CUMBERLAND COUNTY
SOIL & WATER
CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Community Agriculture Planning Toolkit: User Guide

Prepared by Cumberland County Soil and Water Conservation District

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Introduction

Project Background

Cumberland County Soil and Water Conservation District (CCSWCD) has been working to support traditional agriculture activities since 1946. However, since 2016 it has increasingly worked to support "community agriculture" activities through various grant-funded project work.

In 2020, CCSWCD was awarded a grant from the National Association of Conservation Districts to create a guide for individual communities to develop Community Agriculture Plans" (CAPs) using a series of customizable modules. These modules, included in the Attachments, comprise the bulk of the community agriculture planning toolkit. The grant included funding to demonstrate the use of the modules in creating pilot agriculture plans for four participating communities. Feedback from this process was used to refine the modules.

In creating four pilot community agriculture plans, implementation projects were completed for the several communities as well, showing how the action steps in the plans may be put into reality. The project concluded in June, 2021.

What is ''Community Agriculture''?

Community Agriculture is an expansion of what is often described as "urban agriculture". Urban agriculture has been practiced since the dawn of cities and continues to be practiced today even in our largest metropolises. We use the term "community" in place of urban to describe the initiatives included in this plan to better reflect societal and technological changes that have fundamentally upset the traditional definitions of "urban" and "rural" land uses.

Community agriculture can be contrasted with "individual" or traditional agriculture, as depicted in Attachment A: Community Agriculture Defined. While there is some overlap between several of the elements, in general "individual" agriculture includes larger-scale commercial farms that receive USDA subsidies. Many of these farms exist in Maine, and they form a crucial part of our local food system. In some cases, individual agriculture may support community agriculture initiatives, but not necessarily.

Small-scale agriculture is not new, nor is institutional support for it. However, many new types of initiatives have been developed to expand the capacity of community members to grow and process local food. The intent of using the toolkit is to outline how a municipality can foster these activities in the current era.

Why create a Community Agriculture Plan?

Interest in community agriculture has been growing throughout Cumberland County for a variety of reasons. On a high-level, community agriculture initiatives strengthen our region's food systems both through increasing **demand** for consumption of locally produced food, as well as the **supply.** This supports the State of Maine's climate change goals, one of which is to

increase Maine's consumption of locally produced food from 10% in 2020 to 30% by 2030. Additional examples showing the growing interest in community agriculture are included in the Plan Template document (Attachment A).

Many municipalities already have a significant amount of community agriculture activity, however the degree to which initiatives or programs are coordinated varies. The intention of creating a community agriculture plan is to:

1) Compile all of a community's current community agriculture initiatives in one location
2) Create a community-specific action plan using a series of 16 modules provided as part of the community agriculture planning toolkit
3) Increase coordination of initiatives by building local capacity, establishing a municipal "point person", creating a timeline for implementation, and identifying potential funding sources

Who is the toolkit for?

The toolkit can be used to assist communities in creating municipal community agriculture plans. While it was designed based on an analysis of existing programing and public input from communities in southern Maine, it could be used with minor adaptations by communities in other regions of Maine and nationwide. While the intention is to assist in creating municipal community agriculture plans, the toolkit may also be used to create a regional plan as well with some modifications.

The toolkit is designed to be used without a high degree of specialized knowledge or expertise around community agriculture. It can be used by municipal staff, agriculture-based organizations, community members, conservation districts, or anyone interested in establishing community agriculture programs in their community. It is designed to be used in collaboration with partners, community members, and municipal officials to identify community agriculture goals. The template provided by the toolkit can be used to help determine local partners, document existing community agriculture initiatives, and organize community needs into actionable recommendations.

What is included in the toolkit?

