An Introduction to Backyard Growers

Backyard Growers was founded in 2010 by urban farmer, Lara Lepionka, as a way to help her neighbors stretch their budgets by growing their own food. Originally a program of the Cape Ann Farmers’ Market and later with partnership support from The Food Project, Backyard Growers has grown exponentially to serve a broad segment of the region’s low- to moderate-income residents. Programs focus on serving children, families and older adults with garden beds, community gardens and school programs.

The Strategic Planning Process

Backyard Growers has had tremendous success introducing thousands of people to growing their own food. Indeed, this strategic plan is a product of that very success. The purpose of this strategic plan is to propel Backyard Growers to even greater success. The planning process took place between June and August 2018. Activities included:

- Facilitated focus groups with community members, staff and the Board of Directors
- Surveys of the community, staff and the Board of Directors
- Interviews of selected stakeholders

A total of more than 90 people were involved in the strategic planning process.

Implementation and Monitoring

The planning process resulted in this strategic plan which has been approved by the Backyard Growers’ Board of Directors. To implement this plan, the staff, in consultation with the Board of Directors, is developing a three year implementation plan. The Executive Director will report regularly to the full board on the status of implementation, including progress toward each of the strategic goals.
Strategic Analysis:
Where Backyard Growers is Today

Need Statement

Poverty, childhood obesity, and food insecurity are pressing issues in Gloucester. 54% of Gloucester children are from low- to moderate-income households. The U.S. Census Bureau defines four of Gloucester’s neighborhoods as “poverty census tracts” or “food deserts.” A Project Bread study shows that in these areas, over one third of households struggle to put food on the table. In the Gloucester Schools, 37% of students are overweight or obese—higher than the state average of 32%. Backyard Growers addresses these issues by creating direct access to healthy food through gardens and by providing hands-on educational programs that promote growing one’s own food and healthy eating habits.

The Context

Since its inception in 2010, Backyard Growers has built or improved over 285 garden beds in Gloucester alone, serving over 3,000 individuals. This year, Backyard Growers will serve 100% of pre K-7th grade and 9th grade Gloucester students (2,150 students) with its School Garden Programs and Farm to School initiatives. Students learn where real food comes from by participating in classroom and after school programs, “fresh and local” cafeteria tastings, and through hands-on garden activities that culminate with students harvesting the vegetables from their school gardens and eating their produce in the school cafeteria. Backyard Growers’ simple, systems-based approach to school garden education makes its programs sustainable and replicable. Through its new consulting practice, Backyard Growers has successfully expanded its Salad Days and Fall Harvest Days school garden model to other school districts, including Lynn, Chicopee, Rockport, Manchester, and Marblehead, serving thousands of students each year.

Backyard Growers’ Community and Backyard Garden Programs provide raised bed gardens, garden and cooking trainings, garden management, and garden mentor support. Backyard Growers currently hosts four community gardens with a total of 84 garden beds in low-income housing communities and built a new community garden in 2018 at Willowood Gardens, a Gloucester Housing Authority property. Backyard Growers also serves four gardens at partner community organizations; The Open Door, Action Emergency Shelter, The Grace Center, and North Shore Health Project. 80% of Backyard Growers’ gardeners reside in Gloucester’s poverty or food desert census tracts and all of its community and backyard gardens maintain waiting lists. Backyard Growers’ community garden model is in demand in its region and Backyard Growers has recently been approached by a large New England housing authority group to bring its successful model to future housing developments, indicating a new area of growth for sharing its program models. Backyard Growers programs are becoming known across the state and it is consistently presented with opportunities for replication and expansion.
State of the Organization

The strategic planning process looked at the strengths and areas for growth and improvement for Backyard Growers keeping in mind the unique challenges and opportunities at this stage of organizational development. The highlights of this current state assessment are shared below.

