

How urban gardeners can lower the risk of contact with soil contaminants



City dwellers may once have thought that gardening was a hobby for suburbanites or those living in rural areas. But urban gardening has grown in popularity as more and more city folk have looked for ways to increase their access to healthy, low-cost produce. Urban agriculture may seem like a relatively new idea, but National Geographic notes that it actually dates back to the 19th century, when Detroit mayor Hazen Pingree devised a plan to help the city's unemployed laborers during a period of economic crisis. Mayor Pingree developed an idea to use acres of vacant and idle lands throughout the city to create subsistence gardens. Begun in 1894, the program would peak in 1897

with the participation of more than 1,500 families. The program would taper by 1901 as the economy improved, but there's no denying the relative success of the mayor's program.

Urban gardens can be just as beneficial today as they were in Detroit in the late 19th century. However, the Environmental Protection Agency notes that some sites that are now home to urban gardens were once occupied by industrial and commercial operations. That's a significant concern for those who want to start urban agriculture programs in their cities, as the soil might be contaminated. But the EPA says the possibility of contamination should not keep prospective urban gardeners from going forward with their plans. Rather, the EPA recommends gardeners take various steps if they determine the soil where they hope to plant an urban garden has been contaminated.

Consult your local and state environmental agencies. Local and state environmental agencies can help would-be urban gardeners connect with professional site cleanup specialists. These specialists can recommend various ways to reduce high levels of contaminants.

Build raised garden beds. The EPA notes that raised beds are the most common way to reduce the risk of coming into contact with soil contaminants. Raised beds use clean soil that couples with materials necessary to build the beds that serves as physical barriers between the plants and potential contaminants in the ground soil.

Employ soil amendments. Soil amendments can be used to bind contaminants so they are no longer mobile or bioavailable. A thick layer of organic material also serves as a barrier against potential contaminants.

Replace contaminated soil. Replace contaminated soil with soil that has been tested and confirmed as contaminant-free. Phytotechnologies are another way to clean up contaminated soil, though the EPA notes that this approach can take years and won't necessarily prove effective against every contaminant. Urban gardening gives city dwellers a chance to enjoy a wonderful hobby. When soil contaminants are effectively addressed, city residents can enjoy access to fresh, affordable produce grown right in their communities.



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