- **Toolkit User Guide (This document)**
- **Attachment A: Plan Template with annotated comments**
- **Attachment B: Community Agriculture Defined Graphic**
- **Attachment C: Community Agriculture Modules**
- **Attachment D: Goals Table**
- **Attachment E: Survey Example**

The toolkit contains documents that can be used to write a community agriculture plan. The Plan Template (Attachment A**.**) provides a framework for the main document. A Goals Table

(Attachment D.) is included to help guide communities in identifying needs and goals to give their plan a defined purpose.

There are three recommended attachments to your Plan: Community Agriculture Defined, Survey Results, and the Community Agriculture Action Plan (modules used). Survey results can be supplemented with any documents or results derived from the community outreach portion of the planning process. The Community Agriculture Action Plan includes a compilation of all module documents and their respective attachments.

The Community Agriculture Modules (Attachment C) describe 16 different community agriculture initiatives and provides guidelines, examples, and resources for establishing these initiatives in any community. These modules serve two purposes when developing and implementing a CAP:

1) While developing, modules are there to provide an overview of each initiative and how they integrate with community goals.
2) During implementation, modules provide details on what needs to be accounted for at various steps of completion as well as resources and examples of how projects were successfully implemented in other communities. Modules are a recommended attachment to the completed CAP to provide greater context of each initiative to those reading the CAP or wishing to initiate an Action Plan item.

Recommended Process

While the process used to develop a CAP should be tailored to local needs, a general process outline is included here.

Convene Partners

The first step is to determine your community partners / who should be involved. The CAP Template (Attachment A) includes examples of potential partners that operate regionally in southern Maine as well as more generalized types of partners to consider connecting with in your own community. Consider which partners will be integral to writing the CAP and have the time to commit to supporting the process and which partners will only have the skills and time to support specific implementation projects.

Convene	Identify & Convene Partners
Gather	Gather Community Input
Compile	Compile Existing Community Ag Initiatives
Determine	Determine Community Priorities
Incorporate	Incorporate Priorities as Recommended Action Steps
Follow-up	Keep up-to-to date as community goals shift

Gather Community Input

Community needs and interests are the base of a successful CAP. Utilize outreach tools to gather input. These tools may include:

- Surveys shared through social media, traditional media, and in-person (example included with this toolkit as Attachment E)
- In-person conversations at community events
- Attending neighborhood meetings or community workshops

Use community feedback to determine which of the 16 Community Agriculture Modules (Attachment C.) are of highest priority.

Determine Existing Community Agriculture Initiatives

Many initiatives are likely already occurring in your community. Input received during the community outreach phase will likely also highlight which initiatives are currently happening and are more broadly known about. Partners with different focuses on community programs can help to compile a thorough list.

Community agriculture initiatives appear in many forms. For the purposes of developing this toolkit, the Community Agriculture Defined attachment (Attachment A.) was developed to determine which aspects an initiative must have to be considered community agriculture. It also provides insight as to which aspects would classify an initiative as individual or commercial agriculture.
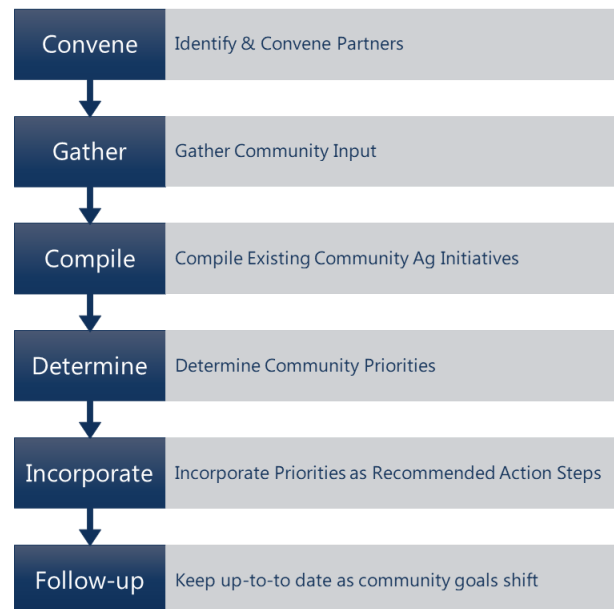
This information is organized by which of the 16 Community Agriculture Modules the initiative best aligns with to identify gaps in programming and areas to continue growing.

