

Assessing and Responding to Information and Training Needs Related to Urban Soil and Community Health

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Abstract:

Recent growth in interest and activity in gardening for recreation, education and producing local food in urban areas, has led to greater numbers of urban residents who are exposed to and interact with soil. In New York City, there are more than 700 community gardens. Multiple public and private organizations support the gardens, across a range of city neighborhoods. These urban gardens are often sited on property with a history of industrial, commercial or residential use that deposited heavy metals, organic chemicals and other contaminants into the soil. The increase in gardening and related activity on such sites has raised questions among a diverse group of users about the impact of urban soils on community health. A Cornell team of soil scientists and Extension educators has sought to assess these issues of concern, as well as the need for information and education related to urban soils. While soils resources do exist, scientists, managers and practitioners are aware that existing guidelines and best practices for soil management are often not appropriate for urban school and community gardens, playgrounds, residential areas and other community sites. In September 2008, Cornell convened a forum of more than 40 participants representing organizations and agencies involved in management and use of soils and green space in the City. The purpose was to discuss and gain insight into the main concerns of practitioners related to soil contamination and community health, and to identify strategies and resources for addressing the concerns. Multiple policy, education/training, research and technical needs were outlined. The group produced a number of action items, including providing reliable, easy to understand information; providing hands-on training in site assessment and soils management; forming smaller working groups to address pressing issues such as contaminants in compost; and creating a mechanism to facilitate communication among practitioners and involvement in collaborative research. The Cornell team used these action items to shape and guide a collaborative education and outreach effort that produced specific outcomes: Comprehensive fact sheets focused on soil contaminants, testing and mitigating exposure were developed and posted on the Cornell Waste Management Institute website (<http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/soilquality.htm>); a soil and compost testing working group was convened in December 2008; in March 2009, soil testing workshops were delivered at GrowTogether, an annual community gardening conference, in the Bronx, and a half-day training on soil testing to maintain healthy urban green spaces was held at Brooklyn Botanic Garden. A key outcome of this work has been the agency partnerships developed and utilized in support of further program and proposal development. The project is an on-going research and extension education effort to develop and facilitate access to understandable and reliable soil information in order to build healthy, sustainable environments. Current efforts are focusing on working with New York City Department of Parks and Recreation's GreenThumb and local gardeners to develop soil testing protocols and to test soils from the raised beds of 100 identified community gardens for lead and other metals.

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