

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY GARDENING

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Community gardening is certainly not a new movement, but has recently become more popular than ever before. The economic downturn, an enhanced interest in eating pesticide-free produce, an increasing interest in health and physical fitness, and a blossoming desire for community connection and sharing produce have all contributed to the renewed interest in community gardens.

Did you know that, on average, food travels over thirteen hundred miles from its point of production to a consumer? Growing one's own food in a backyard or nearby community garden saves energy and helps develop a sense of community among neighbors. Developing, nurturing, harvesting and sharing produce from community gardens is a tangible way to improve the health and climate of both the inner city and suburban communities. In some cities, vacant blighted lots have been transformed into row after row of tomatoes, beans, squash, melons, potatoes, carrots, and herbs creating flourishing greenbelts in an otherwise endless array of concrete, smog, and graffiti.

And, along the way, many gardeners have discovered their own green thumbs; as delicious as home-grown tomatoes and squash are, one family can consume only so many. That's where the magic of doing something one loves creates a synergism with helping others – another prevailing force – leading to sharing nutritious ripe produce with the needy.

Many community gardeners and home-owners with large backyard gardens are embracing the concept of Plant a Row for the Hungry. The concept is straightforward and simple leading to over 14 million pounds of fresh produce donated to local food pantries and distribution centers by participants in the past 13 years. The program, the brainchild of the Garden Writers of America, has virtually no overhead and no 'red tape'. At harvest, gardeners share their bountiful crop of vegetables with those in need by bringing their extra produce to drop-off centers in many communities throughout the United States. The program has grown rapidly with over 44 million American households now participating..

How can you, as an individual, go about starting a community garden? First, invite 'like minds' to an initial brainstorming session. Discuss your enthusiasm for the idea and enlist ideas and assistance from others. An early goal should be to secure a suitable plot of land that is available, in a convenient location, close to a water source, and not liable to be vandalized. Consider talking early-on with a city planner about your idea; there may be a start-up group already forming with a similar idea. Band together whenever feasible. Consider discussing the idea with local churches and schools, as well. Involving a neighborhood group early on in the planning has many advantages, from doling out the work evenly to ensuring early buy in from all

involved, which, in turn, helps guarantee success.

This is the perfect time of year to start planning a spring garden. You'll have several months to enlist the help and permits you'll likely need and maximize your chances of success acquiring donations of irrigation equipment, compost, and seeds and plants. Start organizing a planning committee and make sure you take advantage of all available talents. For example, even though a neighbor has never planted a garden and has a 'brown thumb', he or she just might be at the top of their game in the marketing/public relations world.

Get to know everyone's talents; spend the first meeting discussing what needs to be done, put together a time-line, and start assigning tasks. Start an e-newsletter and keep everyone regularly informed. If someone doesn't follow through with an assignment, don't let it hold the whole project back. Find a backup and move forward on schedule. If you don't have the time to serve as Garden Coordinator yourself, don't leave the first meeting without recruiting the right person! That person will ultimately be responsible for keeping things on schedule, finalizing plans, calling meetings, and communicating with the group. It is also a good idea to appoint a treasurer that can be trusted to appropriately handle the financial end.

Make sure that at least two people sign checks and oversee the books to avoid even a perception of wrongdoing. The entire process should be transparent and books should be open at each planning meeting. Other important positions are a general Renaissance person who is good at repairs and familiar with plumbing and electricity. Consider contacting your local University of California Cooperative Extension office and talk to a trained volunteer who can help you. The Master Gardener helpline is San Bernardino County can be reached at 909,387.2182 or mgsanber@ucdavis.edu.

Enlist local leaders such as neighborhood politicians and other public servants, church leaders, teachers, and administrators. If your next door neighbor is a lawyer, you're even better off and might even want to start a non-profit organization.

The agenda for the first meeting will be full. A major goal should be to discuss the group's vision for the garden; this is an important point that should be agreed upon early on. Does the group envision a community garden where equal-sized plots are rented out to neighborhood residents? Does the group prefer that the garden be largely to produce and provide produce for a food bank or for low-income neighbors? In some cases, the garden might be divided into two or more larger segments with different purposes and goals. While a multitude of ideas are feasible, it is crucial for the group to agree early on the specific goals of their particular garden. Next, an organizational structure should be agreed upon, as discussed above.

An initial committee goal will certainly be to find a suitable plot of land. Don't give up or leave any stone unturned. Also, don't accept the first free plot of land offered unless it fits the criteria agreed upon by the committee. Water availability, a sunny location, adequate access for entryway and maneuverability are essential. Poor garden soil can be augmented with compost but a lack of sunshine cannot be mitigated.

Just to reiterate, remember that the first step to starting a successful community garden is always assembling a group of supportive and committed neighbors, enlisting representatives from civic organizations and associations, and bringing onboard community leaders. This should be accomplished long before you break ground on the garden and will save frustration, money, and lead to a successful venture. It's also important to think about friends, colleagues and neighbors in your inner circle who are skilled in areas such as fundraising, financing, public relations, volunteerism, writing and blogging, and a media buddy or two who can present your cause to a large readership online and in print. Another great source of information and support for the how-to's of community gardening is a University of California Master Gardener or other experienced gardener. Taking the time to spearhead these efforts will help your community garden get off the ground (yes - pun intended!) successfully both from a short and long-term perspective.

