



University of Nevada  
Cooperative Extension

## Special Publication-13-07

### Creating a Community Garden

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#### Introduction

When people consider starting a community garden, the first thought is frequently something such as “What should we plant?” That should be one of the last questions to ask. Many things need to be considered for a community garden to be sustainable. Issues concerning structure, membership, dues, water, and policies and bylaws all need to be addressed before a seed is put in the ground.



Photo: E. Fagin. Community gardens may have all members sharing in garden activities from planting to harvesting.

#### What is a community garden?



Photo: E. Fagin. Some community gardens consist of raised beds for individual gardeners or households.

Different individuals and groups define “community garden” differently. For some, it is a communal garden plot where everyone shares the tasks as well as the produce. For others, it means individual plots maintained by each person responsible for selecting, planting and harvesting their own produce.

The group forming the garden needs to agree on the basic organizational structure before implementing any other plans, since it will influence how the garden is developed.

### **Why have a community garden?**

While a community garden might simply appear to be a good idea, it takes a shared vision and hard work. In the first place, the surrounding community must agree that it is needed. Even if a whole neighborhood will not be gardening, its buy-in is required to maintain good relations. When the adjacent community feels a sense of ownership, it is more likely to protect and support the garden.

The coordinating group needs to agree on the garden's purpose, or purposes. It may be primarily a way for households to grow food, its focus might be neighborhood beautification and community-building, or it could be an educational site where students can learn in an outdoor environment. It could be a synthesis of these.

Likewise, the group will need to agree on the final outcome of the produce. Will surplus food be donated, or shared among the gardeners? Will the garden have a farm stand or a booth at a local farmers market?

### **Where will the garden be located?**

Obtaining the land for a garden, whether it is purchased, leased, on the grounds of a religious institution or part of a municipal park, can be challenging. A vacant lot may look like an eyesore waiting to be improved by a garden, but the property owners could have other plans. City ordinances may limit

the use of its grounds. Institutional properties' concerns about potential litigation can prevent outside groups from using their land. If the garden will be in a property with a homeowners' association, HOA approval is essential. Any construction (fencing, structures, etc.) must meet local codes.



Photo: A. O'Callaghan. Low-income elderly gardeners harvesting the fruits of their labors.

The location will influence membership. A garden among wealthy residences will probably not attract low-income gardeners. A garden in a high crime area might ultimately improve the area, but organizers will first have to confront people's fears of going out alone or after dark.

Growing vegetables and flowers depends on the amount of sunlight the site receives. Leafy vegetables need a minimum of six hours of sunlight, while plants such as tomatoes or melons need at least eight hours. If the only available land is in a shady area, a garden will not succeed. Artificial light is not an option for an outdoor garden.



Restrooms are important. Will facilities be available and accessible to gardeners?

### Who will be the gardeners?



Photo: A. O'Callaghan. Success!

A garden needs a critical mass of participants in order to succeed. While the original coordinators will probably make up the first gardening cohort, no doubt there will be additional members. When reaching out to potential garden members, remember that more people will probably think it is a good idea than will actually become gardeners.

One member might act as a local liaison, to answer inquiries about the garden from the public.

Members should make some kind of commitment, preferably for a year.

Will the garden attempt to attract specific groups, such as families with children, senior citizens or nonprofit groups? If a commercial entity wished to become involved, would it be permitted?

The recruitment style will influence the membership. For instance, flyers to religious groups will probably attract members of that religious group. Social media will attract those who are comfortable using them.



Photo: E. Fagin. Gardens can attract children, teens and families.

Newspapers frequently look for stories with local interest, as will some magazines that reach out to particular groups.

Community gardens should meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The pavement and width of pathways should be navigable by wheelchairs or walkers. Local ordinances may be more stringent than federal ones. Details of ADA requirements are readily available on the Internet or through city and county agencies that issue building permits.

### What about the costs?

There are up-front costs associated with establishing a garden that cannot be ignored. These can be covered by members, donors, grants or other sources. Community gardens usually require payment of annual dues; the amount varies with the costs associated with development and maintenance. Scholarships might be made available to gardeners who otherwise could not afford to participate.

The garden can be an informal assembly of plots, or there may be the desire to have a formal arrangement of raised beds and common areas.

In this case, who will do the design? Is there a member with the skills? Will a professional donate a design, or will there be a charge for that service?

If raised beds are desired, who will build them? This may be done by groups of volunteers, or by paid staff. Each gardener might be expected to build or purchase his or her own. If so, how will this happen? Will the materials be bought, found, re-purposed or donated? If materials are not new, they must be checked for insects, rots and toxins. Will beds be ready and available to participants when they start?



Photo: E. Fagin. Groups of volunteers may be eager to build raised beds for community gardens.

access to water, or will plumbing be installed, and by whom? Will there be a charge for water? Water use could be measured by means of meters, but purchasing and installing them can be expensive. There could simply be a flat water use fee for all gardeners, but that might not be fair to those using water-thrifty irrigation methods.



