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# COMMUNITY GARDEN START-UP GUIDE

*Adapted for Des Moines metro area by City of Des Moines Parks and Recreation, December 2012, from the Twin Cities metro area by [Garden Works](#) September 2007 version and the LA Version found at [http://communitygarden.org/docs/startup\\_guide.pdf](http://communitygarden.org/docs/startup_guide.pdf), 8/15/2007 By Rachel Surls, UCCE County Director With Help of Chris Braswell and Laura Harris, Los Angeles Conservation Corps Updated March 2001 by Yvonne Savio, Common Ground Garden Program Manager, UCCE*

This "Community Garden Start-Up Guide" is intended to help neighborhood groups and organizations along the path to starting and sustaining a community garden.

## **What is a Community Garden?**

A community garden is an area used for growing plants or animals, which has been collaboratively created and is maintained by members of the public. A community garden can take place on public or private land and can involve a broad cross-section of the public, as in a neighborhood community garden. Or it can involve specific sectors of the population, such as a school garden that involves students, teachers, parents, and other community members who support the garden for education.

## **Why Start a Community Garden?**

Many families living in the city would like to grow some of their own fruits, vegetables, herbs, and flowers. Some want to save money on their food bills. Others like the freshness, flavor and wholesomeness of home-grown produce. And for many, gardening is a relaxing way to exercise and enjoy being out-of-doors. There are also families from other cultures who would like to grow traditional foods not available in the supermarket. Those who are lucky enough to have sunny backyards or balconies can plant a garden whenever they have the time and energy. Community Gardens may also help those that don't have a place to garden.

## **Benefits of Community Gardening**

(Information from [American Community Garden Association](#))

- Improves the quality of life for people in the garden
- Provides a catalyst for neighborhood and community development
- Stimulates Social Interaction
- Encourages Self-Reliance
- Beautifies Neighborhoods
- Produces Nutritious Food
- Reduces Family Food Budgets
- Conserves Resources
- Creates opportunity for recreation, exercise, therapy, and education
- Reduces Crime
- Preserves Green Space
- Creates income opportunities and economic development
- Reduces city heat from streets and parking lots
- Provides opportunities for intergenerational and cross-cultural connections

## Step by Step Guide To Start Your Own Community Garden

### 1. Get Your Neighbors Involved

There is a lot of work involved in starting a new garden. Make sure you have several people who will help you. Over the years, our experience indicates that there should be at least ten interested families to create and sustain a garden project. Survey the residents of your neighborhood to see if they are interested and would participate. Create and distribute a community flyer (see page 10) inviting people to become involved. Hold monthly meetings of the interested group to develop and initiate plans, keep people posted on the garden's progress, and keep them involved in the process from day one. Church groups, teachers and kids are great and can be helpful, but are not enough to begin & maintain your project. You will need 1-2 people with experience. Make sure your group has time to commit. Gardens involve mowing, picking up trash and lots of weeding. Remember a 20 ft x30 ft takes 1.5 hours of watering and weeding a week!

### 2. Form a Garden Group

A garden group is a way of formally organizing your new group. It helps you make decisions and divide-up the work effectively. It also ensures that everyone has a vested interest in the garden and can contribute to its design, development, and maintenance. It can be formed at any time during the process of starting a community garden; however, it's wise to do so early on. This way, group members can share in the many tasks of establishing the new garden.

Typically a garden group will:

- Establishing garden rules (see sample)
- Accepting & reviewing garden applications
- Making plot assignments
- Collecting garden dues (if any)
- Paying water bills
- Resolving conflicts

The typical garden group has at least two officers: a president and a treasurer; although your garden group may have more if necessary. Elections for garden officers usually are held annually. Garden groups share information via a contact list including phone numbers, email addresses, etc.

Before the first meeting, each member should try to identify possible properties, potential partners, organization and or people interested in being part of the community garden. Before the end of the meeting, members should have the elections, started the phone/email contact list, scheduled the second meeting and identified a task for each member to accomplish before the second meeting.

Use the first meeting to draw out people's interest in the garden and what they would like to see from the garden. The worksheet, "[Developing a Vision for Your Garden](#)" can guide the discussion, record the outcomes of the meeting, and be shared with people who joining the garden project later. To insure that everyone feels like they were heard during this process, go round the group and ask for people's thoughts and input, and then write it down on a large pad of paper for everyone to see. Many problems and headaches can be avoided in the future by developing a vision of the garden at the very start, and can be reviewed when decisions are being made.

