A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING SEASON EXTENSION STRUCTURES

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DEFINITIONS OF COMMON SEASON EXTENSION STRUCTURES

This guide is intended for community members and local government officials considering changes to master plans, zoning ordinances, and other local policy or regulatory documents that influence the growing and harvesting of backyard produce. The intent is to provide a framework for a common understanding of produce growing practices and structures among those growing the produce and the local officials charged with administering local plans and ordinances. With a common understanding, plans and ordinances can then be tailored to support residents' interests and efforts to grow their own produce while minimizing nuisance and protecting public health, safety, and welfare. This guide concerns the growing of produce for non-commercial purposes and the local regulation of that non-commercial activity. The production of produce for commercial purposes is subject to the Michigan Right to Farm Act, PA 93 of 1981, as amended.

Greenhouse

A structure with a roof and sides that are made of durable materials including glass or other transparent or translucent material such as rigid plastic panels in which the temperature and humidity can be regulated for the cultivation of plants. A greenhouse may or may not be a permanent structure.

It is typical for a local ordinance to exclude 'Garden Centers' from the definition of greenhouses. Garden centers, which may include a nursery or greenhouse as an accessory use, import most of the items sold-items such as plants, potting soil, and garden equipment. Garden centers are typically considered commercial retail businesses and for zoning purposes.

Hoophouse or High Tunnel

A structure with a roof and sides are made largely of transparent or translucent material (not glass) for the purpose of the cultivation of plants. A Hoophouse does not have supplemental heat and is more of a temporary structure as compared to a Greenhouse. A high tunnel is very similar in construction to a Hoophouse, but is generally not enclosed on the ends of the structure.

Cold Frame

A temporary, unheated structure used for protecting seedlings and plants from the cold. Cold Frames are often constructed of durable materials, such as wood, glass, rigid plastic, or even old windows, but are not typically taller than 36 inches.

Low Tunnel

A temporary, freestanding structure that has a supported framework, typically made with hooped PVC or metal pipe and covered with plastic. A low tunnel does not have heat or electrical power and its purpose is to house and protect produce outside the typical growing season of the region.

Raised Bed

A temporary, open structure used for growing produce. Raised beds are most often used in urban environments where there may be concerns about soil contamination so clean soil is brought in and contained within the raised bed. Raised Beds are often used in combination with Low Tunnels.

Accessible Raised Bed

A temporary, open structure between 20 and 35 inches in height that allows for someone standing or sitting to access the soil and produce without bending down. Accessible Raised Beds are useful for the elderly and physically disabled to garden without having to kneel or sit on the ground. Depending on the placement of the bed near other structures, fences, or property lines, an accessible raised bed many need to be fairly narrow (roughly 2 ½ feet) if only accessed from one side. An accessible will also need to allow for approximately 27 inches of clear space underneath to allow for chair access below the bed.

COMMENTARY AND CONSIDERATIONS

Season extension structures have applications across a community from very rural locations to urban. While large greenhouses and hoophouses are more likely to be found in rural locations, smaller versions of these structures have a place in urban locations in home gardens and community gardens. To support the community food system, communities should allow all of these structures in all or almost all zoning districts. Then, regulations can limit the size of the structures, the construction materials used, and the maintenance of the structures so that torn and damaged materials are not becoming a nuisance.

Institutions, such as schools, universities, houses of worship, and hospitals, find season extension structures appealing for educational purposes that tie to curriculum and mission. These institutional season extension structures provide access to fresh food, learning opportunities, and function as a point of community connection. Allowing institutions to construct season extension structures as a use by right will support their mission and add to the vitality of the community.

For residential districts, season extension structures should be treated as an accessory use requiring that there is a principal use (e.g. a single- or two-family residence) first established on the lot before the accessory use is established. An exception would be to allow community gardens in certain districts as principal uses with a sponsoring organization in place to care for the property. For community gardens, other accessory structures that are appropriate to allow include raised/accessible planting beds, compost bins, picnic tables, garden art, rainwater catchment systems, tool sheds or garages, shade pavilions, etc.

Smaller season extension structures below a certain square footage (e.g. 200 ft2) might be allowed without a permit. Many ordinances exempt small garden sheds or other small buildings under a certain size from permitting and the same approach should apply to small season extension structures. Or, structures without a foundation might be considered 'temporary' by the ordinance and be exempt from needing a zoning permit. Communities will want to consider existing definitions in their ordinance and the treatment of other similar structures so that ordinance administration and enforcement is consistent.

Flexibility in the placement of season extension structures is important to consider. The success of growing produce is partly dependent on solar access. If these structures are properly placed, they are more likely to be productive, and then more likely to be properly cared for and maintained. Therefore, smaller, accessory season extension structures, such as raised beds, low tunnels, and hoophouses, should be allowed to be placed in side yards and even front yards – wherever the property owner can most fully utilize sun on the property. Communities could limit the size and height of such structures in front yards, and greenhouses might be limited to rear yards only.

Season extension structures should not be limited to the time of year they can be installed and in-place. Greenhouses, hoophouses, and cold frames are structures that are likely to be in place throughout the year due to their construction and materials. Low tunnels are more likely to be removed by the property owner as needed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Upper Peninsula Food Policy Committee is a subcommittee of the U.P. Food Exchange. The committee works with communities to provide education, draft and recommend regulations, and advocate for public policy that supports the growth of community food systems.

If your community needs assistance revising local plans and ordinances to better accommodate and support the local food system, feel free to reach out to the UPFE Policy Committee at info@upfoodexchange.com 906-225-0671, ext. 723.

www.upfoodexchange.com