Photo: E. Fagin. Giving credit to donors of garden materials, as done here, is a good idea.

## Utilities

Electricity should be included in garden planning, since it is rarely free. Pumps and irrigation clocks run on supplied power, unless they are solar- or battery-powered.

Water is a major issue, whether or not an area gets regular rainfall. Is there ready



Photo: A. O'Callaghan. Irrigate wisely.

Will gardeners be responsible for their own irrigation materials? What kind of irrigation will be permitted? Drip is commonly used for vegetables, but this is not possible if one is only using a hose. Flooding a well-constructed bed is easy, but wastes water.



## Additional important concerns

Soils in urban areas often have low levels of fertility, and/or may have toxic materials present. It is important to know what was previously on the site.



Photo: A. O'Callaghan. Soils should be tested before being used for gardening.

Soils should be assayed by a laboratory before being used in a garden. Who will take responsibility for sending samples for analysis? Will the cost of tests be paid for by gardeners or some other funder?

Fencing is usually installed around garden areas to maintain the security of raised beds and the plants within them. Who will purchase and install it?



Photo: E. Fagin. Fencing around a garden for business employees and family members is illustrated here.

Other items, for example hand tools, soil amendments, mulch and seeds are most often the responsibility of the gardeners themselves when they control individual beds. If the garden is one with shared plots and tasks, the group will need to decide what gets purchased, as well as how items are stored and maintained. A shed can hold things such as shared tools and hoses.

## Managing the garden

Garden management can be the responsibility of a paid staff person, or a volunteer board. Both approaches have pluses and minuses. A paid staffer must receive a salary, which might come from participant dues, or another source. A volunteer board cannot be held to the same level of accountability as paid staff, since it donates its labor. Will the volunteer board be elected from the gardeners? Will there be written bylaws, policies and procedures?

Whichever is chosen, there must be clear expectations of what will be performed. For instance, who maintains common areas, such as pathways?



Photo: A. O'Callaghan. Weeds in common areas are unsightly.

## When will the garden be open?

Many community gardens are off limits at night. Although plants do much of their work in daylight, it may be necessary for gardeners to work in the evening or very early morning. Those working 9 am to 5 pm have little daytime for gardening, outside of weekends. Some shift workers' schedules are similarly inconvenient. Summer afternoons in the desert southwest are very hot with intense sunlight, so the hours when gardeners in the rest of the country can do their tasks are impossible for this region.

Will gardeners have keys to the garden? How will keys be monitored so they are not duplicated? A combination lock is one solution.

## Horticultural practices



Photos: A. O'Callaghan. Serious insect and weed infestations can make use of conventional pesticides very tempting!



Even the best gardener must occasionally deal with issues such as pest control, and in some seasons, this can be extremely challenging. Pests include insects, diseases, weeds and sometimes larger animals such as rabbits, ground squirrels and deer. The group needs to determine what control methods will be acceptable. Integrated pest management, looking at plants for evidence of problems before applying pesticides, should be the bottom line. It is up to the garden group to permit conventional chemical pest control, or to limit pest management to organic products and strategies.

Pesticides include insecticides, herbicides ("weed killers"), fungicides ("disease controllers") as well as rodent bait. Whether organic or conventional, any of these can be hazardous, so it is important for gardeners to read the label on any container before applying.

## Compost

Sustainability includes discarding as little green material as possible. By composting green waste, not only are gardeners limiting the amount of garbage going to the landfill, but they are also creating a valuable soil amendment that can be used in the garden.

There are many ways to compost, from creating a simple pile to purchasing a rotating tumbler. Piles are simple, but can be difficult to turn. Tumblers are easy to rotate, but can be costly and not large enough for a community garden.

In addition, a tumbler will need to be secured against vandalism and theft.





Photo: A. O'Callaghan. A compost tumbler on rack makes turning easier.



Photo: E. Fagin. Compost isn't all glamor; bins must be filled, kept moist and turned!

Compost needs to be turned and kept moist. Who will be responsible for the compost area? It could be part of paid garden staff duties, responsibility could be shared by a committee, or it could be a rotating job for each gardener (assuming he or she is physically able).

Another issue with compost is – who will have access to the finished product? If there is more compost than the gardening group needs, will it be sold to outside groups or donated?

### How else will the garden be used?

In addition to being a location where people gather to grow plants, a garden can serve as an educational center for the community, or even a location for fundraising events.

Could gardening classes occur there, for gardeners, local children or other neighbors? Could it be designed so outside groups could use it for special events?



Photo: A. O'Callaghan. In conjunction with the harvest, the community held a neighborhood fiesta at this garden.

## Summary

A community garden can be a source of food, neighborhood improvement and educational opportunity. Success in a shared urban garden is often a foundation for pride, not only among the gardeners, but for the local community. For a garden to succeed, however, people must

address critical issues such as land, water, management and money. After that, the fun of seed selection, planting and harvesting can begin!



Photo: A. O'Callaghan. Community gardeners may opt to donate part of their produce.

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