An Introduction to Backyard Growers

History: Backyard Growers (BYG) was founded in 2010 by public artist and urban farmer Lara Lepionka as a way to help her neighbors stretch their budgets during the recession by growing some of their own food. BYG was incubated as a small program of the Cape Ann Farmers’ Market until becoming its own 501(c)(3) organization in 2014. BYG got its start and was able to grow thanks to significant partnership support from The Food Project, FoodCorps, and The Open Door.

Mission, Vision & Goals: Our mission is to cultivate healthy, connected, environmentally sustainable communities and to fight for food justice by teaching people how to grow some of their own food. We establish vegetable gardens at homes, housing communities, organizations, and schools, and provide learning opportunities in how to grow and prepare fresh produce. Our goals are to increase access to healthy, affordable foods, help support attitude and behavior changes in making healthy food choices, reactivate neglected urban spaces through food production, and to build community and self-sufficiency within diverse populations.

The Strategic Planning Process, Implementation and Monitoring: Backyard Growers successfully met and/or made major strides in achieving our 3-year strategic plan (2019-2021) goals and objectives despite the challenges of the pandemic. We are proud of our successes and learned from our challenges!

In fall 2021, the founding Executive Director announced she would be stepping down from the position in early 2022 after 12 years of vision and leadership. With such a major transition taking place, the Board of Directors decided to create this interim 18-month strategic plan, which is based on an updated and extended version of our recently completed Roots & Wings strategic plan. This updated plan will allow for a continuity in our direction during this time of transition, creating a road map for the next 18 months based on our current objectives. Next year, the Board of Directors and new Executive Director will embark on a new 3-year strategic planning process, giving the new Executive Director the opportunity to play a major role in forming the vision and direction of Backyard Growers, and to complete a full planning process that engages our many community stakeholders.

The purpose of this strategic plan is to shepherd Backyard Growers through this leadership transition while sustaining and advancing our core strategic plan objectives. The strategic planning process was internal and took place between November 2021 and January 2022. Activities included:

- A review of our core materials, including annual reports, action plans, financials, work plans, among other documents
- Focus groups and meetings with the Board of Directors and the staff team with consultant support

The review and 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 an 18-month action 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
According to Feeding America and the Greater Boston Food Bank, one in eight people in Eastern Massachusetts is expected to experience food insecurity as a result of the impacts of COVID-19. This state-wide statistic holds true in Gloucester, where even before the pandemic, poverty, childhood obesity, and food insecurity have been consistent and pressing issues. The U.S. Census Bureau defines four of our neighborhoods as low-income 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.

Over 55% of Gloucester students are eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program, which is currently free for all students because of COVID. In the Gloucester Schools, 37% of students are overweight or obese—higher than the state average of 32%, and there is statistical evidence of increased overweight/obesity rates as children get older, indicating the importance of exposing children to making healthy food choices and helping families access fresh, affordable foods through multiple strategies. Research shows that children who receive garden-based nutrition education have improved knowledge of, preferences for, and attitudes toward fresh fruits and vegetables (Morris & Briggs 2002), and that eating patterns relating to the consumption of fruits and vegetables are developed at an early age (Kirby 1995).

Fresh food access is also a concern among older adults—especially for older adults who are low-income, lack transportation, and live alone. SeniorCare’s Area Plan on Aging (2018-2021) states that in our region, “Approximately 28% of those aged 65+ live alone. This is a group that tends to be poorer, more isolated and more likely to be a potential user of services.” A recent community health needs assessment conducted by Beverly and Addison Gilbert Hospitals identified “elder health” as one of our region’s top five priority health areas. The gardens we construct and maintain where older adults live and receive services improve access to healthy, affordable produce, create a focal point for safe outdoor exercise and multi-age social interaction, and create a beautiful physical environment—all factors that promote physical and mental health, especially with the added stress and isolation of COVID. Studies have shown that older adults who garden tend to live longer and have a higher quality of life (Soga, Gaston & Yamaura 2017).

With diabetes and obesity rates on the rise, it is urgent that we find ways to increase healthy eating habits and access to healthy foods. Backyard Growers addresses these issues by creating direct access to healthy food through gardens, and by providing broad and consistent hands-on learning opportunities that promote growing one’s own food, healthy eating habits, and a greater awareness of food systems. By “normalizing” vegetable consumption and making it something accessible, interactive, and delicious, participants—especially children—begin making connections that contribute to positive attitude and behavior changes in how they perceive and experience healthy foods, decreasing their chances of obesity and chronic disease.

Community and backyard gardens are a critical part of our local food system, improving food security and fresh food access among vulnerable populations. Our community and backyard gardens and programs play a critical role in building a sense of personal agency and self-sufficiency among our participants. Our initiatives put local food production and healthy food access in the hands of Gloucester residents facing food insecurity by providing them with the resources, knowledge, and skills necessary to grow and prepare some of their own fresh food. Participants have fresh food access throughout the growing season,
decreasing their reliance on food pantry distributions and mitigating the threat of potential COVID food supply chain disruptions. Our initiatives meet many of the recommendations in Goal 4 of the Massachusetts Local Food Action Plan, which is to “Reduce hunger and food insecurity, increase the availability of healthy food to all residents, and reduce food waste.” Recommendations from the Plan that our initiatives work toward include: Expand nutrition education; Expand physical access to fresh, healthy, and local food; Expand access to healthy food for children; and Support urban agriculture.

