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People+Plants is a multimedia series on how to build, maintain, and make the most of community gardens. For more titles and topics in the series, visit learningstore.uwex.edu.



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Starting a Community Garden—How to put your plot on the path to success

Community gardens vary greatly in size, shape, and purpose. Some gardens feature rental plots maintained by individuals or families for their own use. Other gardens support food pantries, churches, or schools. There are even gardens designed to serve educational, therapeutic, or rehabilitative purposes, such as gardens that are maintained by neighborhood schools, assisted living facilities, or correctional institutions. Still other community gardens take on a combination of these purposes and forms.

When planning a community garden, you'll need to define the purpose of the garden, identify available resources, evaluate the condition and suitability of potential sites, gather tools and supplies, and then manage the garden effectively. This publication aims to help guide you in the process of planning and starting a successful community garden.

Takeaway tip

To determine what type of garden you want to start, identify the individuals and groups who are truly interested in being involved and find out what they want out of a community garden. The most successful and sustainable community gardens are based on the interests and abilities of the people who will use them.

What kind of garden will yours be?

The first steps toward determining the type of garden you'll build are to learn the wishes and desires of the people who will be involved and to work together to assess your needs and resources. Otherwise put, think first about those who will be using your garden and the available resources, and *then* determine the form your garden will take. Be sure to remain flexible throughout the planning process. The more people, organizations, and resources involved, the more likely it is that your plan will change over time. Being aware of that up front, and reminding yourself and others of it when necessary, will be a tremendous help when planning your garden.



Merrill Park Community Garden

Master Gardener volunteer Anna Bode-Kokity started the Merrill Park Community Garden in 2006. Located just blocks off the historic downtown in Beloit, Wisconsin, it began as a 25- by 35-foot patch in a sloping pocket park in a residential neighborhood. Since then, the garden has grown to encompass a 30- by 70-foot fenced-in portion, on-site rain barrels, and accessible raised garden beds.

What have the biggest challenges been? Bode-Kokity cites vandalism—adults take produce, whereas youth climb on structures and damage plants—and the transitional nature of the neighborhood, where nobody seems to stay for long. She also feels that events such as classes and workshops haven't been as well attended as she expected, so she keeps asking those who are using the garden for their ideas and feedback. In fact, when asked what the biggest surprise has been along the way, Bode-Kokity admits that most of the

ideas that ended up working best came from other people. "I was against the idea of subdividing the garden, but it turned out that people really want their own patch to tend. I resisted at first, but people came up to me all summer long looking for a little bit of space they could call their own." Finally she relented, and as a result, volunteers are showing a much greater commitment to the garden as a whole.

Another idea that Bode-Kokity initially resisted was charging a fee for the plots. But doing so increases their perceived value and helps volunteers feel more invested in the garden. To ease the sting of the modest \$20 fee, Bode-Kokity offers a refund in the fall to gardeners who have kept up their beds.

The moral of the story? Take the time up front to ask your supporters and volunteers about their hopes and expectations, and to the extent possible, plan your garden around them.



Identify your resources

Listing your available—or potentially available—resources is a great way to start the planning process. The following list can help guide you:

People

What potentially useful knowledge and skills are held by members of your planning group and community? What individuals or groups might have skills or experience in the following roles?

- Avid gardeners, Master Gardener volunteers, individuals and families interested in growing their own food
- Landscape architects, garden designers, landscapers
- Carpenters, builders
- Grant writers
- Planners, project coordinators, volunteer coordinators
- Community leaders (council members, plan commission members, etc.)
- Others

Partnerships

What other groups are or could be involved in creating a community garden?

- Municipal departments, including parks, zoning, and streets
- Service groups
- Schools, churches, food pantries, or other facilities
- Businesses or employers
- Existing community gardens
- Extension educators
- Others

Donations

What are some potential sources of funds, items, time, or expertise?

