

Economic Gardening

Economic gardening is an entrepreneurial approach to economic development that seeks to grow the local economy from within. First pioneered in [Littleton, Colorado](#) in 1989, its premise is that local entrepreneurs create the companies that bring new wealth and economic growth to a region in the form of jobs, tax revenues, per capita income, and a vibrant local business sector. Economic gardening seeks to focus on growing and nurturing local businesses rather than hunting for “big game” outside the area.

Littleton's approach has resulted in a 71 percent increase in employment and a tripling of sales tax revenues since 1989—a much higher rate than the region as a whole—while providing no incentives or tax breaks to recruit or attract outside businesses to the city.

What differentiates economic gardening from other entrepreneurship development strategies is its focus on providing market research and high-level technical assistance to small growth-oriented companies. The focus is on providing accurate, timely and relevant information to local entrepreneurs about key areas such as their competitors, customers, markets, and industry trends. Armed with this kind of information, a small business owner can make better strategic decisions, avoid costly mistakes, and successfully grow his or her enterprise. Market research is a discipline practiced by all Fortune 500 companies; economic gardening programs allow smaller companies to gain access to the same kind of tools and information and thus enjoy the same advantages as their larger counterparts.

Economic gardening strategies help local businesses discover how to reach markets outside the region. In turn, these exporting growth-oriented companies can spur the formation of local business suppliers and service firms to support them. More and better-paid workers also increase the demand for local goods and services, recirculating wealth throughout the local and regional economy.

An effective economic gardening (EG) program needs to be built from the ground up—that is, from the local community level first. EG is a strategy that operates within a larger entrepreneurial development system that is unique to each community. It must be integrated into the formal and informal systems that are already in place within that community. Our white paper, [10 Tips for Implementing an Economic Gardening Project](#) provides help for communities that want to explore economic gardening in their locality. [Growing Local Economies, Inc.](#) and the [Center for Rural Entrepreneurship](#) have partnered to offer consulting and training services to assist communities in the exploration and implementation process.

Economic gardening programs currently operate in several locations around the country, and even in locations in Australia and Japan. U.S.-based economic gardening projects include statewide initiatives in Wyoming, Florida, Kansas, and Washington, as well as local and regional programs in Montana, Wisconsin, Portland (OR), and several other locations.

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