

Starting a Community Garden

This is designed to give many different groups the basic information they need to get their gardening project off the ground. These lists are in no way meant to be complete. Each main idea will probably trigger more questions, so an assortment of ways to carry out that idea are presented; pick and choose those that seem to apply to your own situation.

1. Form a Planning Committee
2. Choose a Site
3. Prepare and Develop the Site
4. Organize the Garden
5. Insurance
6. Setting up a New Gardening Organization
7. How to Manage Your Community Garden
8. Troubleshooting

FORM A PLANNING COMMITTEE

- Determine if there really is a need and desire for a garden.
- Who will the garden serve--youth, seniors, special populations?
- Organize a meeting of interested people.
- Choose a well-organized garden coordinator.
- Form committees to accomplish tasks: Funding & Resource Development; Youth Activities; Construction; Communication.
- Approach a sponsor. A sponsor is an individual or organization that supports a community garden. Site sponsorship can be a tremendous asset. Contributions of land, tools, seeds, fencing, soil improvements or money are all vital to a successful community garden. Some community gardens can provide most of their provisions through fees charged to the membership; but for many, a garden sponsor is essential. Churches, schools, citizens groups, private businesses, local parks and recreation departments are all potential supporters.
- Make a list of what needs to be done.
- Find a garden site.
- Obtain lease or agreement from owner.
- Decide on a mailing address and central telephone number(s). Try to have at least 3 people who are very familiar with all pertinent information. Form a telephone tree.
- If your community garden has a budget, keep administration in the hands of several people.
- Choose a name for the garden.

CHOOSE A SITE

- Identify the owner of the land.
- Make sure the site gets at least 6 full hours of sunlight daily (for vegetables).
- Do a soil test in the fall for nutrients & heavy metals.
- Consider availability of water.
- Try and get a lease or agreement which allows the space to be used at least for 3 years.
- Consider past uses of the land. Is there any contamination?
- Is insurance something you need to consider?

PREPARE AND DEVELOP THE SITE

- Clean the site.
- Develop your design.
- Gather your resources--try to gather free materials.
- Organize volunteer work crews.
- Plan your work day.
- Decide on plot sizes, mark plots clearly with gardener's names.
- **Include plans for a storage area for tools and other equipment, as well as a compost area.**
- Have a rainproof bulletin board for announcing garden events and messages.
- Arrange for land preparation--plowing, etc--or let gardeners do their own prep.
- Will the garden be organic?
- Lay out garden to place flower or shrub beds around the visible perimeter. This helps to promote good will with non-gardening neighbors, passersby, and local authorities.

ORGANIZE THE GARDEN

- Are there conditions for membership (residence, dues, agreement with rules)?
- How will plots be assigned (by family size, by residency, by need, by group-- i.e., youth, elderly, etc.)?
- How large should plots be (or should there be several sizes based on family size or other factors)?
- How should plots be laid out?

- If the group charges dues, how will the money be used? What services, if any, will be provided to gardeners in return?
- Will the group do certain things cooperatively (such as turning in soil in the spring, planting cover crops, or composting)?
- When someone leaves a plot, how will the next tenant be chosen?
- How will the group deal with possible vandalism?
- Will there be a children's plot?
- Will the gardeners meet regularly? If so, how often and for what purposes?
- Will gardeners share tools, hoses, and other such items?
- How will minimum maintenance (especially weeding) be handled both inside plots and in common areas (such as along fences, in flower beds, and in sitting areas)?
- Will there be a set of written rules which gardeners are expected to uphold? If so, how will they be enforced?
- Should your group incorporate and consider eventually owning your garden site?

INSURANCE

It is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain leases from landowners without liability insurance. Garden insurance is a new thing for many insurance carriers and their underwriters are reluctant to cover community gardens. It helps if you know what you want before you start talking to agents. Two tips: you should probably be working with an agent from a firm which deals with many different carriers (so you can get the best policy for your needs) and you will probably have better success with someone local who has already done this type of policy or one that works with social service agencies in the area.

SETTING UP A NEW GARDENING ORGANIZATION

Many garden groups are organized very informally and operate successfully. Leaders "rise to the occasion" to propose ideas and carry out tasks. However, as the workload expands, many groups choose a more formal structure for their organization.

A structured program is a means to an end. It is a conscious, planned effort to create a system so that each person can participate fully and the group can perform effectively. It's vital that the leadership be responsive to the members. Structure will help an organization to last; it will promote trust; it will help your group grow and create new opportunities for leaders to develop.

If your group is new, have several planning meetings to discuss your program and organization. Try out suggestions raised at these meetings and after a few months of operation, you'll be in a better position to develop bylaws or organizational guidelines. A community garden project should be kept simple as possible, whether large or small.

Bylaws are rules that govern the internal affairs of an organization: they are officially recorded by the State in which your organization resides. They are required when you form a nonprofit corporation, but are useful even if your group is a club or a group of neighbors. Many battles are won simply because one side has more pieces of paper to wave than the other. It's helpful to look over bylaws from other similar organizations if you are incorporating. Guidelines and Rules (see TROUBLESHOOTING for examples) are less formal than Bylaws, and are often adequate enough for a garden group that has no intention of incorporating.

Organizational Considerations:

- What is your purpose? What are your short and long-term objectives?
- How are decisions to be made? Who chooses leaders and how?
- How will work be shared? Who does what?
- How will you raise money? Membership dues, fund raising, grants, sponsors?
- Are you open to change? Flexibility is important when goals and members change. Do you want to be incorporated or act as a club?