- Local service groups
- Grants
- Local suppliers (printers, building supply and hardware stores, nurseries, eateries that might offer free food for volunteers, etc.)
- Community colleges, Extension offices (for on-site educational opportunities)
- Others

Be flexible in your approach to resources. If the local building supply store can't donate the wood for your raised beds, might they send a crew to build them? If your municipality can't provide the topsoil or compost you need, can they point you to a builder who might have some to spare? Remember to talk about your plan early and often, as you never know when an individual or group is looking for a worthy project and might be a great resource.

Harness people power

People are the most important component of any community garden. In order to build a successful and sustainable garden, it is vital that you engage the members of the community. Work with neighbors and other community members *before* you break ground. Listen to their ideas and concerns and be sure they feel that they are part of the process.

If your garden is to be a success, you'll need to build and lead a team of committed volunteers. According to the American Community Garden Association (ACGA), a rental garden needs 20 volunteers to be successful; a smaller garden may require fewer.

Be site savvy

Selecting a site that fits your needs and being aware of the challenges a site may pose are key in building a successful community garden. There are several factors to consider when evaluating potential sites.

Location and size

When determining the location for your garden, be sure to consider the garden's purpose. Will you be growing produce for your local food pantry? If that's the case, a smaller plot adjacent to the food pantry might be more practical than a larger plot at some distance. If you prefer a larger but more remote site, make sure you have easy vehicle access so you can haul your bounty every week.

Determine the size of the garden by striking a balance between production needs and what the people involved can realistically manage. Even if you have space for a large garden, starting small will allow you to grow your garden, the skill and experience of the people involved, and your gardening expertise before taking on the larger challenge of a big garden. Once you determine the garden's size, mark the area and calculate the square footage. This figure will be used in calculating many of your inputs, such as the amount of topsoil or compost you will need. If you need help with the calculations, search for a garden calculator online or ask your garden supplier for assistance.

Takeaway tip

Think first about who will be served by your garden; then think about the ideal garden location.

Parking

Note the amount and type of parking available when visiting a potential site. While parking may not be a major factor in choosing a site, it's important to be aware of the ease with which people will be able to access the site.





Sunlight

If the purpose of your community garden is to grow fresh fruits and vegetables, the garden area should receive at least 6 hours of sunlight for optimal production. Be sure to note whether surrounding buildings—especially to the east, south, and west—will significantly reduce the amount of sunlight the site receives.

The garden space should be clear of trees and other tall vegetation that may block the sun and compete with your garden plants for water and soil nutrients. It's a good idea to spend a full day mapping the patterns of sunlight on your plot. Knowing which areas receive more intense levels of sunlight—usually the parts that receive afternoon sun—will help you lay out your garden.

If a site has too much shade, you might consider ways to modify the site, such as removing trees.

Current use

While you're at a potential site, note the land's current use. If the plot is an empty lot, for example, someone may be using it as an informal public park. Make note of current uses and neighboring activities so these issues can be clarified in a land-use agreement if necessary.

Also note the existing traffic patterns of a site. An unfenced vacant lot that serves as a neighborhood shortcut may need to be fenced to prevent people from tromping through the garden. Or even better—you may decide to include the shortcut in the design of the garden so that neighborhood residents can continue to use it. (If you plan to do any digging, dial 811 to call Diggers Hotline or your local One Call center and learn the locations of any buried utility lines.)

Another aspect to consider is the amount of effort that will be needed to turn your site into a workable garden. Is there asphalt or other material that will need to be removed? Are there a lot of weeds? Some weeds, such as Canada thistle and creeping Charlie, are much harder to eradicate than others, such as dandelions and lamb's-quarters. Know what you are up against before you commit to a site.

Soil and drainage

Ideally, the soil at your garden site should be suitable for digging and easy planting. Color and texture are good indications of soil's physical condition: the ideal soil is the color of semisweet chocolate and crumbles easily in your hand. If the soil at your site doesn't fit this description—if it is sandy, stony, or heavy and clay-like—you may need to make efforts to amend, or improve, the soil to make it more suitable for growing.

