In the wake of the COVID-19, more libraries are taking their activities outdoors. Outdoor spaces are becoming a valuable resource for library programmers.

Libraries have always energized their spaces with plant life, whether with indoor potted plants or outdoor landscaping. In recent years however, librarians have gone beyond the occasional fern or shrub to embrace the vast potential of using gardens to expand the reach of their services and collections. Library staff eager to develop STEAM educational programs have re-discovered that gardens are the original Maker Spaces, filled with possibilities for introducing DIY and STEAM skills, such as biology, agriculture, botany, herbal medicine, nutrition, and food prep. Library gardens have been gaining in interest even more in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the height of the pandemic, many libraries quickly pivoted to outdoor activities to keep customers engaged while safeguarding their health. Library staff quickly discovered that outdoor spaces offered many benefits, especially for youth activities. Children had the freedom to be loud and make messes, without disrupting patrons seeking space for quiet reading and study indoors. Also, the outdoors are a natural stimulating environment for young learners. Because of this, many libraries are now looking into installing permanent outdoor classroom and multi-purpose spaces, ranging from simple patios or garden beds to entire playscapes.

HISTORY OF LIBRARIES AND OUTDOOR SPACES

There is an established history of symbiotic relationships between libraries and gardens. The earliest recorded library gardens were in China, where intellectuals built themselves “scholar gardens” as spaces for private study and retreat. Ssu-Ma Kuang, a Confucian scholar from the eleventh century, kept his personal library of manuscripts in his garden.

Public libraries began exploring the possibilities of gardens and outdoor spaces during the early days of industrialization in the nineteenth century. Libraries in large, dense American cities began creating outdoor rooftop reading rooms, to create homier spaces for their patrons while providing them with fresh air and sunshine. Outdoor spaces became valuable resources for libraries during the 1930s, when many of those left unemployed by the Great Depression would gather at public libraries during the day. Libraries found room for the swell of patrons by
establishing outdoor reading rooms on their lawns or nearby parks, providing books, magazines, and tables. A New York Public Library branch established an outdoor reading room such as this at nearby Bryant Park. This program was revived in 2003. The Bryant Park Reading Room is still ongoing today, and along with books features live readings, writing workshops, and book clubs.

Speaking of Bryant Park — this vibrant park held up by urban planners and architects as a shining example of the transformation of a dilapidated area into a beloved public amenity. The park was neglected in overgrown in the eighties, but surgical changes to improve visibility and circulation for pedestrians brought the site back to life. The classical design of Bryant Park, originally designed in 1934, complements the Beaux-Arts style building housing the library. Bryant Park’s formal garden design features tidy pathways, evenly spaced rows of trees, and a plaza with a fountain. The park has a secret — a two story stack extension for book storage is hidden beneath the park grounds.

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, libraries embraced outdoor services and programs more than ever. Outdoor services included “library take-out” programs, where librarians encouraged discovery by setting up outdoor tables with books for browsing. Some libraries began “park and read” programs, where families could listen in on story time from the safety of their cars on the library parking lot. During this time, libraries have discovered the outdoor real estate is a valuable resource. Your library may be currently considering an expansion into the great outdoors.

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**BENEFITS OF GARDENS AT LIBRARIES**

- **Health benefits to patrons and staff:** Access to nature and plant life has proven mental and emotional health benefits. Proponents of trauma-informed design often extoll the role green spaces can play in promoting feelings of security, serenity, and self-esteem.

- **Outreach to new potential patrons:** A library garden with community activities is an opportunity to bring in members of the community who normally wouldn’t visit the library, and serve as a starting point to connect them with other library programs.

- **Curbside appeal:** Attractive outdoor spaces, especially ones designed for children, entice passerbys and draw them in to explore the library.

- **Diverse program opportunities:** Gardens provide a cornucopia of opportunities for libraries to engage learners of all ages. From teaching about plant life cycles by having children plant seeds and seedlings; to teaching about history through historical garden designs; to supplementing literary studies with gardens inspired by books and authors. The possibilities are only limited by a library programmer’s imagination (and we all know that resource is always abundant!)

- **Activate underutilized space:** Many libraries struggle with limited space for classrooms and activities. A well-designed outdoor area can be a budget-conscious way of creating more space for community and educational and community-building activities.

- **Improve the site environment:** Gardens offer several practical benefits to make site and facility maintenance easier (and less costly). Carefully selected plants can control storm water run-off, improve air quality, and reduce the heat island effect of pavement.

- **Promote sustainability:** Libraries can contribute to sustainability efforts by planting gardens that will benefit local pollinators and birds. Certain plants also improve soil health by loosening up compacted soil and regenerating depleted soil with fresh nitrogen. On a macro scale, green spaces help check the impact of global warming.