### 3. Find Land for the Garden

Look around your neighborhood for a vacant lot that gets plenty of sun--at least six to eight hours each day. A garden site should be relatively flat (although slight slopes can be terraced), free of trash and debris and without paving. Any rubble or debris should be manageable--that is, it can be removed by volunteers clearing the lot with trash bags, wheelbarrows, and pick-up trucks. Ideally, it should have a fence around it with a gate wide enough for a vehicle to enter. It is possible to work with a site that is paved with concrete or asphalt by building raised beds that sit on the surface or using containers. You can also remove the asphalt or concrete to create gardens, but it will take more time, be more difficult and expensive.

The potential garden site should be within walking, or no more than a short drive from you and the neighbors who have expressed interest in participating. If the lot is not already being used, make sure the community supports establishing a garden there.

### 3. Find Land for the Garden (continued)

It's best to select three potential sites in your neighborhood and write down their address and nearest cross streets. If you don't know the address of a vacant lot, get the addresses of the properties on both sides of the lot--this will give you the ability to make an educated guess on the address of the site. We suggest you identify at least three potential sites because one or more might not be available for you to use for various reasons, and you want to end up with at least one that works out.

Use the "[Garden Site Evaluation Checklist](#)" to help assess potential sites.

### 4. Find out Who Owns the Land

It is illegal to use land without obtaining the owner's permission. In order to obtain permission, you must first find out who owns the land. Take the information you have written down about the location of the sites in step 3 to your county's tax assessor's office.

For a site in Polk County, you may visit the website at <http://www.assess.co.polk.ia.us>. The Polk County Assessor's office is located at 111 Court Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50309. If you find a vacant lot, call the Polk County Auditor's Office at (515) 286-3097 to see who owns the lot. If the city owns the lot, contact the City's Engineering [Real Estate](#) division to find out about purchasing by calling (515) 283-4561 or emailing [realestate@dmgov.org](mailto:realestate@dmgov.org).

For a site in Dallas County, you may visit the website at <http://assessorweb.co.dallas.ia.us>. The Dallas County Assessor's office is located at the Dallas County Iowa Courthouse, 801 Court Street, Rm. 204, Adel, IA 50003, and can be reached at (515) 993-5802.

### 5. Find out if Your Proposed Site has Water

Every garden needs water. The easiest solution is to ask a neighbor resident or business to provide the garden with water.

If you need your own water system and meter, while you are researching site ownership, contact the water service provider in your area to find out if your potential site(s) has/have an existing water meter to hook-in to. Call your water provider's customer service department, and ask them to conduct a "site investigation". They will need the same location information that you took with you to the Tax Assessor's office. Existing access to water will make a critical difference in the expense of getting your project started. Depending on the size of your garden site, you will need a 1/2-inch to 1-inch water meter. If there has been water service to the site in the past, it is relatively inexpensive to get a new water meter installed (if one doesn't already exist). If there has never been water service to that site, it might cost much more for your water provider to install a lateral line from the street main to the site and install your new meter.

### 6. Contact the Land Owner

Once you have determined that your potential site is feasible, contact the land owner to see if they are open to the idea. If so, follow-up by writing a [letter to the landowner](#) asking for permission to use the property for a community garden (see page 14). Be sure to mention to the landowner the value of the garden to the community and the fact the gardeners will be responsible for keeping the site clean and weed-free (this saves landowners from maintaining the site or paying city weed abatement fees).

Establish a term for use of the site, and prepare and negotiate a lease. Typically, groups lease garden sites from land owners for \$1 per year. You should attempt to negotiate a lease for at least three years (or longer if the property owner is agreeable). Many landowners are worried about their liability for injuries that might occur at the garden. Therefore, you should include a simple "hold harmless" waiver in the lease and in gardener agreement forms. For more information on the lease, and the hold harmless waiver, see 8, "Signing a Lease".

#### **Land Tenure**

Is the garden site secured with a lease? Does it need to be?

Be sure to contact the landowner yearly to ask about development plans for the land

If there are plans for the land, determine development schedule

#### **Trouble Shooting Land Development...**

If your garden site is slated for development mid-season, talk to the owner to delay removal until after the growing season. Often land is cleared months prior to actual digging begins. Delaying garden removal until after the season is good public relations for the owner/developer and good for garden morale.

