



**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
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**The urban agriculture revival**

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Some critics of urban agriculture see its growing popularity as a superficial response to public concerns about urban food deserts. However, urban agriculture could evolve instead to become an important part of the U.S. food system, as it already is in much of the rest of the world. The United Nations estimates that more than 800 million people worldwide cultivate fruits and vegetables or grow livestock in cities (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], n.d.). The World Watch Institute estimates that

urban agriculture produces 15 to 20 percent of the world’s food (n.d.). The U.S. Department of Agriculture doesn’t yet collect data on urban agriculture, but urban gardens are becoming an increasingly important source of fresh vegetables and fruits in some cities. This is particularly true in the inner-city communities of old post-industrial cities such as Detroit, Philadelphia, and Camden, New Jersey (Royte, 2015).

The skeptics contend that food production moved out of cities for sound economic reasons and that those reasons are still valid.

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*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer**? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. I spent the first half of my academic career as a free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. During the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t working and wasn’t going to work in the future—not for farmers, rural communities, consumers, or society in general. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark the needed revolution in economic thinking.*

The geographic specialization of large-scale, industrial agricultural operations has proven to be the most effective means of minimizing the costs of food production. With growing specialization and globalization of food production, there seems little prospect of economic survival for the urban agriculture movement. A recent critique of urban agriculture in the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (JAFSCD) concluded: “It would be misleading to pretend that urban gardening could significantly improve food security and affordability” (Hallsworth & Wong, 2013).

However, critics fail to recognize the importance of the non-economic benefits provided by urban agriculture. A set of rebuttals to the JAFSCD critique focused on the quality-of-life benefits to individuals and the social benefits to urban communities, including the potential for fresher and more nutritious food in inner cities (Colasanti & Hamm, 2013) and revitalized urban communities around community gardens (Lavid, 2013). Such public benefits justify publicly funded economic investments in urban agriculture, as well as zoning of urban and peri-urban land to encourage local food production (Evans & Miewald, 2013). As one defender pointed out, “The growing movement is not predicated on false hopes of its productive potential, but recognizes urban cultivation as one of many approaches to address inequalities in the conventional food system” (Weissman, 2013, p. 24).

Urban agriculture is not a new phenomenon. In earlier times, residents of cities either grew their food or bought most of their food from local farmers, by necessity. Even as U.S. cities grew during the 19th century, many urban dwellers continued to rely on backyard gardens and orchards. The “truck farmers” who settled and farmed on the urban fringes met most remaining fresh food needs. They trucked fresh vegetables, fruits, milk,

meat, and eggs into city neighborhoods for home delivery, street vending, or for sale at city markets. As cities continued to grow, however, less space was left for urban gardens and peri-urban truck farms.

Early city planners seemed to have had little concern for preserving land for food production within either cities or urbanizing areas. Green spaces were largely planned as parks where people could retreat to shade trees, scenic lakes, and spacious lawns to make bearable the harsh realities of the old industrial cities. By the late 1800s, however, a few progressive city planners were becoming concerned about the social and environmental desecration of industrial cities.

In 1898, Sir Ebenezer Howard initiated the Garden City Movement in Great Britain. His basic idea was to replace large industrial cities with cities of modest size, ideally around 32,000 people. An inner core of industry would be surrounded by residences, and an outer green belt would be reserved for farms to provide food for the city (The Garden City Movement, n.d.). In 1902, Howard published his classic book, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, which expresses his grave concerns about uncontrolled industrial urbanization, including the loss of urban food security (Howard, 1902). However, his garden cities movement never gained widespread popularity, and by 1930 only two model cities had been developed.

Howard’s concept of garden cities was reframed during the 1920s by Lewis Mumford of New York, a noted scholar, writer, and advocate for ecologically sound urban planning (Wojtowicz, 2001). Mumford’s attempts to revive urban agriculture became more appealing during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The stage was set for the victory gardens of World War II, when individual and community gardening accounted for about half of total U.S. vegetable production (Victory Garden, n.d.). Mumford’s ideas are most notably expressed in his 1961 book, *The City in History, Its Origins, Its*

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*Transformations, and Its Prospects.*

The post-war economic boom of the 1950s brought new employment opportunities that transformed cities, and new chemical and mechanical technologies that transformed agriculture. Suburbs replaced inner cities as the focus of urban economic growth. As cities expanded, peri-urban farms were replaced with commercial and residential developments. The food from urban gardens and orchards and peri-urban truck farms was replaced by food from large industrial produce farms, mostly in California and Florida. People no longer raised food; they bought food. At least those who could afford it did.

The popularity of urban agriculture in the U.S. has tended to be cyclical—growing during times of food scarcity and shrinking during times of abundance. It grew during the economic depressions of the 1890s and 1930s, and again during the recession of 2008, as well as during the two world wars. A 2001 United Nations report confirms a global tendency for urban agriculture to surge in popularity during times of domestic food scarcity (Smit, Nasr, & Ratta, 2001/2011). However, the same report noted the consistent global pattern of decline in urban agriculture in response to economic and agricultural industrialization.

The current revival in urban agriculture in the U.S. does not appear to be a typical cyclical surge because it is occurring during a time of agricultural abundance. Far more than enough food is available in the U.S. to provide everyone with food security, and U.S. farmers have the capacity to produce far more. For example, Americans waste as much as 40 percent of the food produced in the U.S., and significant acreages of U.S. farmland are being devoted to producing biofuels rather than food (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Chief Economist, n.d.). The industrial food system is very productive, but it simply does not make enough nutritious food available in places where people need it most,

notably inner cities. Rather than a response to general food scarcity, the current growth in urban agriculture seems much more like a reversal of the previous decline resulting from economic and agricultural industrialization.

The industrialization of agriculture caused agriculture to move out of urban areas, but now its failure appears to be a primary motivation for returning agriculture to urban areas. The recent urban agriculture movement has coincided with the organic farming, sustainable agriculture, and local agri-food movements. All of these movements are rooted in a rejection of the current industrial agri-food system.

Furthermore, the decimation of inner cities resulting from industrial abandonment now appears to be a primary motivation for urban residents joining together to not only to grow their own food, but also to rebuild their communities. The urban agriculture movement is as much about restoring urban quality of life as improving urban food security. Ecovillages, transition towns, eco-municipalities, and hyperions are 21st century version of the early-20th century garden cities. The current surge in popularity in urban agriculture could mark an urban ecological, social, economic, and cultural revival that is rooted in the continuing quest for enough good food.

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