The [State of Georgia](#) committed years ago to providing the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) machines necessary to process Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. The market's leaders also work closely with [Wholesome](#)



Community members and their plot at the Decatur Kitchen Garden.

Source: Robin Chanin and the Global Growers Network

[Wave](#) to help run a double bucks program, which doubles in value any SNAP benefits used at the market.

Decatur Kitchen Garden

While community gardens have existed in Decatur for decades, one impetus for their increase and the city's support for them came from Mayor Bill Floyd, who served in this role from 1999 to 2013. Mayor Floyd's initial vision was a full-scale farm that would produce enough to support an expansive farmer's market. City Manager Merriss encouraged a more tempered goal, but agreed that within reason a city-supported community garden would be a worthwhile investment for city staff and resources.

Assistant City Manager David Junger brought management and city expertise to the project, but he and Merriss realized that they needed agricultural experts if this project was really to get off the ground. They reached out to the state-wide non-profit [Georgia Organics](#), which provides "education, mentorship programs, and support systems for Georgia farmers to strengthen and expand the number of organic and sustainable farms in the state,"⁶ to think about budget, a job description for the garden manager, and other planning challenges. The city intended to provide the budget and general oversight of the garden, while contracting out the day-to-day management of the garden.

As the city's vision began to take shape, one of the areas of highest concern was finding the land for the garden. After a thorough review, they realized the most promising plot was right outside of the city limit, in DeKalb County, at the United Methodist Children's Home (UMCH), which had been a self-sustaining farm in the 1950s and 1960s.

City staff discovered Umurima Wa Burundi, also known as the "Burundi Women's Farm," that was located on a plot of privately owned, commercial property. The garden was

being managed by a group operating within Refugee Family Services, which has now become a separate non-profit called the Global Grower's Network.

Decatur staff was struck by how well the Burundi Garden was organized and maintained and how much it seemed to produce for such a small amount of space. They reached out to Susan Pavlin at Refugee Family Services to ask if it would be interested in managing the land at UMCH. Serendipitously, Ms. Pavlin was looking for land and grant partners to expand their agricultural programs.

With UMCH on board and the city able to outsource the garden to the capable team at the Global Grower's Network, Decatur staff got to work solidifying the details of the arrangement. In the end, the city agreed to hold a lease to the land for \$10 per year with a provision to have the land managed by an outside partner. Several key staff members at Refugee Family Services were creating a separate organization called Global Growers, and the city ultimately created a management agreement with Global Growers. Decatur Kitchen Garden was born.

Global Growers and similar organizations provide land and some gardening instruction to immigrant families; the families that have plots are responsible for what is grown and whether it is taken to a farmers market, sold elsewhere, bartered, or just consumed. These kinds of programs have a focus on sustainable agriculture and creating economic opportunity for immigrant communities.

For its part, the city of Decatur provided some staffing and equipment support to help the garden begin running and to support ongoing maintenance. The grounds maintenance supervisor tilled the entire space according to a site plan that was designed to allow water to flow naturally to the plots. The financial contribution was designed to taper off, allowing the garden to slowly become more self-sufficient. The city provided \$40,000 to the Decatur Kitchen Garden in its first year, \$30,000 in the second year, and \$20,000 in the third year.

After a year in operation, the Global Growers' team did a full report to the city on the state of the garden, its impact on the community, and how team members had used the money received from the city. Merriss remembers being blown away by the productivity achieved with so few resources and on such a small amount of land. She claims that, "For everything we've done, either by accident or plan, the Kitchen Garden is one of the most extraordinary."

Given the Kitchen Garden's strong track record, the city was willing to continue finding ways to support its efforts. In 2013, the city helped organize the Decatur Dinner Party, a fundraiser for the Kitchen Garden. This inaugural event relied heavily on city staff to coordinate logistics, marketing, and partnerships, and it raised \$10,000 for the garden. In 2014, the party raised \$14,000 with slightly less city involvement in the planning. Lena Stevens, Decatur's Project Manager, says that the city recognizes that it could turn this event over entirely to Global Growers, but it is happy to leverage its experience and connections working with

vendors to hold the event.

The City's Role in Decatur's Food System

Good fences make good neighbors

A local food system is rarely designed and implemented by a single organization or sector. In Decatur, the city has helped support multi-partner efforts, acting as a convener and facilitator. Importantly, the city has also helped to articulate the role of the different partners and expectations of each in their contributions. While the city has been enthusiastic in its support of local food initiatives, it has also been measured.

In the city's 2010 Strategic Plan, which was developed with significant input from residents, Decatur committed itself to supporting the expansion of gardening opportunities, highlighting the physical, social, economic, and health benefits that community gardens are known to bring.⁷ While providing this overall endorsement, Decatur has limited its role in the implementation of different tactics.

