



Committee of the Whole Report

For the Meeting of July 29, 2021

To: Committee of the Whole **Date:** July 22, 2021
From: Thomas Soulliere, Director of Parks, Recreation and Facilities
Subject: Report Back: Expanding food and pollinator growing initiatives on municipal land

RECOMMENDATION

That Council receive this report for information and confirm which (if any) of the options outlined in this report should be advanced for consideration in the draft 2022 Financial Plan.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides Council with options to increase the cultivation of food and pollinator plants on municipal land, as requested in 2020.

Since 2016, the City has implemented several measures and increased resources to support community-led gardening and food system projects. This has resulted in a significant expansion in the volume of food-bearing and pollinator plants on City property.

As directed by Council, staff have developed options for consideration which support further increasing food and pollinator plants on municipal land. These options include the potential for expanding existing programs and seek to address key factors which influence decisions relating to participation by community groups; specifically, funding and lack of awareness about existing City programs.

Should Council wish to proceed with one or more of the options, staff will present resource requirements through the annual financial planning process and initiate the necessary actions.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to identify opportunities for increased cultivation of food and pollinator plants on municipal lands.

BACKGROUND

The City recognizes gardening and food production as a valuable community activity that contributes to health and well-being, positive social interaction, connections to nature, and food security.

Over the past five years, the City has increased resources available to assist community-led gardening initiatives. This investment includes new grant programs, dedicated staff to coordinate activities, in-kind support for community garden operators, boulevard gardening guidelines, and the Urban Food Tree Stewardship Program.

The City has also adjusted horticulture practices to include food and pollinator plants in the majority of public gardens, based on direction from Council to “naturalize gardens” across Victoria.

In June 2019, Council approved several additional actions to advance food system objectives outlined in the 2019 – 2022 Strategic Plan, including a future City-built, community-run allotment garden as well as food systems targets and outcomes (Appendix A).

In 2020, Council approved a new urban agriculture project to address food security challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, staff utilized existing growing space and resources to launch the *Get Growing, Victoria!* program, an edible plant seedling distribution project. Following a presentation on this project, Council directed staff to report back on options for increasing the cultivation of food and pollinator plants on municipal lands in 2021. This report offers the staff response to this direction, for consideration in 2021/2022.

ISSUES & ANALYSIS

2019-2022 Food Systems Targets and Outcomes

The pandemic continues to impact City operations, including the Parks division, where resources have been directed towards supporting the City’s emergency response and public safety priorities. Despite these circumstances, progress is being made towards the food systems targets and outcomes pertaining to food and pollinator plants on municipal lands.

Food Systems Target Areas	2019 Benchmark	2021 Status	2022 Target
Neighborhoods with a community garden	77%	85%	85%
Neighborhoods with allotment gardens	38%	54%	75%
Number of allotment plots in the City	230	290	460
Neighborhoods with community food trees	31%	61%	100%

Further Increasing Food and Pollinator Plants on Municipal land

Many of the City’s existing programs are providing incremental increases in food and pollinator plants on municipal land, as detailed in Appendix B. Apart from the City’s own gardens, which are managed by horticulture staff, the current urban agriculture program focuses on supporting community capacity to develop and manage gardens that serve resident needs across the municipality. Although the 2020 direction to staff did not specify a desired level of increase in planting on municipal land, staff have identified options and associated implications for consideration which follow the existing community-based program model.

The options detailed in the following section have been selected as they respond to demand and community interest and address key barriers which may be limiting factors for residents. These include financial barriers and a lack of awareness of gardening opportunities. The recommendations are expected to further increase progress towards the food systems targets, and result in more community participation in growing food and pollinator plants on municipal land.

OPTIONS & IMPACTS

The following options are presented for Council consideration.

Option 1: Expand the Get Growing, Victoria! initiative

In 2021 the demand for *Get Growing, Victoria!* seedlings exceeded the available supply by approximately 40%, which points to the program's success and popularity. The City currently provides 80,000 seedlings to the community through the program. An increase of 20% in seedlings grown in the City's nursery would result in 100,000 seedlings distributed to the community and further address the current demand of the program.

Financial and Human Resource Impacts

Expanding *Get Growing, Victoria!* would require additional operating funding to support an increase in labour and material costs.

If Council would like to proceed with this option, staff should be directed to include an ongoing supplemental request of \$15,000 for consideration as a part of the Draft 2022 Financial Plan.

Option 2: Provide start-up funding to support the Food Tree Stewardship Program

Since 2016, the City has offered a Food Tree Stewardship Program, which encourages citizens' stewardship of food-bearing trees on City land as an asset for promoting food security, food education, and urban forest growth. One of the food systems targets is for all neighbourhoods to have community food trees by 2022. To date, 61 percent of neighbourhoods have community food trees, and only ten food trees have been planted on public land under the Food Tree Stewardship Program.

Based on feedback from residents, barriers to the program's growth include tree establishment costs, a lack of community awareness, and water access. However, there is keen interest from community stakeholders to take part in this program if start-up support was available; eight local organizations have expressed interest in participating in the Food Tree Stewardship Program beginning in fall/winter of 2021/2022.