Be prepared to purchase liability insurance to protect further the property owner (and yourself) should an accident occur at the garden. For more information on the hold harmless waiver, and liability insurance, see below #8, "Signing a Lease", and # 9, "Obtaining Liability Insurance".

## 7. Get Your Soil Tested

It might be advisable to have the soil at the site tested for fertility pH and presence of heavy metals. For information on submitting a soil sample view form ST0011 on the Iowa State University Extension and Outreach Store at <https://store.extension.iastate.edu/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=6184> or call (515)957-5760.

## 8. Signing a Lease

Landowners of potential garden sites might be concerned about their liability should someone be injured while working in the garden. Your group should be prepared to offer the landowner a lease with a "hold harmless" waiver. This "hold harmless" waiver can simply state that should one of the gardeners be injured as a result of negligence on the part of another gardener, the landowner is "held harmless" and will not be sued. Each gardener should be made aware of this waiver and should be required to sign an agreement in order to obtain a plot in the community garden. A sample gardener agreement form (see pages 18-21) is attached which your group can use as a model.

## 9. Obtaining Liability Insurance

Landowners may also require that your group purchase liability insurance. Community gardeners may be able to contact their neighborhood organization, a non-profit or business that already has property nearby to put a rider on their insurance. It is possible to purchase insurance independently, but this is often more expensive than finding a community partner.

Liability insurance essentially stands between the landowner & someone who wishes to sue them for a wrong experience on the garden site. Does the land owner require insurance?

## 10. Planning the Garden

Community members should be involved in the planning, design, and set-up of the garden. We strongly recommend that garden group members take the initiative early on to connect with gardeners from other community gardens in their area or have a similar vision. Not only will group members learn the lessons of other garden groups, but also take away new ideas and new relationships with nearby and similar community gardens.

- Measure the site and make a simple to-scale site map
- Hold 2-3 garden design meetings for interested participants to attend
- Use the Community Garden Planning Worksheet to guide discussion when designing the layout of the garden and how the garden will operate
- Generate ideas & visualize design with simple drawings, garden photos cut out of magazines representing different components (flower beds, compost bins, pathways, arbors, water, sidewalks) that can be moved around. Remember to draw in existing trees (and areas they shade)
- Record group decisions in official minutes

### a. Basic Elements of a Community Garden

Although there are exceptions to every rule, community gardens should almost always include:

#### • PLOTS

At least 15 plots assigned to community members. These should be placed in the sunniest part of the garden. Without plots for individual participation, it is very difficult to achieve long-term community involvement. Raised bed plots, which are more expensive, should be no more than 4 feet wide (to facilitate access to plants from the sides without stepping into the bed), and between 8 and 12 feet long (it is advisable to construct your raised beds in sizes that are found in readily-available lumber, or that can be cut without too much waste). In-ground plots can be from 10 x 10 up to 20 x 20 feet. Pathways between beds and plots should be least 3 to 4 feet wide to allow space for wheelbarrows. The soil in both raised bed and in-ground plots should be amended with aged compost or manure to improve its fertility and increase its organic matter content.

**a. Basic Elements of a Community Garden (continued)**

• WATER

A simple irrigation system with one hose bib or faucet for every four plots. Hand watering with a hose is the most practical and affordable for individual plots (and it's almost a necessity when you start plants from seed). Drip and soaker-hose irrigation can be used in all areas of the garden for transplanted and established plants, but especially for deep-rooted fruit trees and ornamentals. If no one in your group is knowledgeable about irrigation, you might need some assistance in designing your irrigation system. Seek out a landscape contractor or nursery or garden center professional to help you develop a basic layout and materials list.

• FENCE

An 8-foot fence around the perimeter with a drive-through gate. In our experience, this is a key element of success. Don't count on eliminating all acts of vandalism or theft, but fencing will help to keep these to tolerably low levels.

• SHED

A tool shed or other structure for storing tools, supplies, and materials. Recycled metal shipping containers make excellent storage sheds, and are almost vandal-proof. Contact the Port Authority for leads on where to find them.

• SEATING

A bench or picnic table where gardeners can sit, relax, and take a break--preferably in shade. If there are no shade trees on the site, a simple arbor can be constructed from wood or pipe, and planted with chayote squash, bougainvillea, grapes, kiwis, or some other vine.