Many successful community gardener organizers publish an online monthly newsletter or blog. These are regularly updated with pictures of gardeners seeding, hoeing, and harvesting their bounty and offering tips and advice on growing specific vegetables, along with information regarding how gardening improves one's physical, mental, and psychological health. Other points to blog about include the cost-savings of growing one's own produce and how a certain percentage of community garden produce will regularly be donated to community food banks.

Garden Location

Deciding whether to establish the garden on public or private land is an important issue for your planning committee to discuss and agree upon. There are advantages and disadvantages to both scenarios. In either case, be sure that the land you ultimately select is available for at least five years; if you're really serious about a long-term endeavor, ten years is even better! If you're considering using public land, talk to your local city public works department about the possibility of your group setting up a sub-committee to work directly with the city to develop a community garden in a city park, greenbelt, or near a library. Remember that the garden needs to be in a convenient location for parking, gardener and equipment access, and should be located close to a reliable water source. Gardens located more than five miles from a major population base often offer less expensive land, allowing community garden organizers to rent or purchase a greater acreage, but may fall apart in the long-run due to the fact that gardeners themselves just don't want to commute that far to keep up their plots. Often, in these cases, vegetables do get planted but over time the plots become neglected, only to have weeds, diseases and insects spread from abandoned plots to active, adjacent gardens.

In some cases, a home-owner with his/her own 'back 40' may decide to turn the land into a community garden, donating the space. Make sure that zoning laws are on your side if you decide to take this route. In other cases, residents of apartments and condominiums and home-owner associations band together very successfully to initiate the garden plans and work through their local governing boards.

Budgeting For Your Community Garden

What is the required investment in dollars and cents to implement a community garden? Average costs will likely range from \$1,000 to \$6,000 and vary substantially based on the organizers' success getting the actual garden space tools, fencing, seeds and plants, fertilizer and compost and mulch donated. Another cost that needs to be included is the expense of designing and installing a drip irrigation system and the actual cost of water. While raised beds are wonderful, the cost of the wood and time and labor to actually build them can be prohibitive. If volunteers are available to build and install the raised beds, the prospect becomes more favorable. Once the garden has been planted and the community is fully involved, it may be easier to offset year-to-year maintenance costs such as upkeep of walkways between plots and entryways through plot rentals fees.

Some community gardens supply only the physical plots and water and nothing more. Renters, in turn, pay a set amount each month or season to cover their share of these collective costs and are responsible for paying for and obtaining their own seeds and garden transplants, fertilizer, tomato cages, soil amendments, etc. The mechanism your group chooses depends on how much or how little control you ultimately want to maintain over the actual garden operations. My recommendation is that soil throughout the entire garden area be amended with compost all at one time before plots are rented or assigned. Costs for this initial soil improvement can be divided equally among gardeners when plots are prepared and ready for rent.

Fall and Winter Chores Before Renting Plots

Raised Beds

If you decide to construct raised beds to grow vegetables and herbs, they need to be sized correctly. Be sure to allow plenty of walkway space between beds for wheelbarrows and other implements as well as adequate space for the actual gardeners to tend their plots. Raised beds can be any length and range from three feet wide to five feet wide and from six inches high to 18 inches high. Beds wider than five feet across hamper the ability to reach at least halfway across conveniently to seed, weed, fertilize, and harvest. Fall and winter are great seasons to start preparing the garden, whether you decide to use raised beds or a more traditional approach with no beds. In both cases, high quality soil and/or compost is required to help ensure a successful garden.

Soil Amendments: compost

If the native soil where the community garden plots will be installed is mostly sand or clay, mixing in at least 40% compost by volume will greatly benefit the garden plants by improving physical, chemical, and biological components. Check with city solid waste or public works departments to locate high-quality compost. You may be able to get it donated free.

Loose and bagged compost and mulch is available from Miramar landfill (Miramar Greenery) <http://www.sandiego.gov/environmental-services/miramar/cmw.shtml>. City of San Diego residents may acquire up to two cubic yards of compost or mulch free. (One cubic yard is approximately the size of six 32-gallon trash containers.) Larger amounts may be purchased onsite loose or bagged. Contact your city public works department to find out if free compost is available. For other great tips, visit calrecycle.ca.gov/organics

Soil Tests

I strongly suggest that you have a soil test conducted by a reputable laboratory before deciding whether or not to add compost. Have tests run on pH, soil drainage, and soil physical and chemical properties. In the long run, having your soil tested before gardens are subdivided for planting will save money and frustration. The soil test report alone is worth the cost of the procedure; it will provide valuable information on what fertilizers and amendments are needed to grow a healthy vegetable garden without polluting ground water. (Gardeners preferring to use only organic fertilizers can receive specific information on sources and amounts of these products to use, as well.) First and foremost, remember that an accurate and reliable soil testing report requires accurate sampling. Here is how to take a soil sample for valid results:

1. Take 6 – 8 inches deep soil samples from several locations throughout the garden where the soil is thought to be the same. Each individual sample should be about one cup; mix six to eight samples of like-soil together in a gallon sized ziplock plastic bag.
2. Submit the sample along with your contact name, phone number and email address to a reputable laboratory for analysis and detailed report. Include as much information as you can regarding what types of crops (eg: vegetables) will be grown in the garden and where the garden is located (city). Two reputable local laboratories located in Southern California are Soil and Plant Laboratory, Inc. <http://www.soilandplantlaboratory.com/index.html> (714.282.8777) located at 1594 North Main Street in Orange, CA and Wallace Laboratories <http://www.bettersoils.com/> (800.473.3699) located at 365 Coral Circle, El Segundo, CA. You will receive a complete report within two to three weeks.