

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

## To reduce violence in Philly, plant trees and gardens

Data show that remediating abandoned, trash-filled lots by planting trees and gardens can reduce crime, suggesting green space should be a “must-have” public service here in Philly, like transit.



Tioga Hope Garden. Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

by Matt Rader, For The Inquirer

If you walk more than a few blocks in most neighborhoods in our region, you will observe some stark differences. In places where residents have time and money to “beautify their neighborhoods,” trees and gardens abound. In neighborhoods where time and money are scarce, so are green elements. This is inequity in action.

This has consequences beyond just how different neighborhoods look.

Trees do a lot for a neighborhood — most notably, they mitigate heat. Trees lessen the so-called urban heat effect, and neighborhoods like Chestnut Hill with high tree cover [can be up to 20 degrees cooler in summer months](#) than Kensington and others with barely any trees.

» **READ MORE:** [A low-cost way to reduce depression: renovate vacant lots](#)

Importantly, data also show that trees, community gardens, gardens in public spaces, and remediated vacant land can also reduce violent crime and improve community health. At a time when Philadelphia is on track to break another yearly record for homicides, the city must embrace these simple tools and treat trees and gardens as “must-have” public services that are high on the list for public investment, like transit or education.

Philadelphians face deep health and safety problems that threaten the city’s vitality, including lack of access to good jobs, rising gun violence, omnipresent trash and litter, and growing impacts from heat and flooding. Many Black and brown communities are disproportionately affected by these issues. Perhaps most jarring is the city’s record-high number of homicides, with [more than 330 murders in 2022](#) so far.

We at the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society have long believed that simple environmental solutions offer an affordable way to help address these acute quality-of-life issues at scale. That’s why we raise money — including from our members and the Flower Show — and work with volunteers, nonprofits, small businesses, and government in more than 230 neighborhoods to build community and public gardens, plant and sustain trees, and clean and green vacant lots.

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## Before and after: Making Philly’s streets green

The corner of Fourth Street and Cecil B. Moore Avenue

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2301 N. Gratz St. in North Philly



A [report](#) from researchers at the University of Pennsylvania in collaboration with PHS shows that our efforts deliver results. Residents near lots greened and maintained by [PHS Landcare](#), a partnership between PHS and the City of Philadelphia, reported significantly [lower perceptions of crime](#) (which dropped by 37% after the lots were maintained), vandalism (down 39%), and safety concerns when going outside their homes (down 58%).

There wasn't just a change in the perception of crime — actual crimes decreased after the lots were greened. Specifically, areas surrounding treated lots saw a 13% [reduction in crime overall](#), a 29% drop in gun violence, and a 22% decrease in burglaries in neighborhoods below the poverty line.

Research has also found that having more street trees on a block [lowers residents' risk for heart attack, stroke, and similar diseases](#), and is associated with a lower risk of [asthma](#) in children. Community gardens and green spaces have been linked to an [increased sense of solidarity among a community](#), decreased feelings of [depression](#), and [reduced stress levels](#).

Despite this evidence, only about a third of Philadelphia's vacant lots are cleaned and greened today via our PHS Landcare program. [Philadelphia's tree canopy declined by 6% from 2008 to 2018](#), the result of factors such as development and storm damage. Community gardens are routinely lost to sheriff's sales. Gardens in public spaces are rare.

"Gardens in public spaces are rare."- *Matt Rader*

As a city and region, we do not treat these green elements as must-have public services, and therefore do not seriously invest in them. As leaders across the region weigh strategies to address livability challenges and make choices regarding how to spend federal COVID relief and infrastructure funding, they should invest in expanding tree canopy, cleaning and greening more vacant lots, stabilizing community gardens, and leveraging all the above to create jobs and business opportunities for those most in need.

We envision a [Green Equity Initiative](#) as a first step toward fully harnessing the potential of environmental solutions to improve health and well-being, rectify environmental and social inequities at the neighborhood level, and encourage all leaders to recognize street trees, gardens, and clean and maintained vacant land as an expected "norm" for Philadelphia and all other cities, woven into the fabric of communities.

*Matt Rader is the 37th president of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS). He is focused on deepening and expanding PHS's efforts to use horticulture to advance the health and well-being of the communities in the Greater Philadelphia region and beyond.*

Matt Rader, For The Inquirer