

Organizing a Community Garden



- How to Organize a Community Garden
- Keys to Community Garden Success



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Mill Street Rainbow Garden
Anderson

How to Organize a Community Garden



Choose a Site

- Determine where there is a desire and a need
- Determine what area will work best (availability of sun and water, etc.)
- Contact the owner of the land

Organize a Meeting of Interested People

- Hold promotional activities such as radio announcements
- Prepare and distribute informational flyers to the neighborhood or area
- Meet with interested people to discuss what is involved in membership in a community garden such as benefits, rules, etc.
- Allow people to sign-up for plots

Prepare and Develop the Site

- Arrange for land preparation (plowing, cleaning, clearing, etc.)
- Gather materials - petition for free supplies (seeds, tools, soil, etc.) from area businesses, churches, citizens groups, park and recreation departments, etc.
- Develop and assign plots
- Establish area for storage of supplies, educational materials, and list of rules
- Choose a name for the garden

Manage the Garden

- Keep members interested in gardening
- Act as a role model for proper gardening
- Provide educational resources and other support to members
- Troubleshoot problems that arise

Keys to Community Garden Success



Every community garden is as different as the gardeners that belong to them. There are some common traits that the most successful gardens share. These are:

Establish Good Lines of Communication Among All Participants

Everyone likes to feel that their voice matters and that what they say and think is recognized on an equal basis with everyone else. Good communication is the key to making sure this happens. There are often many major decisions to be made in the development of a community garden, especially at the outset. It may sometimes seem easier for one or two people to make decisions for the group, but this usually backfires, especially at the beginning before everyone has had time to get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses. A good garden coordinator will figure this out right away and give people the opportunity to express their opinions before final decisions are made. In addition to regular group meetings, a message board installed somewhere in the garden is a good way to keep everyone informed about important issues, as is a regular newsletter. So that no one person is overburdened with the task of telephoning everyone in the garden, it may be best to set up a phone-tree system.

Develop Partnerships Within the Community

Involve as many like-minded groups and individuals in your project as possible. It is not necessary to be a gardener in order to enjoy and participate in a community garden. Create a "Friends of the Garden" membership category for those people who want to help with the project but are not able, for whatever reason, to maintain their own garden plot. Actively seek out local politicians and other community leaders, members of the media, health professionals, the landscape industry, anti-poverty activists, and anyone else that could help. The more people that feel a personal attachment to the project, the better.

The Perfect Garden Coordinator

A good garden coordinator is all things to all people. She or he is dynamic, enthusiastic, inspiring, a diplomat, a veritable garden encyclopedia, tireless, devoted, able to deal with any problem with ease...and just about impossible to find. Since that's the case, make sure that the candidates fully understand the scope of the job. You may also want to consider having the garden members vote on a smaller group of interested garden members to be charged with the task of selecting a garden coordinator.

Don't Rely on Only One Person

Although having a good coordinator is key, it is equally important to have a well organized team. The success of the project should not rest on any one person's shoulders. If the garden is associated with a community center or other institution, the coordinator is often a staff member of that organization. But what happens when that person moves on to another position? Without the active involvement of a committed team, the entire project could go into a rapid nose-dive.

Start Small

It is always better to have a small success rather than a big failure, especially in the first year. Taking on too much at the start of any project usually results in burn-out after only a short time. You can always expand in the years to come. Most people are very enthusiastic gardeners in the spring, when that combination of sunshine, warm temperatures, and sweet smelling soil is too intoxicating to resist. By mid-summer that enthusiasm has waned considerably as the less than glamorous garden chores, like weeding and deadheading (removing dead flowers from plants), competes with swimming, baseball, and other summer fun. Do not get too discouraged when this happens. Instead, create some sort of special event or activity that will draw the gardeners back to the garden and help them to recall the excitement they felt in May.

Choose Your Site Well

Look for a site that is visible, safe, centrally located, in an area that will benefit from a community garden, has plenty of sun (at least 6 hours each day), has good access both by foot and for deliveries, and has the support of the neighbors. The area should be as flat as possible and should have good drainage (no wet spots or standing puddles). Make sure the location you have chosen has easy access to water. To cut down on pollution from cars, try to find a spot that is not too close to a stop sign or traffic light or adjacent to a parking lot. Do not hide the garden away from view because vandals prefer not to be seen. The more visible the garden, the safer the garden will be. Test the soil for nutrients and heavy metals if previous uses of the land warrant it. For more information on soil testing, contact your county University of California Cooperative Extension office (see resources, Section 8).

Keep the Garden Well Maintained Year Round

Vegetable gardens often have the reputation of being less than attractive. This is usually the result of poor or inconsistent maintenance by the gardeners. Let the gardeners know what is expected of them with a clearly defined, written set of garden by-laws. Keep the grass trimmed, common areas neat, the beds weeded (or better yet, mulched), pick up trash daily, locate the compost area out of sight as much as possible, plant flowers around the edges of the site as well as within the plots (pretty marigolds are ideal for keeping pests away), and try to design the site with imagination. There is no rule that says a garden has to be laid out in perfect 10 ft. x 20 ft. rectangular plots.

Build a Strong Sense of Community

Most community garden projects do not start out with a strong sense of community unless the group has come together before for other projects. Quite often most of the gardeners have never met before, or are the all too common kind of neighbors who say hello to each other but never really get beyond that. A community garden provides an excellent setting in which to get to know other people without many of the normal barriers to communication that we, unfortunately, create. It's hard to develop respect for someone when you do not have the opportunity to get to know them. When people are working together for a common cause, enjoying the fresh air, with their hands in the soil and the beauty of nature all around, facts like how much money they make and where their grandmother was born do not seem to matter as much as they did before.

Provide Educational Opportunities for the Gardeners

Not all, or even most, of the participants will be knowledgeable gardeners when they join the garden. A wise coordinator will understand that a first time gardener's enthusiasm is linked to a successful harvest. That does not mean that the first year has to yield a record bumper crop, but it can be very discouraging if nothing does well. Many novice gardeners will benefit from a bit of guidance from a more experienced gardener, either formally, as in a workshop; or informally, from the life-long gardener in a nearby plot. Actively encourage these opportunities.



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Lazy Landing Garden
Anderson, CA