Strengths
- Lara Lepionka, Founder
- Dedicated and talented staff
- Successfully brings people together, building community
- Successfully inspires, teaches and supports people to grow food
- Excellent reputation
- Financially stable
- Strong community support
- Partnership with schools
- Systems focus
- Learning organization – dynamic and nimble

Challenges
- Founder driven
- Under staffed
- Inadequate staff compensation and development
- Inadequate space
- Shifting funding sources
- Demand for services exceeds capacity
- Scaling up to a larger organization
- Need to extend Backyard Growers’ presence to the larger community, beyond Backyard Growers’ gardeners
- Inadequate branding

Opportunities
- Approached to bring Backyard Growers’ model to housing developments
- Expand Backyard Growers’ model to communities beyond Backyard Growers’ current geographic presence

Threats
- Disadvantageous and/or unpredictable government policies and regulations
Envisioning the Future & Setting Direction

Vision Statement
Backyard Growers envisions a healthy community in Gloucester and beyond where:

● Everyone has direct access to healthy food through gardens
● Educational programs that promote growing one’s own food and healthy eating habits are a priority
● Growing food together connects people and builds community
● Neglected urban spaces are reactivated through food production

Mission Statement
Backyard Growers cultivates healthy, connected, environmentally sustainable communities and fights for food justice by teaching people to grow their own food.

Goals & Objectives
As a start up, Backyard Growers very successfully focused on bringing gardening and the gardening experience to Gloucester. While still working to expand and deepen its presence in Gloucester, Backyard Growers has grown to the point where its primary opportunities are to focus on two different things: to spread its wings, expanding beyond Gloucester, and to strengthen its roots, building the foundation for sustainable success.
Goals

Goal 1: Expand and deepen Backyard Growers’ involvement in Gloucester

Objective 1.1 Establish one additional community garden which is also a learning urban farm environment and is accessible to the Gloucester community regardless of income, possibly to be created as a partnership with the City

Objective 1.2 Introduce a farm to school experience to the Gloucester Public Schools 8th grade

Objective 1.3 Partner with the Gloucester Public Schools to improve the school food environment

Goal 2: Develop a practice consulting to groups working to establish gardening programs in geographic areas beyond Gloucester

Objective 2.1 Develop and implement a business plan to establish a significant consulting practice

Objective 2.2 Develop models and templates to replicate Backyard Growers’ successful programs

Objective 2.3 Deliver a district-wide consulting project in a high-need Massachusetts school district

Objective 2.4 Deliver a substantive consulting project outside of Massachusetts

Objective 2.5 Increase annual consulting revenue by 50%

Objective 2.6 Participate in the larger discourse as a thought leader, advocate, and spokesperson for best practices

Goal 3: Strengthen Backyard Growers’ organizational systems and infrastructure to support current operations and future growth.

Objective 3.1 Develop a competitive work environment including appropriate compensation and opportunities for career advancement

Objective 3.2 Develop appropriate levels of staffing, both paid and volunteer

Objective 3.3 Develop the Board to provide vision, leadership and governance; including clarifying roles and responsibilities, instituting a program of strategic board recruitment and orientation, and moving towards a best practices model of board performance

Objective 3.4 Develop policies and procedures appropriate for the size and complexity of the organization

Objective 3.5 Establish long term sustainable funding strategies

Objective 3.6 Establish appropriate physical space

Conclusion

With these goals and objectives, Backyard Growers is moving boldly to achieve its mission.
Backyard Growers Board of Directors

Jennifer Perry, President
Director of Distribution and Nutrition, The Open Door

Bethe Palmer, Treasurer
Finance Consultant; board member of seARTS and Manchester Essex Conservation Trust

Suzanne R. Gosselin, DC, Clerk
Harbor Health Group, PC

Betsy Brown
Community Volunteer, Former Wellspring staff & board member

Sophie Courser
Farm Manager, Alprilla Farm

Joel Favazza
Founding Attorney, Seaside Legal Solutions; Gloucester School Committee

Frieda Grotjhan
Business owner (retired)

Lara Leplionka
Executive Director, Backyard Growers

Heidi McGrath
Teacher, O'Maley Middle School (retired)

Conor Miller
Founder, Black Earth Compost

Dr. Brian Orr
Brian Orr Pediatrics

Elizabeth Redmond
Chief Financial Officer, Pathways for Children

Jen Zola
Volunteer Outreach Specialist

Backyard Growers
Strategic Plan 2018-2021