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AARP

Tips,
Tools and
Resources for
Individuals

Start
– or Join –
A Community
Garden!

Do you have a green thumb or would you like to have a greener thumb? Consider starting or joining a community garden! Growing fruits and veggies is a great way to use your skills while discovering new gardening talents and helping your community.

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Start - or Join - A Community Garden!

OVERVIEW

Do you have a green thumb or would you like to have a greener thumb? Consider starting or joining a community garden! Growing fruits and veggies is a great way to use your skills while discovering new gardening talents and helping your community.

The Problem

Some communities are struggling to purchase fresh and healthy food for their families. Local food pantries and other organizations whose mission is to provide food to those in need are seeing an increase in need and a decrease in donations. As for us, we're always on the go-go-go. When it comes to buying food, we don't always pay attention to where it comes from or how it was grown.

The Solution

Start or join a community—or a school—garden! You'll work with your neighbors and community members to grow nutritious, healthy fruits and veggies that you know came from a good source. And, you can share your bountiful harvest and newfound skills with local community organizations who feed the hungry.

Time Commitment

A few hours to join an existing garden. Numerous days (spread out in manageable chunks) to start a garden.

Special Considerations

Starting a new garden can take some time. It won't happen overnight, so be prepared to follow this project through even if it takes a bit longer than expected. But remember, the end results are worth the wait!

Who can do this?

Anyone who can do moderate physical activity. Also, you should be comfortable getting dirty!

Great Reasons to do this Project

- It will help you connect with the community.
- You can help provide fresh food to those in need.
- Your family will have access to healthy and nutritious food.
- You'll preserve green space in your neighborhood.
- You'll get outdoors and enjoy some fresh air.



THE BASIC STEPS

To START a community garden, follow these steps below. If you want to JOIN an existing garden, skip to the end of this section. Consider starting a garden at your local school. See the Additional Resources section for ideas on how to Start a Teaching Garden with a school in your community.

STEP 1: START WITH A PLAN

Form a Planning Committee

Recruit friends and neighbors who are interested in helping with the garden. Find three to five energetic, committed people for your planning committee.

Hold an initial meeting with the planning committee. Discuss:

- What is your purpose? Who will the garden serve?

Schedule a kickoff; invite neighbors, community organizations, gardening and horticultural societies.

For information on setting ground rules for your garden, see *How To Set Ground Rules* in the guide.

Hold Your Kickoff Meeting

At the meeting, you should:

- Introduce yourself and the planning committee.
- Explain why you want to start a garden.
- Get feedback and initial thoughts.
- Make sure to discuss:
 - What type of garden you want—for example, a communal space to benefit a certain group (such as to provide produce to a soup kitchen for seniors), individual plots for family use, a flower garden.
 - What special skills people have to offer—for example, a lawyer among the group could be helpful (but isn't necessary) for drafting documents related to land use.
 - How committed everyone is to this idea? Community land use issues—whether public or private—often involve jumping through administrative hoops. You'll need dedicated people on your team to see everything through.
- Schedule the next meeting, and maybe even monthly meetings.
 - As issues arise, you'll want a place to talk through everything with members.



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- Participation will vary at the meetings but it's nice for your gardeners to know they have a forum to raise issues. You can always cancel a meeting if nobody sees a need to get together.
- Grab everyone's contact info before they leave.
 - Communication is key to your garden's success. Develop an email list, phone tree, or another way to keep in contact with members.
- Review the HandsOn Network guide www.handsonnetwork.org/ for more ideas on how to be a successful volunteer leader.

STEP 2: FUNDING: HOW TO DO IT?

Some gardens “self-support” through membership dues. Talk with interested members about what they are willing to contribute.

Also, consider finding a sponsor or two. Churches, schools, private businesses, or parks and recreation departments are all possible supporters. Ask your sponsor what they would be willing to provide, such as land, tools, seeds, or even money!

You can raise money for your garden in other ways. For example, one garden sold “square inches” at \$5 each to hundreds of sponsors.

Before you start collecting funds, you will need to set up a bank account. You should determine what the money will be used for and who will have access to the account.

“ At your kickoff meeting, find out what special skills people have to offer.