What goes into formal Bylaws

- Full official name of organization and legal address.
- Organizing members, names and addresses.
- The (brief description of the) purpose, goals and philosophy of the organization.
- Membership categories and eligibility requirements.
- Membership dues, how much and when paid.
- Specify when and how often regular or special meetings of the membership are to be held, as well as regular and annual meetings of the board of directors.
- State what officers are necessary, how they are chosen, length of term, their duties and how vacancies are filled.
- Organizational dissolution processes
- State special committees, their purpose and how they operate.
- Establish a system so that bylaws can be rescinded or amended, maybe by a simple majority. State any official policies or practices: e.g.. garden group will avoid the use of hazardous substances; group will agree to keep all adjacent sidewalks in good repair and free of ice and snow in season; group will make all repairs necessary to keep equipment, fences and furniture in good order and repair.
- Include a Hold Harmless clause (sample):

"We the undersigned members of the (name) garden group hereby agree to hold harmless (name owner) from and against any damage, loss, liability, claim, demand, suit, cost and expense directly or indirectly resulting from, arising out of or in connection with the use of the (name) garden by the garden group, its successors, assigns, employees, agents and invites."

HOW TO MANAGE YOUR COMMUNITY GARDEN

In order to offer a high quality community garden program, good management techniques are essential. Included in this fact sheet are the main ideas to consider in management, along with many different ways to carry them out. Having written rules is very important with older groups as well as new gardens, since they spell out exactly what is expected of a gardener. They also make it much easier to deal with challenges as they arise.

Sample Guidelines and Rules

Some may be more relevant to vegetable gardens than to community flower gardens or parks. Pick and choose what best fits your situation.

- I will pay a fee of \$ ___ to help cover garden expenses.
- I will have something planted in the garden by (date) and keep it planted all summer long.
- If I must abandon my plot for any reason, I will notify the garden leadership.
- I will keep weeds at a minimum and maintain the areas immediately surrounding my plot if any.
- If my plot becomes unkempt, I understand I will be given 1 week's notice to clean it up. At that time, it will be re-assigned or tilled in.
- I will keep trash and litter out of the plot, as well as from adjacent pathways and fences.
- I will participate in the fall cleanup of the garden.
- I will plant tall crops where they will not shade neighboring plots.
- I will pick only my own crops unless given permission by another plot user.
- I will not use fertilizers, insecticides or weed repellents that will in any way affect other plots.
- I agree to volunteer hours toward community gardening efforts. (include a list of volunteer tasks which your garden needs).
- I will not bring pets to the garden.
- I understand that neither the garden group nor owners of the land are responsible for my actions. I THEREFORE AGREE TO HOLD HARMLESS THE GARDEN GROUP AND OWNERS OF THE LAND FOR ANY LIABILITY, DAMAGE, LOSS OR CLAIM THAT OCCURS IN CONNECTION WITH USE OF THE GARDEN BY ME OR ANY OF MY GUESTS.

Application Forms

Application forms can include any of the following information:

Name(s)

Address Zip

Telephone number:

Days

Evenings

Site Preference:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Size of plot. (list choices available)

Season:

Year round (must be maintained all year)

Short season (include dates)

Check the appropriate items:

- I am a senior citizen
- I am physically disabled
- This is my first year at this garden
- I would like a garden next to a friend, Name _____
- I have gardened here before and would like plot # ___ if available
- I have gardened before at (where?); for how long?

TROUBLESHOOTING

Vandalism is a common fear among community gardeners. However, the fear tends to be much greater than the actual incidence. Try these proven methods to deter vandalism:

- Make a sign for the garden. Let people know to whom the garden belongs and that it is a community project.
- Fences can be of almost any material. They serve as much to mark possession of a property as to prevent entry, since nothing short of razor-wire and land mines will keep a determined vandal from getting in.
- Create a shady meeting area in the garden and spend time there.
- Invite everyone in the community to participate from the very beginning. Persons excluded from the garden are potential vandals.

- Involve the neighborhood children in learning gardens. They can be the garden's best protectors. (see below.)
- Plant raspberries, roses or other thorny plants along the fence as a barrier to fence climbers.
- Make friends with neighbors whose windows overlook the garden. Trade them flowers and vegetables for a protective eye.
- Harvest all ripe fruit and vegetables on a daily basis. Red tomatoes falling from the vines invite trouble.
- Plant potatoes, other root crops or a less popular vegetable such as kohlrabi along the side walk or fence.
- Plant the purple varieties of cauliflower and beans or the white eggplant to confuse a vandal.
- Plant a "vandal's garden" at the entrance. Mark it with a sign: "If you must take food, please take it from here."

Children's Plots

- Children included in the garden process become champions of the cause rather than vandals of the garden. Therefore your garden may want to allocate some plots specifically for children. The "children's garden" can help market your idea to local scout troops, day cares, foster grandparent programs, church groups, etc.
- Consider offering free small plots in the children's garden to children whose parents already have a plot in the garden.

People Problems and Solutions

Angry neighbors and bad gardeners pose problems for a community garden. Usually the two are related. Neighbors complain to municipal governments about messy, unkempt gardens or rowdy behavior; most gardens can ill afford poor relations with neighbors, local politicians or potential sponsors. Therefore, choose bylaws carefully so you have procedures to follow when members fail to keep their plots clean and up to code. A well-organized garden with strong leadership and committed members can overcome almost any obstacle.