When deciding which role the city should have in these endeavors, it played to its strengths as a source of support, owner of mowers and other relevant equipment, and steward of the big picture. It has allowed residents, partners, and organizations leverage their abilities as gardeners, educators, organizers, and volunteers to manage the day-to-day activities of markets and gardens.

Leveling the field

In 2009, the city established [guidelines for community gardens](#). These guidelines were requested by the City Commission as a way to help elected officials and staff communicate with and educate residents who were leading the efforts to ensure that they are aware of the various considerations to keep in mind. These guidelines include an application, scope of work, information on liability, acknowledgement of garden responsibilities, and guidance from the Decatur Environmental Sustainability Board on urban agriculture. Applications are evaluated on whether proposals:

- Help develop the knowledge of city residents of all ages regarding how to grow food, how to protect the environment while growing food, and how to improve nutrition and food quality.
- Increase opportunities for city residents to interact with one another and celebrate the city's food heritage.
- Are integrated with, assist, and enhance the city's efforts to implement three plans that the city has developed: greenspace plan, stormwater plan, and waste management plan.
- Address short- and long-term funding sources to ensure that the garden does not become a drain on city resources or a nuisance to residents.⁸



Local chefs support the Decatur Kitchen Garden at the annual Decatur Dinner Party.

Source: City of Decatur

A "yes, if" approach

City Manager Merriss takes pride in the entrepreneurial nature of residents and has a history of leveraging their good ideas to benefit the entire community. For several garden initiatives and before the 2009 guidelines were in place, residents would approach her to ask permission to start gardens on plots with environmental sensitivities. Her response was to tell the residents yes, but only if they checked with the affected parties, received sign-off from appropriate city staff, and pulled together the correct supporting documentation.

Encouraging residents' ideas keeps the city government attuned to their interests and concerns. Empowering residents to work through roadblocks toward their ultimate goals allows them to demonstrate their commitment to the issue and ensures that they are aware of all the different factors that need to be considered. This approach makes community gardens and similar projects a true community effort.

WHY SHOULD A LOCAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT COMMUNITY GARDENS?

- **Can attract new residents.** People want to live in a dense, urban environment, but they want a place to go and get dirty.
- **It's a matter of public safety.** Gardens create a small amount of security, should a disaster strike and food supplies cut off.
- **Keeps residents healthy.** Fresh food and the act of gardening feed into goals of fostering an active, healthy community.

— Staff at the City of Decatur

Lessons Learned

- **Don't let great get in the way of good enough.** There are few perfect opportunities to move forward with a food system or other initiative. Decatur has jumped on the opportunities that are good enough to get started with, out of a belief that being in motion will set them up for bigger projects when they come along. This has made it much easier to get momentum and buy-in.

Initially, for instance, Assistant City Manager David Junger was asked to lead the effort to design and staff the Decatur Kitchen Garden. While he had not worked with community gardens before, he had won “garden of the year” in his neighborhood, making him the most qualified person on staff.

- **Plant the seeds for relationships early.** You can't build partnerships the day that you need to do something with those partners. It's important for local government officials to invest time in establishing relationships with community members well before it's time to join together to act. The Decatur Kitchen Garden was a new idea for the city, the Methodist Children's Home, and the Global Growers. Its success hinges on the trust developed between those partners to honor agreements and be transparent in their dealings.
- **Define community broadly.** A key to one of Decatur's most successful local food initiatives was the city's willingness to look past geographical boundaries. The

Decatur Kitchen Garden sits outside of city limits, and most of the farmers are not residents of the city. But the land at UMCH was the best plot of land available and the people that Global Growers supports are the population that would be served best by the initiative.

Even though Decatur and its residents weren't at the center of the site selection and gardens, the Decatur Kitchen Garden has been a boon for the community. Residents are often spotted volunteering at the garden, inviting their neighbors to its fundraisers, and buying the food produced at the local farmers market.

Endnotes

- 1 City of Decatur Comprehensive Plan. City of Decatur: 2005. <http://www.decaturga.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=1701>.
- 2 State and County QuickFacts. U.S. Census. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/1322052.html>. Accessed on 11/25/2014.
- 3 Conversation with City Manager Peggy Merriss on October 21, 2014
- 4 [Comprehensive Plan](#), pg. 2-5.
- 5 [State and County QuickFacts](#).
- 6 “Programs” page. Georgia Organics.com. <https://georgiaorganics.org/about-us/programs/>
- 7 2010 Strategic Plan. City of Decatur, Georgia. 2010. <http://www.decaturga.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=2570>.
- 8 Responsibilities and Guidelines for Communities Gardens on City-Owned Properties. City of Decatur, Georgia. Adopted in 2009. <http://www.decaturga.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=1973>.

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