



## Cleaning Up Brownfields

**City farmers can work with local governments and voluntary programs to clean up contamination in vacant lots for growing.**

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The EPA encourages city farmers who grow on brownfields—vacant city lots that might contain hazardous chemicals—to partner with local governments to test the soil. Safety of urban-grown food is a concern for city farmers. As farmers in big cities across the country transform vacant lots into growing sites in order to move their food production closer to home, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency strongly urges them to test the soil for contamination.

“I think we can get complacent because we build a raised bed and we bring in clean fill. We are now creating a magnet for exposure. We are bringing people onto a site that we don’t know what’s on the site,” said Ann Carroll of the EPA’s Office of Brownfields and Land Revitalization during a conference call hosted by the Community Food Security Coalition’s Urban Agriculture Committee.

The EPA’s Brownfields Program offers grants for testing soil in “brownfields,” vacant lots whose redevelopment or reuse might be hindered due to the presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant or contaminant. One stipulation, however, is that only governments are eligible to receive grant funds through this program.

“The good news for urban farmers is they can work with their local, county or regional government to apply for the grant, test the site to make sure its safe, or secure funding to clean it up before they start funding,” Carroll said.

Another way for city farmers to take advantage of the grants offered through the Brownfields Program is to contact their local government or voluntary cleanup program for an inventory of vacant lots that have been tested and cleaned or are scheduled for cleanup. The farmers can then develop and grow on lots already proven free of contamination.

When Lynchburg Grows began operating as a city farm in Lynchburg, Va., in 2004, it partnered with the city and enrolled in the local Voluntary Brownfields Program. Through the program, the city farm received \$150,000 to perform Phase 1 and Phase 2 environmental assessments on its property and an adjacent city property.

On its 2 acres of land, Lynchburg Grows hosts nine greenhouses, five of which date back to 1919. The greenhouses were painted with lead paint. That lead eventually made its way into the soil and, as the assessments showed, created hot spots of lead five times higher than the EPA’s safety levels. In addition, they found other harmful chemicals that did not exceed risk levels.

“Because we work with kids and developmentally challenged adults, we wanted to get out all the old dirt that had all these contaminants and bring in fresh organic compost,” said Michael Van Ness, the farm’s co-founder.

Lynchburg Grows’ brownfields cleanup is set to be finished by the end of 2010, Van Ness said. Much of the work involved simple procedures, such as capping the land so people don’t have direct contact with the soil. He recommends urban farmers not hesitate in partnering with their city to clean up brownfields.

“Look at the past use of the property. If you think there could be [contaminants] there, you need to go through these steps,” he said. “After all, you are talking about feeding communities.”

Soil testing for vacant lots is site specific—no one test will suffice, Carroll said. City farmers must know the history of the lot and test for different contaminants accordingly. Possible contaminants soil should be tested for include lead or other heavy metals; petroleum or other fuel oils; or solvents such as VOCs, PCBs and asbestos.

“If you were in an area where there was a lot of older housing—where lead paint was probably used—and maybe torn down, you might think of lead and asbestos. If you were in an industrial area or there was a history of illegal dumping on the site, you might start looking for a different suite of environmental chemicals,” Carroll said.

Additionally, because states have different soil testing thresholds and requirements, Carroll suggests city farmers get to know their local brownfields contacts and cooperative extension agents for advice.