City in a Garden – Gardens in 12 Chicago neighborhoods
United States of America / Chicago, traditional homelands of the Council of the Three Fires: the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi nations
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Project summary
The city of Chicago’s motto urbs in horto means “city in a garden.” This project will start by focusing on developing horticultural interest in 12 of the 77 community areas in the city’s south side including Jackson Park, Washington Park, and Hyde Park which includes the park legacy designed by American landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted.

The goal of this project is to develop self-initiated community involvement with a focus on biophilic design for local high-school seniors or college freshmen. Participants will study the history of green spaces in their communities and explore natural spaces, public parks, public gardens, community gardens, and award-winning backyard gardens within their own neighborhood. Participants will explore how they may participate in horticulture activities with a focus on the historical, the social, and the ecological aspects. Instead of asking participants to engage in pre-made projects they would explore how they want to interact within their communities with a focus on horticulture and landscaping. This would be a do-it-yourself project. Ideas could include turning empty lots into community garden space, adding flowers to a public art space, creating a personal garden in their backyard, finding ways to grow plants in limited rental spaces, finding a community garden space in which to volunteer, or even finding revenue-producing plant-based jobs within their community.

Background
I am a heritage vegetable and sheep farmer and have received a “Snail of Approval” from Slow Food Chicago. I have also served as a Slow Food USA delegate to the 2018 Terra Madre Salone del Gusto in Turin, Italy, an international event dedicated to food politics, sustainable agriculture, and the environment. I am also a horticulture consultant in Chicago. My focus has been on working with adults with special needs and have completed a Horticulture Therapist Certification from the Chicago Botanic Garden and Oakton Community College and have actively been learning how to develop better horticulture programming. In 2022 I participated in the Advocates for Urban Agriculture Farmer to Farmer as a F2F mentor.

Implementation
This project would engage 12 teenage participants from each of the south side’s 12 neighborhoods of Bridgeport, Armour Square, Douglas, Fuller Park, Washington Park, Oakland, Kenwood, Burnside, Hyde Park, Woodlawn, South Shore and Greater Grand Crossing. Various community groups in these neighborhoods would be consulted to help find participants who would be considered “stakeholders” in this summer project lead by me. I live in this community and have developed a decades-long network of Chicago gardeners, horticulturalists, food activists, and others interested in landscaping, gardening, and food production.

Stakeholders will develop a personal project with guidance from me that can be done during the summer of 2023 with a focus on planning, budgeting, and completion. That personal project goal will be reached by finding mentors within their community that work on similar projects. Mentors can be from local community gardening organizations or city and county resources. The project would require that I secure the appropriate horticulture speakers and plan tours of green spaces based on participants’ individualized project goals.

Final projects will be reviewed by the group and documentation will be published in book form and/or in virtual form and can encourage other Chicago garden projects to take note of what this age group wants to see in their communities – examples could be maintaining existing projects or raising their voices to be heard on future projects.

Meeting times would be agreed upon by stakeholders with allowances for work and/or school schedules. 4-hour monthly meetings from May-October would allow stakeholders to observe the effects the change of seasons in the Chicago region have on green spaces in their communities.
Stakeholders will document their experiences in a medium with which they most feel comfortable: sketching, photographing, video recording, spoken word, or other method that can be shared as a final group compilation to be shared with community/civic leaders at the completion of this six-month project. An online forum for stakeholders will be used to keep up to date outside of the monthly meetings to share information gathered, find answers to questions, to encourage stakeholders to find local resources for their individual garden projects, and to share concerns with other stakeholders.

Anticipated Results
This project would expand to include stakeholders in all 77 of Chicago’s community areas by focusing them into groups that feature Central, Far North Side, Far Southeast Side, Far Southwest Side, North Side, Northwest Side, South Side, Southwest Side, and the West Side. Additional grants would be sought out and applied to creating stipends for advisors and participants as well as funding for garden-based projects. This initial 12 community area-project would be a testing ground on developing ways to implement self-initialized projects. It will be interesting to see if the focus will need to be on smaller projects or if larger projects can be implemented in one growing season. These projects may also become encourage stakeholders to go on and engage in horticulture-based community involvement. The “seeds” of this project may encourage stakeholders in this age group to continue other horticulture projects, to work in the horticulture field, qualify for horticulture-based scholarships, or enrich their lives by engaging with plants on a more personal level. Ideally stakeholders will become project leaders in the following year and mentoring a new group of stakeholders to engage in garden projects in their communities. By encouraging a space for sharing concerns and dreams of new participants as well as offering advice based on their previous experience in developing garden projects stakeholders can engage in the practice of listening and being listened to.