The soil of the garden should be free of debris and contaminants. Lead and arsenic are common soil contaminants in urban neighborhoods. Other contaminants may be of concern if the garden is in an industrial or agricultural area. For more information, refer to the UW-Extension publication *Soil Contaminants in Community Gardens* (A3905-03), and check with your local Extension office for soil testing information.

Also note the site's slope and drainage. Steep slopes pose challenges for gardens because bare soil can wash away during heavy rains. Look for land that is as level as possible, without low spots where water pools after rainfalls. Many plants do not do well in soils that are wet for prolonged periods, so avoid planting in such areas.

Whether you see pooling or not, it is important to understand your site's drainage because it can reveal a great deal about your soil's composition and how long the soil will retain water after heavy rains. You may want to conduct some drainage tests: Dig a hole approximately 1 to 2 feet deep and fill it with water. Note how quickly it empties. If the water is gone in less than an hour, the soil is well drained and is probably sandy in texture. If it takes much longer than an hour, the soil drains poorly and probably contains a high percentage of clay.

If the site you have selected has poor soil or drainage, consider ways to modify the site. Perhaps you can amend the soil or incorporate raised beds in the garden.

Water access

Access to water is critical. Newly planted seeds and transplants must be watered after planting. Depending on the weather conditions, regular watering may be necessary throughout the growing season. Water lines, rain barrels, or some other water capturing system should be nearby to provide water. If water lines are tapped, keep in mind that someone will have to pay for the water used, whether it's the garden, the municipality, or another party.

Takeaway tip

If water access is an issue, you'll want to find ways to conserve moisture on-site. Using mulch will reduce your garden's water needs and keep back weeds. Opaque plastic mulch in the form of sheeting can reduce the risk of certain plant diseases, but not all gardens allow plastic mulches. Good organic alternatives include marsh hay, straw, grass clippings, leaves, newspaper, and composted manure. Organic mulches offer the benefit of being able to be incorporated into the soil after harvest.

Don't land in trouble

Once you've selected an ideal site, make sure that the land is available to meet your garden's present and future needs. Does the land's zoning limit your ability to start a produce stand, build structures, or keep bees or chickens on-site? What are the setback requirements? Is there room for growth if the garden needs to expand?

Having documented permission to establish a garden in the form of a land-use agreement is always advisable, especially if you plan to build any structures such as garden sheds or gathering spaces.

When drafting a land-use agreement, consider the following questions:

- What is the duration of the agreement? (The ACGA recommends that any site be available for several years.)
- If a water line is available on-site, who will pay for the water?
- What restrictions are there on the property (e.g., restricted pesticide use)?
- Are you allowed to build structures such as garden sheds on the land? If the structures are not movable, who will own them or be responsible for their removal?
- What will happen if the owner decides to sell the land?
- Who will be responsible for mowing and maintaining the uncultivated areas of the property?

Gardens on public property such as those on park and school grounds may require a lease, contract, or memorandum of understanding that spells out the duration and type of use for the space. This document should define the roles of all the groups involved and address liability concerns.

Be a good neighbor

Wherever the garden is located, think about your neighbors-to-be. Make note of nearby residences and other buildings and think about sight lines that you may want to enhance or block with your garden's design. Inform your neighbors about your intentions by going door to door, posting flyers, or holding a neighborhood meeting so you can listen to their concerns and address them as appropriate.

Takeaway tip

Engage your neighbors as early as possible in the planning process. You can more easily address concerns with design modifications if you are aware of the concerns up front. For example, an unwelcome feature such as a set of compost bins can be relocated or shielded from view with an ornamental shrub. In addition, your neighbors may gain a sense of involvement from voicing their concerns, even if they don't actively volunteer in the garden project. Involved neighbors are the best protection against vandalism.

Tooling up

The tools needed to start a community garden generally include those that help you to work the land, plant crops, maintain the plants, harvest, and clean up at the end of the season. Commonly, these tools include shovels, hoes, water hoses, hand trowels, buckets, gloves, wheelbarrows, and baskets. Many gardens require gardeners to supply their own tools. Large, expensive items, such as tillers, might be borrowed or rented from a hardware or rental supply store.