• SIGN

A sign with the garden's name, sponsors, and a contact person's phone number for more information. If your community is bilingual, include information in this language.

• COMPOST

A shared composting area for the community gardeners. Wood pallets are easy to come-by and (when stood on-end, attached in a U-shape, and the inside covered with galvanized rabbit-wire) make excellent compost bins.

**b. Nice Additions to Your Garden Plan**

• A **community bulletin board** where rules, meeting notices, and other important information can be posted.

• A **small fruit tree orchard**, whose care and harvest can be shared by all the members, can create shade for people as well as shade-loving plants.

• A **water fountain** can be a simple drinking fountain attachment to a hose bib (or faucet) you can purchase at a hardware store.

• **Perimeter landscaping**, could include drought-tolerant flowers and shrubs, plants which attract butterflies and hummingbirds, or roses and other flowers suitable for cutting bouquets. Herbs are also well-suited to perimeter landscaping and help to create barriers to unwanted insects who do not like the smell of their essential oils.

• A **children's area**, could include special small plots for children, a sand box, and play equipment.

• A **meeting area**, could range from a semi-circle of hay bales or tree stumps, to a simple amphitheater built of recycled, broken concrete. Building a shade structure above would be beneficial as well.

• A **food pantry plot**. Contact your local food pantry see what items they would like and remember to consider shelf-life.

**11. Creating a Garden Budget**

Use your design to develop a materials list and cost-out the project. You will need to call-around to get prices on fencing and other items. You might be surprised at the cost. A community garden with just the Basic Elements (listed above) typically costs between \$2,500 to \$5,000. At this point, your group might decide to scale back your initial plans and save some design ideas for a "Phase Two" of the garden.

**12. Where to Get Materials and Money**

While some start-up funds will be needed through determination and hard work, you can obtain donations of materials for your project. Community businesses might assist, and provide anything from fencing to lumber to plants. The important thing is to ask. Develop a letter that tells merchants about your project and why it's important to the community. Attach your "wish list", but be reasonable. Try to personalize this letter for each business you approach. Drop it off personally with the store manager, preferably with a couple of cute kids who will be gardening in tow! Call the manager to follow-up. Be patient, persistent, and polite. Your efforts will pay-off with at least some of the businesses you approach. Be sure to thank these key supporters and recognize them on your garden sign, at a garden grand opening, or other special event.

Money, which will be needed to purchase items not donated, can be obtained through community fund-raisers such as car washes, craft and rummage sales, pancake breakfasts, and bake sales. They can also be obtained by writing grants, but be aware grant writing efforts can take six months or longer to yield results, and you must have a fiscal sponsor or agent with tax-exempt 501(c)3 status (such as a church or non-profit corporation) that agrees to administer the funds.

**13. Make Sure Your Garden Infrastructure is in Place**

If you have not yet formed a garden group, now is the time to do so. It's also time to establish garden rules, develop a garden application form for those who wish to participate, set up a bank account, and determine what garden dues will be if these things have not already been done. This is also the time to begin having monthly meetings if you have not already done so. Also, if you haven't already contacted your city councilperson, he or she can be helpful in many ways including helping your group obtain city services such as trash pick-up. Their staff can also help you with community organizing and soliciting for material donations.

Visit [Garden Works'](#) website for additional ideas of garden rules & job descriptions, compiled by community gardens

- Garden Rules
- Garden Application
- Set-up Bank Account
- Volunteer Job Descriptions
- Garden Fee Structure
- Monthly Meetings
- Trash Pick-up

**14. Get Growing!**

Many new garden groups make the mistake of remaining in the planning, design and fundraising stage for an extended period of time. After several months of the initial research, designing, planning, and outreach efforts, people need to see visible results or they will begin to lose interest in the project. Plant something on your site as soon as possible. To keep the momentum going, initiate the following steps even if you are still seeking donations and funds for your project (but not until you have signed a lease and obtained insurance).

**a. Iowa One Call**

To prevent damage to underground infrastructure and to keep your gardeners safe, call [Iowa One Call](#) to get all underground lines located. Dial 811 or 1-800-292-8989 at least 48 hours in advance.

**b. Clean up the Site**

Schedule community workdays to clean up the site. How many work days you need will depend on the size of the site, and how much and what kind of debris are on site.