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Visitors enjoying Bryant Park on a sunny afternoon. A stage is set up in the background for programming. Photo by Sue Pruchnicki.
TYPES OF LIBRARY GARDENS

Through our research and discussions with librarians, we’ve discovered many imaginative garden designs and concepts used by libraries. Here’s just a few of the endless possibilities we’ve encountered:

- **Community Gardens:** These gardens assign structured plots to individual patrons, who are then responsible for maintaining the plot. The library supports these patrons by providing water, tools, and educational opportunities. These gardens promote social cohesion while addressing food insecurity and public health in communities by offering the opportunity to harvest fresh fruit and vegetables. Many libraries also offer seed libraries, where patrons can acquire seeds for planting in community plots or their own home gardens.

- **Demonstration Garden:** These gardens offer educational opportunities by spotlighting specific gardening methods, like xeriscapes, home seed-to-table gardening, and hydroponic towers, or specific categories of plants, such as native plants, pollinators, or medical plants. Demonstration gardens provide programming opportunities for classes and tours.

- **Children’s Area:** These areas are designed to support exploration, play, and programming for a library’s youngest patrons and their families. If you’re feeling ambitious, these library gardens can incorporate playgrounds and playspaces for added fun. Library gardens offer many benefits for children: developing gross motor skills, observational and visual-spatial skills. Programs that encourage children to work together on gardening projects help them develop social and problem-solving skills, as well as serving as an introduction to STEAM learning.

- **Literary garden:** These gardens feature designs or plant varieties drawn from literary sources and inspiration. For example, the Chinese Garden at the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens draws inspiration from classic Chinese literature, and poetic couplets written in Chinese calligraphy can be found throughout the garden.

- **Historical garden:** A historical garden can be an opportunity to explore a community’s history by reflecting the architectural period of the library building or surrounding neighborhood. Many periods in art and architectural history had accompanying trends in garden design which would be fascinating subjects for a history enthusiast on your team to dig into and explore. Consider a 19th century Victorian-style garden bursting with popular plants of the period: asters, begonias, ferns, heliotropes, morning glories, and roses.

- **Sensory garden:** These gardens don’t just look beautiful — they engage all the senses with smell (pleasantly aromatic flowers and leaves), sound (rustling leaves and grasses, rattling seed pods), touch (pleasantly textured foliage), and even taste (edible herbs and flowers such as mint or lemon balm). Some plants have very unique sensory qualities — Spilanthes flowers, also known as toothache plants, cause a mild numbing sensation when sucked on! Because these gardens engage all the senses, they are excellent for visually impaired patrons.

- **Dye gardens:** Libraries with an interest in arts integration can nurture plants that can be turned into hand-made dyes for fabrics, yarns, and paper, such as indigo (deep blue), marigolds (yellow), hibiscus (reds and pinks), woad (blues) and madder (orange and reds). These gardens offer exciting opportunities for partnering with local artists and arts organizations.
POSSIBLE RISKS

Creating a library garden isn’t as simple as scattering some seeds on the ground. A project such as this requires careful planning, or it can have unpredicted downsides.

• **Overextending budget and resources**: Creating a garden or green space can become expensive, with the costs of plants, soil, fertilizers, tools, and other materials quickly adding up. Establishing and maintaining a garden can also eat up valuable staff time and energy.

• **Neglect**: When a garden is not properly maintained, overgrown or dying plants quickly devolve into an unattractive, messy, and underutilized space; which degrades the library site’s curb appeal and creates a stressful, depressing environment for patrons and staff.

• **Unwanted wildlife**: Although most of us start gardens with the hope of attracting charming birds and butterflies, they can also draw more troublesome wildlife, such as rabbits or deer. These animals will ruin your efforts by gobbling up your plants, and can also cause trouble for your surrounding neighborhood.

• **Vandalism**: If a site is unsupervised or accessible after hours, you risk destruction of your garden by vandals, or unintentional damage from trespassers or uninformed harvesters.

• **Unpleasant indoor environment**: Indoor plants can also cause headaches for librarians, by creating humidity problems or attracting insects.

• **Rooftop garden challenges**: Roof gardens can make tracking down leaks difficult, and not all building structures can safely carry the combined weight of soil, plants, and retained water.

• **Invasive species**: Be cautious about which plants you select for your garden: some may be considered invasive species in your region, and cause damage to your local ecosystem. Look to local gardening or native plant organizations, or public gardens, as resources for learning which plants are nuisances.

HOW TO START YOUR GARDEN — THE RIGHT WAY!

To avoid the risks outlined above, follow these suggested steps:

• **Be patient and realistic** — gardens can take a year or longer to realize.