Determine Priorities

Based on community input and existing initiatives, what are the community goals which are driving the needs of the community? Are they based on increasing food security, shortening the supply chain, supporting local businesses, building community identity, or something else? Use the Goals Table (Attachment D.) to identify which goals align best with the needs of the community and which modules can help to meet those goals.

All goals and modules are provided in the template but can be removed if they are not relevant for your community's needs.

Incorporate Priorities as Community Agriculture Recommendations

Focusing on the modules that were previously identified to support meeting community goals, revisit the existing initiatives that align with those modules. Are there steps that can be taken to enhance these programs to reach more people or overall be more successful? Add these steps into the "Action Plan Summary" column for the appropriate module section.

Use the "Timeline" column to indicate the priority of each action. Is it a high priority item that needs to occur within the next 2 years? Or is it an aspirational goal that does not need to be initiated for 5 or more years?

Identify key partners to implement either specific action items or all action items. This designation may vary by module.

Do the items in the Action Plan Summary for the module relate to any other modules? Be sure to update the text under the module title to reflect any connections that can be made. The template includes common relations but should be updated to reflect those that are the most relevant for your community.

Modules which are not indicated as priorities and no items are included in the Action Plan Summary can be removed or left as place holders for future revisions.

Implementation

The goal of this exercise is not to create a plan which will sit on a shelf: The goal is to create a document which may be used to accelerate community agriculture development in a community and build connections between various initiatives. As such, we highly recommend that communities create a "point person" or position who is responsible for keeping the CAP updated and for carrying out its recommendations as funding and resources allow.

It is important to recognize that these CAPs will require updates as new initiatives come online and priorities shift. As detailed in the CAP Template, it is recommended that CAPs be updated on at least a semi-regular basis. This may, for example, include an annual or bi-annual

community survey. It may also include a CAP update, for example on a 10-year basis in conjunction with municipal comprehensive plan writing.

Follow-up

These plans are not static. While they are generally written with a planning framework from a given starting point, they should be periodically updated. Time frames for recommendations range from short (within 2 years), medium (2-5 years), and long term (more than 5 years). We therefore recommend that communities update plans according to the following schedules:

- Every 2 years:
  - Review the action steps in the plan and identify which have been completed.
  - Remove any actions that no longer appear relevant and add new actions as appropriate.
  - Adjust action item priorities, moving items up from long and medium term to short term as appropriate.
  - Conduct a community survey to assess changing needs, priorities, and trends.
- 10 Year interval:
  - Complete an update of all plan sections, incorporating new information. Items completed in the action item table can be included in the background or existing program categories as appropriate.
  - Conduct a survey to assess trends and changing needs recorded from surveys conducted during previous 2-year intervals.
  - Hold a community agriculture forum to present results of community survey, incorporate feedback, help set priorities, and present proposals for new installations, programing, and other community agriculture initiatives.
  - It is recommended that this be completed in concert with municipal comprehensive plan updates.
  - Consider incorporating the community agriculture plan into the municipal comprehensive plan.

Funding Acknowledgement

Attachments

Attachment A: Plan Template

Attachment B: Community Agriculture Defined

Attachment C: Community Agriculture Action Plan Attachments

C-1 Land Use Regulation

C-2 Economic Development

C-3 Adult Learner

C-4 Youth Education

C-5 Events

C-6 Community Gardens

C-7 Connecting Growers to Land

C-8 Perennial Agriculture

C-9 Edible Main Street

C-10 Community Resources

C-11 Community Composting

C-12 CSA

C-13 Farmer's Market

C-14 Gleaning and Foraging

C-15 Soil Contamination

C-16 Soil Systems and Fertility

Attachment D: Goals Table

Attachment E: Survey Example