

# What if I Don't Have a Lawn? Urban Land Access and Permaculture Design

By Heather Coburn, Excerpted from *Food Not Lawns*.

If you don't have a space at home to garden, here are eight strategies for finding a space.

## 1. Use the neighbor's lawn.

It may seem odd in this culture, but in other places people frequently share yard and garden space with their neighbors. If you've been eyeing that nice sunny lawn, dreaming of filling it with fig trees and big red tomatoes, what could it hurt to ask? Go on, go over there, bring some seeds and a smile, and ask!

## 2. Rent a plot in a community garden.

Most cities have some sort of community garden program. Ask at the local University, Agricultural Extension Service, or Gardening Store, or try doing a search on [www.google.com](http://www.google.com)--just type in the name of your city and "community garden." Most of these programs lease ground from the city and rent out small plots to local gardeners on a seasonal basis. If you can't find a program locally, perhaps you would like to start one? Growing with Community Gardening, by Mary Coe, is an excellent source for step-by-step instructions on how to start a variety of community garden projects. I also cover a few in Chapter 8 of this book.

## 3. Start a garden in a vacant lot.

You can do this with or without permission. Sometimes property owners will let you plant vegetables and fruit trees in a sunny, underused corner. More often they will say no if you ask, but won't notice for a long while if you just do it without alerting them. When Food Not Lawns started our first garden, in an overgrown section of the park, the city didn't know we were there for almost a year. We got the combination to the gate from a neighbor, and just started working. By the time someone came along to ask questions, we had a beautiful garden established, and they let us continue to use the space. They even sent park workers to drop off chip mulch once in a while! There are countless examples like this, where people took over an area, grew food, and eventually gained a common ownership of the land. There are as many examples of gardens that were eventually bulldozed and built into high-end condos, but in my opinion, it is worth a try, and likely that you will get at least a season's reward for your audacity.

## 4. Grow food in the existing landscape.

You don't have to turn over a big area or even disrupt existing plantings much to integrate some food plants. We once rode bikes around town with a big bag of zucchini seed, and planted them wherever we saw a gap in the landscaping. Later we saw big plants in some of the spots, and harvested some delicious zucchini! I have also planted fruit trees into existing beds, in front of local businesses or at the edge of the park. This type of "guerilla gardening" works great, because the city or property owner maintains the landscape, and your plants will get watered--sometimes even weeded and fertilized--right along with the plants that were already there! The downfall is, whoever is doing the maintaining may notice your plant and

pull it out, and you won't know whether they use organic practices. Still, this is a good option for generating more food around town, and can be great fun. Also try down alleys, along back fences. Often there is a garden in the other side of the fence, and you can plant small beds along the outside that benefit from the surplus water and fertility. Refer to chapter 8 for more tips on guerilla gardening.

**5. Volunteer at a local farm or help a friend with their garden.**

Most organic farms accept work-trade for produce, and some will trade work or cash for growing space of your own. This gives you an opportunity to learn from the farmer, and gives you access to the farm infrastructure, like irrigation, seeds, surplus starts, and more. If you can't find a local farm hook up, try just volunteering to help someone else with their garden. Building relationships in this way enhances community and opens up new opportunities for the future.

**6. Garden in pots and containers.**

Even a small paton can hold a few planters, and most veggies do well in containers. Try strawberries, carrots, beets, or salad. You can also build a self-contained potato garden: Take some chicken wire and make a ring. Put a layer of thick straw in the bottom and toss some potatoes in. Cover with straw, leaves, or soil, water often, and keep adding more mulch on top as the shoots emerge. Soon you will have a basket full of fresh potatoes.

**7. Use the roof.**

If you have a good roof without too much slope, but no ground space, consider building raised beds or planter boxes on the roof. Make sure you can get a hose up there, because hauling buckets up and down a ladder is no fun. There are fabulous rooftop gardens in big cities all over the world. You can build one, too.

**8. Depave your sidewalk or driveway.**

Rent a concrete cutter or just get together some friends with crowbars and rip out the pavement around your house. It really doesn't take that much work to convert a driveway or parking area into a garden. I have seen several wonderful examples, and the residents never looked back. The broken up pieces--aptly called "urbanite" by permaculture folks--work great for stepping stones or patio pavers. Park on the street and enjoy the extra exercise walking home.

<http://www.foodnotlawns.com/urbanlandaccess.html>

*Promoting peace through permaculture, one seed at a time.*

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