STEP 3: CHOOSE A SITE

Find the Site

Picking the right site will take time, so be patient!

Do an initial scout and make a list of potential sites, just in case your first choice doesn't work out. When looking at sites:

- Record the address (or the nearest cross streets) – This will help with determining ownership.
- Measure the size – Your garden doesn't need to be huge, but you will want enough room for each plot, usually 10' x 10'.
- Check for sunlight and water – The garden should get at least 6 full hours of sunlight daily (for vegetables) and be near a water source.
- Test the soil – You can assess the nutrients in the area, as well as make sure there is no contamination.



Secure the Site

Once you find the perfect site, you'll need to get permission from the owner to use it. You might even need to pay to lease the land.

See *How to Secure a Garden Site* in this guide.

STEP 4: DEVELOP AND PREPARE THE SITE

Design the Garden

Once you have your plot secured and ready to go, the real fun can begin! (For more details, see *Basic Elements of a Community Garden* in this guide.) When designing your garden, a simple grid is easiest.

Keep in mind:

- Walkways – People will need enough room to walk and carry gardening tools, both around the edges and between rows of plots.
- Defined plots – Finalize the size and number of plots.
- Children's plots – If you have decided to include children's plots make sure to set aside a specific section of the garden.
- Fencing – You'll need to design and build a fence around the garden, for security and to keep animals out.
- Storage areas – There will need to be a place to keep tools and other equipment, as well as a compost area.
- Flowers and shrub beds – Planting around the perimeter of the garden will help promote good will with non-gardening neighbors and municipal authorities.

Set Up the Site

Getting your site ready for planting is a big job. So round up lots of volunteers!

First things first, spend a day cleaning the site. You may need to rent heavy equipment, like a backhoe, to do a thorough job.

After the site is clean, it is time to get building:

- Plan a work day when all gardeners in your group come together to set up the site.
- Gather your resources – soil, mulch, fencing, stakes, etc. Try to get free materials from your sponsors or other sources, like a local landscaping company.

Organize volunteers into work crews. Have some turn soil, install plot borders, raised beds (if needed),



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- a fence, etc.
- After everything is ready, have all the gardeners mark their plots

STEP 5: PLANT SOMETHING!

Getting a plant in the ground marks a significant step in your garden’s success. Even if everyone isn’t yet ready to plant, starting the first plant now will give everyone a sense of accomplishment and a boost of energy.

Hold a celebration to applaud everyone’s hard work. Remember, community gardens are all about creating and strengthening communities. And fun events go a long way to keeping everyone engaged and excited!

“ Install a rainproof bulletin board for announcing garden events and messages to keep members up to date and recruit new gardeners.

STEP 6: SHARE THE WEALTH

Gardens can produce and produce AND PRODUCE. Individuals may choose to donate food and produce to neighbors who could use some fresh produce. Or your group may have agreed to donate fresh food to a local food bank, faith based organization, or other group that provides food to those in need.

You might also consider holding an educational session where you can teach others in your community about how to build a community garden and/or how to create their own family garden.

STEP 7: INSPIRE OTHERS ON CREATETHEGOOD.ORG!

TELL US WHAT YOU DID!

We want to hear stories (www.CreateTheGood.org/stories) about how you helped give back to your community. You just might inspire others to do the same.

SHARE FEEDBACK

We are always looking for feedback on our materials, so please let us know how this guide was helpful or additional information you wish we could have included. Share lessons learned and tips for others who are involved with community gardens at www.aarp.org/createthegoodgroup.

KEEP UP THE GOOD!

Remember, whether you’ve got five minutes, five hours or five days, you can make a positive impact in your community. And if you have more time, consider organizing another service activity, finding local opportunities and posting your events at www.CreateTheGood.org.

Want to Join a Community Garden?

There are approximately 18,000 community gardens throughout the United States and Canada. Use the American Community Garden Association’s website–<http://acga.localharvest.org/> –to find one near



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you. The site includes garden details and contact information for each site. Also, if your garden is not listed, you can add your site to this national databank of community gardens so others can find you.

You can also become a member of ACGA. Senior memberships start at \$15 and provide access to the group's Member Directory, where you can participate in discussions on ACGA's email listserv. You can find membership information at www.communitygarden.org.