**c. Get Water**

Without water, you can't grow anything. So get this key element into place as soon as possible. There are plenty of opportunities for community involvement in irrigating the garden--from digging trenches to laying out PVC pipes.

**d. Plant Something**

Once you have water, there are many options for in-garden action. Stake out beds and pathways by marking them with stakes and twine. Mulch pathways. If your fence isn't in yet, some people might still want to accept the risk of vandalism and get their plots started. You can also plant shade and fruit trees and begin to landscape the site. If you do not yet have a source of donated plants, or don't wish to risk having them vandalized, plant annual flower seeds which will grow quickly and can be replaced later.

**e. Continue to construct the garden as materials and funds become available.****15. Celebrate!**

At this point, your ideas and hard work have finally become a community garden! Be sure to take time to celebrate. Have a grand opening, barbecue, or some other fun event to give everyone who helped to make this happen, a special thank-you. This is the time to give all those who gave donated materials or time a special certificate, bouquet, or other form of recognition.

**16. Troubleshooting as the Garden Develops**

All community gardens will experience problems somewhere along the way. Don't get discouraged--get organized. The key to success for community gardens is not only preventing problems from ever occurring, but also working together to solve them when they do inevitably occur. In our experience, these are some of the most common problems that "crop-up" in community gardens, and our suggestions for solving them.

**a. Vandalism**

Most gardens experience occasional vandalism. The best action you can take is to replant immediately. Generally the vandals become bored after a while and stop. Good community outreach, especially to youth and the garden's immediate neighbors is also important. Most important--don't get discouraged. It happens. Get over it and keep going. What about barbed wired or razor wire to make the garden more secure? Our advice--don't. It's bad for community relations, looks awful, and is sometimes illegal to install without a permit. If you need more physical deterrents to keep vandals out, plant bougainvillea or pyracantha along your fence, their thorns will do the trick!

**b. Security**

Invite the community officer from your local precinct to a garden meeting to get their suggestions on making the garden more secure. Community officers can also be a great help in solving problems with garden vandalism, and dealing with drug dealers, and gang members in the area.



## 16. Troubleshooting as the Garden Develops (continued)

### c. Communication

Clear and well-enforced garden rules and a strong garden president can go a long way towards minimizing misunderstandings. But communication problems do arise. It's the job of the garden group to resolve those issues. If it's something not clearly spelled out in the rules, the membership can take a vote to add new rules and make modifications to existing rules. Language barriers are a very common source of misunderstandings. Garden group leadership should make every effort to have a translator at garden meetings where participants are bilingual--perhaps a family member of one of the garden members who speaks the language will offer to help.

### d. Trash-Compost-Recycle

It's important to get your compost system going right away and get some training for gardeners on how to use it. If gardeners don't compost, large quantities of waste will begin to build up, create an eyesore, and could hurt your relationships with neighbors and the property owner. Waste can also become a fire hazard. Make sure gardeners know how to sort trash properly, what to compost, and what to recycle. Trash cans placed in accessible areas are helpful to keep a neat and tidy garden.

### e. Gardener Drop-Out

There has been, and probably always will be, a high rate of turnover in community gardens. Often, people sign up for plots and then don't follow through. Remember, gardening is hard work for some people, especially in the heat of summer. Be sure to have a clause in your gardener agreement which states gardeners forfeit their right to their plot if they don't plant it within one month, or if they don't maintain it. While gardeners should be given every opportunity to follow through, if after several reminders either by letter or phone nothing changes, it is time for the group to reassign the plot. It is also advisable that every year, the leadership conduct a renewed community outreach campaign by contacting churches and other groups in the neighborhood to let them know about the garden and that plots are available.

### f. Weeds

Gardeners tend to visit their plots less during the winter time, and lower participation, combined with rain, tends to create a huge weed problem in spring. Remember, part of your agreement with the landowner is that you will maintain the lot and keep weeds from taking over. In the late summer/early fall, provide gardeners with a workshop or printed material about what can be grown in a fall and winter garden. Also, schedule garden workdays for the spring in advance since you know you'll need them at the end of winter to clear weeds. If you anticipate that plots will be untended during the winter, apply a thick layer of mulch or hay to the beds and paths to reduce weed proliferation.

**Good luck with your community garden project!**