Staff have identified the option of providing \$10,000 in annual grant funding to help address financial barriers for community organizations wishing to participate in the Food Tree Stewardship Program. The grant recipients would receive support covering the cost of installing a water connection, food trees and tree planting supplies, including tree stakes, ties, wire fencing for deer protection, and bark mulch. Providing this start-up funding is projected to result in approximately 30 food trees being planted on public land annually.

Financial and Human Resource Impacts

If Council would like to proceed with this option, ongoing supplemental funding of \$10,000 should be referred for consideration as part of the Draft 2022 Financial Plan.

This direction would also require that the City update the terms of reference of the Community Garden Start-Up Grant to include start-up funding for the Food Tree Stewardship Program.

Option 3: Expand Volunteer Coordinator Grant eligibility

The Volunteer Coordinator Grant was launched in 2015 and allows for the distribution of grant funding of approximately \$10,000 per neighbourhood for non-profits needing assistance with volunteer coordination relating to community garden operations, as well as other City gardening programs.

As community gardening activities in each neighbourhood expand, staff have observed that providing funding on a per-neighbourhood basis may no longer be the most effective method of supporting non-profit gardening groups equitably. In recent years, the City has heard from organizations that more flexible grant support is needed to reflect the number and scale of gardening projects being managed per organization.

For example, in neighbourhoods where multiple organizations manage gardening projects, the \$10,000 funding is divided between organizations. In contrast, in a neighbourhood with no competing gardening activities, one gardening project will receive the entire funding allocation regardless of the scale of the project.

Staff have noted that removing the “per-neighbourhood” limit and revising the Volunteer Coordinator Grant Terms of Reference would allow applicants to apply for any amount up to \$10,000. These changes would enable smaller projects that do not need the full funding allocation to apply for amounts that reflect lower project costs. The adjustment would also support neighbourhoods with multiple community gardens while prioritizing neighbourhoods that would most benefit from this grant.

Implementing these changes will result in the grant changing from a direct award grant to a competitive grant, requiring Council to amend the City Grant Policy. Increased flexibility within the terms of reference could lead to greater participation in the program and therefore help to increase the cultivation of food and pollinator plants on municipal land.

Financial and Human Resource Impacts

If Council wishes to proceed with this option, the terms of reference for the Volunteer Coordinator Grant would need to be updated and the City Grant Policy amended, which could be completed within existing resources.

Option 4: Develop a Growing in the City (GITC) feature map

Existing City guides, fact sheets, and the City’s website provide detailed information on *Growing in the City (GITC)* programs; however, these materials are static and may not provide a clear overview of the various opportunities to grow food on public land. Moreover, there is potential to increase food and pollinator plants on City land through the promotion and engagement of the boulevard

gardening program. Residential boulevards make up 17% of municipal land; however, a very small amount is currently used for boulevard gardening.

Staff have noted that developing an interactive GITC feature map, to illustrate the range of opportunities to grow food and pollinator plants in the City could be a valuable new tool. Such a map, would replace the current “Community Garden” feature map, and include the following: Boulevard Gardens; Community Food Trees; Pollinator Pathways; Existing Community Gardens; Community Garden Potential and *Get Growing, Victoria!* distribution sites.

The interactive and dynamic features of the proposed map, combined with public communication of the new tool, may help raise awareness of the various opportunities and resources to grow food and pollinator plants on City land, and as a result increase participation.

Financial and Human Resource Impacts

Creating the GITC feature map could be accommodated with existing staff capacity and funding levels.

Future food and pollinator growing initiatives

Further community engagement with food systems stakeholders, including the Urban Food Table, will be conducted throughout 2022. The consultation will evaluate current programs, help develop future Urban Food Targets and inform the creation of new innovative community-based, food-growing and pollinator initiatives. The findings from this consultation will be reported to Council as part of the annual GITC update in 2022.

Accessibility Impact Statement

Urban agriculture programs are of critical importance to citizens of all ages and abilities. Staff will continue to work with community partners to ensure accessibility remains a focus of the planning, design and implementation of food and pollinator planting initiatives.

2019 – 2022 Strategic Plan

Objective #5, item 24: “Look for opportunities to increase food production on public land including increasing community gardens in all neighborhoods in the city and building urban food systems into our parks operations”.

Impacts to Financial Plan

Where applicable, the potential impacts of the options noted above would be presented for Council consideration as part of the annual financial planning processes.

Official Community Plan Consistency Statement

The opportunities presented in this report support the OCP’s objectives to encourage food production and gardening on City land.

CONCLUSIONS

The City is making consistent progress towards the food systems targets approved by Council in 2019. This growth is directly related to the level of community participation in the *Growing in the City* programs and investments being made by the City on an annual basis. The options outlined in this report provide further considerations, for expansion of food and pollinator plants on municipal land through the community-based model.

Respectfully submitted,

Navdeep Sidhu
Assistant Director

Thomas Soulliere
Director

Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager.

List of Attachments

Appendix A: 2019-2022 Food Systems Targets & Outcomes

Appendix B: City programs that will increase food and pollinator plants on City land in 2021-2022