

City Looks For Gardeners To Green Vacant Lots

Indianapolis has set aside more than 100 city plots for something not often found in a major metropolitan area: farming.

Indianapolis' urban gardening initiative is intended to serve as a valuable way to promote local, sustainable agriculture, economic development and community building, [6News' Rafael Sanchez](#) reported.

As part of the program, six lots are currently being used to grow fruits and vegetables. People selected to be urban gardeners must commit to maintaining the city owned properties for five years.

"You have to think about things like how are going to get water to the site? What are going to do if you can't get water to the water site? How are you going to engage the community?" said Karen Haley, director of Indianapolis' Office of Sustainability.

Gardening in the city also brings with it unique challenges, including soil that's often contaminated from previous uses.

"There is a lot lead in urban soil," said Gabriel Filipelli, a professor at Indiana University Purdue University-Indianapolis who heads up the school's New Center for Urban Health. "If grown with caution, you can grow wonderful food."

Filipelli has been testing soil on campus for a new urban garden and tested more than 30 sites in Indianapolis, Greenwood, Carmel and Fishers for free this summer.

He requires at least five samples from a proposed garden -- three from the actual area of planting, one sample from dirt near the road and another from the drip line closest to the garden.

The samples are then sent to his lab in Indianapolis and undergo several tests.

For areas with known lead contamination, including most older neighborhoods inside Interstate 465, Filipelli recommends bringing in at least six inches of new top soil before starting a garden.

"It's fine if the roots go down into the contaminated soil, they don't bring up the lead very much. But the point is to cap the contamination with new mulch and clean soil," he said.

Matthew Jose, the former head of Purdue University's Urban Farm Project, has put his expertise to work on Indianapolis' near east side, transforming vacant lots into produce-producing plots collectively known as Big City Farms.

Jose uses raised beds built up with organic matter to nurture his plants, and said he builds up his beds over the winter to prevent any contamination.

"I tell people I have a son who's a toddler and I feel totally comfortable letting him eat what I grow," he said. "I think it's that safe."

Local urban garden advocates Laura and Tyler Henderson tend to plots they've helped design across the city, as well as their own expansive home vegetable array.

They said creating raised beds helped to eliminate the danger of contamination because heavy metals continue to sink, but urge all gardeners growing edible to have their soil tested.

"When you get people thinking about growing in their yard, especially in neighborhoods like this one (Cottage Home), where you've got a lot of older houses, they were surely painted with lead at some point in time," Laura Henderson said. "You need to test your soil for heavy metal contamination."

Filipelli asked anyone looking to have their soil tested to contact him at gfilippe@iupui.edu. Results take up to six weeks to come back.