Growing food in urban environments provides many economic, social, environmental and health benefits. It promotes food security, brings communities together and makes good use of unused or abandoned land. The act of gardening promotes physical activity and provides fresh and nutritious foods. However, because of the nature of urban and industrial activity in cities, environmental contaminants are sometimes found in urban soil.

This fact sheet provides basic advice for gardening and farming in urban areas where there may be concerns about environmental contamination.

Where do I Start?

Know your garden plot:

Do you know what your garden plot was used for in the past? Is it near heavy traffic, painted structures or industrial emissions? Do you know anything about the soil? Answers to these questions will help you decide whether to test your soil for environmental contaminants and what to test it for. Following are some simple gardening practices for everyone to consider in order to enjoy the many benefits of gardening while avoiding the contaminants sometimes found in soil.
Most garden fruits and vegetables do not easily absorb chemicals. It depends on soil type and pH, types of and concentrations of chemicals, organic matter in the soil, levels of nutrients like calcium, plant type, and plant growth stage. Some produce such as tubers and root vegetables are more likely to absorb chemicals into the edible portions, but most plants do not absorb chemicals into the fruits or leaves. Careful planning and specific actions can reduce the exposure to and uptake of many chemicals by plants.

There are several ways to do this:

- Keep the soil damp while gardening to limit kicking up dust where you can breathe it in and where it can collect on garden foods. Covering bare ground also limits exposure to soil by creating a physical barrier. Examples may include mulch, landscape fabric, grass or other groundcover plants.

- Consider investing in soaker hoses or water at the base of a plant. This minimizes splash back that can occur when watering plants from above and can help prevent plant diseases and save on water.

- Plant your crops away from building, utility poles, busy roadways or other sources of potential contamination.

- Do your best to remove the dirt from you edibles. Vegetables like broccoli and leafy greens need to be soaked in water for a few minutes in order to remove the small amounts of dirt and dust that can “hide” in hard to reach areas. For all other veggies, use running water and scrub them a well before eating them. This is especially important for root crops.

- Avoid planting root crops in soil with known lead contamination.
Having a rain barrel can be a life saver in the vegetable garden during those hot summer months. Saving water not only helps protect the environment, it saves you money and energy. Diverting water from storm drains also decreases the impact of runoff to streams. Therefore, a rain barrel is an easy way for you to have a consistent supply of clean, fresh and free water for outdoor use.

Other things to consider:

- Plant gardens at least a foot away from the “drip line” of a house or building, which is where water runs off the roof. This keeps food crops away from potential chemical residues coming off roof shingles, or from where house painting activities may have occurred over the years.
- Improve your soil quality by adding composted foods, grass clippings, and leaves that are free of pesticides or crop fertilizers, or add garden amendments intended for food crops.
- Test your soil if you have concerns about contaminants (see resources on the last page).
- Take shoes off when entering the home.
- Wash hands right after gardening, even when you use gloves.
- Children are more sensitive to environmental contaminants and need teaching and encouragement to become healthy urban gardeners.
- Animals that play in or around the garden can collect soil on their fur and feet.
- Bringing in clean soil and using raised beds is an option in areas with known high levels of contamination.
HEALTHY URBAN GARDENING

HOW TO START YOUR OWN COMMUNITY GARDEN

1. Form a garden planning committee
2. Identify resources (funds, people, equipment)
3. Approach potential sponsors
4. Choose a site
5. Prepare and develop the site
   - Research property history
   - Analyze soil samples
   - Determine site clean-up and garden design
   - Plan the garden design for children, other sensitive groups, and those with special needs
6. Decide on membership, identify management, roles, and responsibilities
7. Prepare volunteer crews and gather needed materials and equipment
8. Write garden rules and bylaws
9. Determine insurance needs
10. Establish communication network for members

GEORGIA SPECIFIC RESOURCES

UGA Cooperative Extension
University of Georgia
www.extension.uga.edu
(800) ASK-UGA1

UGA Agriculture Testing Laboratory
http://aesl.ces.uga.edu
(706) 542-5350

USDA Alternative Farming Systems Information Center
http://afsic.nal.usda.gov
(301) 504-6559

EPA Urban Agriculture Program
www.epa.gov/brownfields/urbanag

GEPD Brownfields Program
www.gaepd.org/brownfields
(404) 656-2833

American Community Garden Association
www.communitygarden.org
e-mail info@communitygarden.org
(877) ASK-ACGA

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
www.atsdr.cdc.gov/sites/brownfields
(800) 232-4636

English Avenue Community Farm near downtown Atlanta (www.wikipedia.org).

We Protect Lives.