The Context

Who We Serve: We serve low- to moderate-income residents and public school children in Gloucester, and share our school and community program models regionally through a consulting practice to increase our impact. Specific populations we serve include low-income children, families, and older adults; households in subsidized housing communities; single parent and “grandparents raising grandchildren” households; refugees and immigrants speaking English as a second language; food-insecure individuals; and homeless populations. Now completing our 12th growing season, Backyard Growers has built over 400 garden beds and has served over 4,000 individuals in Gloucester alone since our inception.

School Programs: Our School Garden Program serves all eight Gloucester schools and Pathways for Children, reaching 100% of pre-K through 8th grade students. Students learn about nutrition, the environment, food systems, and how to grow food through hands-on garden, classroom, and cafeteria programs (serving over 2,000 students annually). Each year students have habit-building experiences of growing, harvesting and eating vegetables through experiential learning opportunities with the aim of “normalizing” vegetable consumption and raising a generation of students who have a deeper understanding of where real food comes from.

Community Programs: Our Community, Backyard, and GrowBag Garden Programs serve over 400 Gloucester residents each year by providing built raised bed or modular container vegetable gardens; free and low cost seeds, seedlings, and gardening resources; multiple garden trainings and cooking workshops; garden site coordination; free public events; and volunteer garden mentors. We host six community gardens in low-income neighborhoods, serve five gardens at partner organizations to provide fresh food for their clients, and build approximately 10 new backyard gardens each year.

Consulting: We have successfully replicated our signature program—Salad Days/Fall Harvest Days—in over 31 schools in Massachusetts through our growing consulting practice, allowing us to impact thousands of students outside of Gloucester each year. We have recently expanded our consulting work to include training and assistance in developing garden infrastructure and programs for housing developments and community organizations outside of Cape Ann. This additional consulting work allows us to not only grow our revenue through consulting income, but to impact new service populations outside of our geographic area but in ways that don’t over leverage staff time and resources. To date we have worked with the Salem Council on Aging, the Ipswich Housing Authority, Elder Services of the Merrimack Valley, and the MA Policy, Systems, and Environment SNAP-Ed Program Task Force Implementing Agencies under this new line of consulting work.
Roots and Wings Extended Plan

18-month Interim Strategic Plan – Leadership Transition
January 2022 – June 2023

State of the Organization

Overview: In our strategic planning process we reviewed where the organization was in 2018 in comparison to our status at the end of the 3-year plan in 2021. Based on a review of our action plans and annual reports, we recognized the work that was successfully completed, core work that needs to be sustained, and work that needs additional actions in order to be successful. We also identified growing areas of opportunity—such as our consulting practice and our GrowBag initiative—and areas we have pulled back from for a number of reasons—such as the objective of improving school food environments. In addition, we identified areas that are important, but not vital, which can be put on hold during a leadership transition if necessary.

Structure: In 2019 BYG began to change its staffing model from a team mostly comprised of short-term AmeriCorps service members and entry-level staff positions, to a model with a professional full-time leadership team, including the executive, program, and development directors and program support staff including a part-time outreach manager. As part of our strategic growth and to meet the demand for our services, we added two new full-time program staff roles in 2021—a program coordinator and a garden educator—as well as a new part-time operations specialist. This new staffing structure has allowed us to be more strategic across all organizational functions, and has taken our organization to a new level of strategic financial growth. Our active Board of Directors has strong leadership and has focused on fine tuning our governance and financial policies and protocols.

Governance & Financials: In the past three years the Board of Directors and the staff team have enacted new governance and operations policies and procedures and improved our financial systems, bringing BYG to a new stage of its organizational development. As a result, BYG has the tools in place and the organizational capacity to manage a successful leadership transition while maintaining and furthering our core objectives.

Envisioning the Future & Setting Direction

Goals & Objectives:
As an extension of our recently completed Roots & Wings strategic plan, we will maintain the main spirit of our goals: deepening our work in Gloucester; expanding our impact through our consulting practice; and ensuring the sustainability of the organization by managing a successful leadership transition.

Former Goal 1: Expand and deepen Backyard Growers’ impact in Gloucester
NEW GOAL 1: Expand access to resources, spaces and programming that is responsive, equitable, and mission aligned

Objective 1.1 Fully incorporate DEI work throughout BYG programming / outreach
Objective 1.2 Increase GrowBag strategies to expand geographic area, population served & revenue generation opportunities through sales
Objective 1.3 agriCulture: Complete Phase 1 installation of high-profile creative placemaking project at the Willowood Housing development garden
Objective 1.4 Complete expansion of Burnham’s Field Community Garden site with renewed collaboration with the City of Gloucester and Burnham’s Field Community Garden Board
Former Goal 2: Expand and strengthen Backyard Growers’ consulting practice
NEW GOAL 2: Expand and strengthen Backyard Growers’ impact through consulting to schools, housing developments, and other community organizations well beyond Gloucester

Objective 2.1 Increase reach and revenue through new housing development and community organization consulting
Objective 2.2 Expand partnership with Black Earth Compost to include off site installation (by BEC) and wraparound consulting (by BYG) for organizations outside of Gloucester and within the Black Earth geographic reach
Objective 2.3 Develop a cohesive pricing structure for all lines of consulting
Objective 2.4 Create a mechanism for tracking and surveying impact of consulting work

Former Goal 3: Strengthen Backyard Growers’ organizational systems and infrastructure to support current operations and future growth
Goal 3: Shepherd Backyard Growers through its first major leadership transition

Objective 3.1 Develop a competitive work environment including appropriate compensation and opportunities for career advancement
Objective 3.2 Manage smooth transition from founder to new Executive Director
Objective 3.3 Build new partnerships to expand and/or enhance work & revenue
Objective 3.4 Develop evaluation tool for doing assessments to understand impact

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