

*The Grass Isn't Greener: Exploring the Motivations for and
Barriers to Home Gardening in Rhode Island*

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Executive Summary

Food production and consumption in Rhode Island must be understood within a national and even global context because the average food item travels between 1,500 and 2,500 miles before reaching a consumer's plate.ⁱ Moreover, modern, industrial farms often grow only one or two crops and depend upon synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, heavy machinery and large-scale irrigation, which in turn depend upon natural gas and oil reserves. According to a recent Cornell University study, production of the average American diet requires more than 500 gallons of oil per person per year.ⁱⁱ These factors combine to create a host of consequences that significantly impact human health and the environment, such as global climate change and high levels of air, water and soil pollution.

In the face of such overwhelming problems, it is sometimes difficult to find the motivation for personal action, despite the fact that profound issues like climate change demand - in addition to top-down policy - a combination of many actions at the individual level. This is one reason why vegetable gardening is such an attractive prospect. In addition to empowering an individual against the large scale consequences of our food supply, growing some of one's own food combats more tangible problems faced by Rhode Island residents and their communities. Gardening can reduce diet-related diseases, high grocery bills, and childhood obesity, while increasing self sufficiency, promoting exercise, reducing stress and providing hands-on education for children and adults. As Michael Pollan once wrote, growing even a little of one's own food is "one of those solutions that, instead of begetting a new set of problems - the way 'solutions' like ethanol or nuclear power inevitably do - actually beget other solutions, and not only of the kind that save carbon."ⁱⁱⁱ

While I advocate for the increase of local food through community gardening, vacant lot gardening and small scale farming, this thesis focuses almost exclusively on the value of home vegetable gardening. Aside from avoiding the need for land acquisition, the proximity of front and backyards to homes provides a number of benefits for growing food: visibility encourages tending and provides more security for produce while pre-existing water supplies prevent the need for costly installation.

Rhode Island's front and backyards possess the potential to grow the most local and nutritious food possible, and although some residents are already growing their own food, it is clear that there is room for many more gardens in the state. A large portion of my research therefore focuses on the reasons why most Rhode Island citizens do not grow a portion of their own food, and conversely, what motivates those who do.

With the ultimate goal of increasing the number of home gardens in Rhode Island, I interviewed customers at farmers markets, a population I believed would be the most amenable to the idea of gardening at home. These interviews revealed a number of barriers that are both common and possible to address. Two of the most significant barriers found were perceived or real concerns about soil contamination and a general lack of knowledge about growing food. Notably, I found that many current gardeners also struggle with lack of knowledge, which they feel significantly affects their success in the garden.

Taking into consideration the information gathered from my interviews, I recommend a number of ways in which home vegetable gardening might be expanded in Rhode Island. I focus specifically on the recommendation of garden coaching in which an experienced gardener is matched with a person who lacks the knowledge or confidence necessary to grow food successfully in their front or backyard. I highlight this recommendation because it is both feasible at the present time and because it has the potential to address many of the barriers brought up during my interviews. Lastly I discuss how the garden coaching recommendation was put into action in collaboration with the University of Rhode Island Master Gardener program.

ⁱ Halweil, Brian, Thomas Prugh. Home Grown: The Case for Local Food in a Global Market. Massachusetts: Worldwatch Institute, November 2002. p. 6.

ⁱⁱ Pimentel, et al. "Reducing Energy Inputs in the U.S. Food System." *Human Ecology*, Vol. 36, No. 4. (2008). p. 459.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pollan, Michael. "Why Bother?" *New York Times Magazine*, Sunday April 20, 2008.