• **Talk to other successful, local public gardens and park managers for lessons learned.** Many communities have very active gardening organizations filled with volunteers eager to share their expertise with you.

• **Contact local authorities** to identify ordinances and rules about public spaces, such as ADA compliance.

• **Poll staff and patrons to gauge interest**

• **Establish measurable goals and outcomes**, such as increased program attendance and diversity, education on healthier eating, or outreach to children with disabilities.

• **Create an implementation plan**, including fundraising, volunteer solicitations and milestone dates.

• **Don’t completely outsource the tasks of creating and maintaining a garden** — identify library staff that can/want to manage the development of the garden and the program opportunities, as well as can/want to manage volunteers and maintenance needs. Some libraries have even hired garden managers specifically for this purpose.

• **Determine the best location for the garden**, taking into consideration water source, drainage, soil type and conditions, available sunlight, and accessibility.

• **Engage local experts**, such as your local Master Gardeners organization, to consult on the design.

Starting a library garden requires careful planning — create a long-term plan for maintaining funding, garden upkeep, and volunteer recruitment and retention early!

Rendering of a conceptual design for a patio and outdoor programming space at Maryville Community Library in Illinois. Design by Bond Architects.

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Establishing community partnerships is an excellent method for sourcing volunteers, funding, and programming for your garden space. It also raises your library’s profile in the community and attracts new potential patrons. The organizations listed below are good places to start:

- Scouts
- 4-H or Future Farmers of America clubs
- Botanical gardens and public gardens
- Garden clubs
- Parks and Recreation departments
- Master Gardener and Agricultural Extension programs
- Horticulture and Biology university programs
- Schools with community service requirements
- Service organizations
- Senior citizens organizations: members may have downsized at home but miss the opportunity for gardening. Because of their experience, seniors may also have a depth of knowledge of what plants and gardening techniques work well in the local environment.
- Aligned industries and businesses: home garden centers, hardware stores, tree service professionals, and landscape professionals

SUSTAINING THE GARDEN

Establishing the garden is only the first step: you must ensure you have the ongoing materials, resources, and labor to maintain it. Integrating enthusiasm for fresh, exciting new projects is often easier than retaining consistent interest in established programs. Make sure you are putting the effort into volunteer recruitment and retention beyond initial planning to ensure the longevity of your project. Take time to consider ways of volunteer recognition that will maintain their enthusiasm and interest in the project. Planning for continued funding of your garden project is also important. Be sure to research renewable funding options to cover the cost of maintaining your garden.
WHEN TO HIRE A CONSULTANT

Gardens can be successfully accomplished as DIY projects, or with the help of community partners. However, you may considering hiring an architect or other design professional to assist your library with the project. Although it may seem expensive, hiring a design professional can save you money in the long run because they are aware of all the potential pitfalls, challenges, and setbacks you may face, and will get the project done right the first time. Design professionals also have insights into the life-cycle and maintenance costs of materials, and will know which materials will save you on long-term costs. Also, the spatial and visual thinking skills of a design professional will help discover how to maximize the potential of your outdoor space.

SERVICES AN ARCHITECT OR PLANNER CAN PROVIDE INCLUDE:

- Knowledge of regulations and codes.
- Accessibility and ADA compliance.
- Designing for safety and security.
- Infrastructure, such as water for plants.
- Design of raised beds, pathways, and steps.
- Safely installing sculptures and other artwork.
- Planning around drainage, erosion, and other land management issues.
- Safely planning and installing rooftop gardens.
- Design and installation of more complex fixtures or structures such as gazebos, pavilions, drinking fountains and water features.

MAIN TAKE-AWAYS

- Set aside enough time to plan and fundraise for the most appropriate, useful, and sustainable garden for your library and its surrounding community.
- Reach out to community partners to broaden your base of support for creating, sustaining, and programming the garden space.
- Know when it’s best to hire a professional to help design your outdoor space.
FOOTNOTES


3) The Huntington Chinese Garden: https://www.huntington.org/chinese-garden

WORKS CITED


RECOMMENDED READING


LIBRARY GARDEN EXAMPLES

Kokomo-Howard County Public Library Butterfly Garden [Howard County, Indiana]
Bryant Park Reading Room [New York City, New York]
Washoe County Library Downtown Reno Branch Indoor Garden [Reno, Nevada]
St. Louis County Community Gardens [St. Louis, MO]
National Library of Medicine Herb Garden [Montgomery County, Maryland]
Nature Explorium at Middle County Public Library [Centereach & Selden, NY]
Imaginarium Garden at Southfield Public Library [Southfield, MI]
Loudon Extension Series: Gardening & Architecture [Loudoun County, VA]
High Point Public Library Teaching Garden [High Point, North Carolina]
Pottsboro Area Public Library Community Garden [Pottsboro, TX]

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