Consider the infrastructure of your garden. Where will tools and supplies be stored? Where will compost go? Where will the water come from and how will it reach the garden rows? Where will signs and communications be posted? It may be helpful to visit other community gardens to see how they address their infrastructure needs.

Getting started

It's important to start the garden correctly. Here are some issues to discuss with your team of volunteers:

- Killing grass or removing sod—If you have grass, you'll need to remove it properly or it will come back to haunt you.
- Building raised beds—If you need raised beds, many pre-fabricated beds, kits, and plans are available.
- Amending the site—If you need to improve the soil, you'll need to calculate how much topsoil or compost you'll need.
- Water—If your site isn't plumbed, you might want to think about a water-capturing system or a way to bring in water.

Resources to help you address these issues can be found at your local Extension office.



Managing the garden

Someone will need to serve as garden coordinator to organize all the gardening efforts. This person should be familiar with gardening and the resources available for help.

Reliable support from other sources, such as student groups, church congregations, and neighborhood residents, is also necessary. These gardeners will be responsible for the bulk of the work in the garden. Good communication between the gardeners and the garden coordinator is absolutely essential.

Garden guidelines

Managing garden members can be challenging, and a management plan can help provide direction to everyone involved in the garden. Published guidelines on behavior and expectations should be developed with input from all garden members and shared with all gardeners from the beginning. As every garden is different, your group will need to come to agreement on the rules you will follow.

Here are some common issues to consider when developing garden guidelines:

- Will there be an application or membership fee?

- Will gardeners be required to volunteer labor toward garden upkeep?
- Who will handle ongoing maintenance such as mowing, filling water tanks, and turning compost?
- What specific duties are required of each individual at end-of-season cleanup?
- Are there any restrictions on what can be planted?
- Will your garden be completely organic or will chemicals be allowed? If chemicals are allowed, which ones?
- Are there shared tools or other materials, and what are the rules for their use?
- How will the garden produce be used? Will any or all of it be donated?
- What will happen if an individual's plot is not maintained?
- How will disagreements among gardeners be handled?
- Are there consequences for drug and alcohol use on-site?
- If vandalism occurs, how will it be reported?
- What are the hours of operation?
- Are pets allowed?

Education and information

Don't forget the educational role of the garden; not all gardeners will have green thumbs. Use the community garden as an opportunity to teach novice gardeners the ins and outs of gardening. You may find it to be an educational experience for everyone involved!

Share and discuss the following information with gardeners:

- Best practices for disease, weed, and pest control
- Guidelines for coordinating crop planting and harvest dates
- Tips on handling produce, including transportation, storage, and timing of harvest
- Contact information for the local Extension office and educator

Community connections

Writing press releases, engaging people through social networking sites, and creating community signage may help attract families and individuals to the garden. Planned celebrations offer opportunities for everyone involved in the community garden to exchange stories, share experiences, and network. The garden coordinator may want to keep in contact with the people involved to use them as sources of information for future community garden grant applications.

Takeaway tip
Put lots of effort into the end-of-season cleanup, as it can go a long way toward preventing future problems with weeds, diseases, and other pests.

A well-planned and sustainable community garden begins and ends with the people involved. Recognizing the needs of those using the garden is much more important than any of the resources, tools, or designs available. And as more and different people become involved, the garden will change. Like the people and neighborhoods it reflects, a community garden should be both dynamic and rewarding for all who participate. With thoughtful planning, inclusion of the community, hard work, and a little luck, your garden will grow more than fruits and vegetables—it will be a place to grow friendships and community connections.

Additional resources

To find more titles and topics in the People + Plants series, visit these websites:

learningstore.uwex.edu
fyi.uwex.edu/peopleplants

For more information on community gardening and best gardening practices, see also:

American Community Gardening Association

www.communitygarden.org

UW-Extension Cooperative Extension Horticulture

hort.uwex.edu

Find your local Extension office:

In Wisconsin www.uwex.edu/ces

Outside of Wisconsin

www.csrees.usda.gov/Extension





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