BASIC ELEMENTS OF A COMMUNITY GARDEN

(Provided by: University of California Cooperative Extension, Los Angeles County, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources)

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

At least 15 plots assigned to community members.

- These plots 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' wide (to facilitate access to plants from the sides without stepping into the bed), and between 8' and 12' 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'. Pathways between beds and plots should be least 3' to 4' 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 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, nursery, or garden center professional to help you develop a basic layout and materials list.

An 8' 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.

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.)



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Bench or picnic tables 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.

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 both languages.

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.



HOW TO SET GROUND RULES

(Provided by: University of California Cooperative Extension, Los Angeles County, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources)

It's important to establish some ground rules for your garden. Work with your planning committee to write down the answers to these questions:

- 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?
- Do you want the garden to be organic?
- 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 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? If so, will it be free for parents who already have a 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 set rules which gardeners are expected to uphold? If so, how will they be enforced?
- Should your group incorporate and consider buying your garden site?



SAMPLE GUIDELINES AND RULES

(Provided by: American Community Garden Association)

Formal Bylaws and Rules

When drafting formal bylaws for your garden, you should include:

- 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
- 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
- What officers are necessary, how they are chosen, length of term, their duties, and how vacancies are filled
- Organizational dissolution processes
- Special committees, their purpose, and how they operate
- A system so 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.”

Informal Rules

Write down a simple list of commitments each member needs to adhere to. Pick and choose what best fits your group’s situation (what type of garden, is it in a park, etc.)

- 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.



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- 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 a one week 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.



HOW TO SECURE A GARDEN SITE

Identify the owner of your potential garden site(s).

- Figure out how much you are willing to pay in rent. Hopefully the owner will give it to you for little money. Most community garden groups lease sites from landowners for \$1 per year.
- Contact your county tax assessor's office for the owner's contact information. (Don't worry about whether the land is public or private—either could work for a garden.)

Write a letter to the landowner of your top site.

- Ask permission to use the property for a community garden. This is a sales job, so turn on the charm!
- In the letter, list the benefits of a garden to the community and emphasize that gardeners will keep the site clean and weed-free.
- If you've secured any sponsors, mention them here.
- Follow up with a phone call or stop by the house personally if you don't get a response.
- If that owner says no, move down your list to the next option.

Write a lease, once you have a "yes" from a landowner.

- This sounds intimidating but it's not difficult! Try to get a lease for at least three years if the landowner is willing.

Make sure to check about liability. Consider including a simple "hold harmless" waiver in the lease—and in gardener agreement forms. Or consider getting liability insurance. Work with an agent that deals with a number of the top carriers. That way you'll get the best policy for your needs.



CREATING AN APPLICATION FORM

The application form for your community garden doesn't need to be anything fancy. 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 _____ for _____
(where) (how long)



TROUBLESHOOTING

Vandalism

Vandalism is a common fear among community gardeners. However, the fear tends to be much greater than the actual incidents. 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 neighborhood project.
- Fences can be of almost any material. They serve as much to mark possession of a property as to discourage unauthorized entry. Short picket fences or turkey wire will keep out dogs and other animals.
- Create a shady meeting area in the garden and make your presence known.
- Invite everyone in the neighborhood to participate from the very beginning. Persons excluded from the garden are potential vandals.
- Invite the neighborhood children to learn how to garden. They can be the garden's best protectors.
- 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 every day to discourage unauthorized access.
- Plant potatoes, other root crops, or a less popular vegetable such as kohlrabi along the sidewalk 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."

Gardener Drop-Out

Community gardens traditionally have a high turnover rate. People often sign up for plots and don't follow through, or go on a vacation and never get back to the garden after they return. Remember, gardening is hard work for some people, especially in the heat of summer.

Be sure to have a clause in your gardener agreement that states gardeners forfeit their right to their plot if they don't plant 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 club to reassign the plot.

It is also advisable that every year, the leadership conduct a renewed community outreach campaign by



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contacting churches and other groups in the neighborhood to let them know about the garden and that plots are available.

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't 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.



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

American Community Garden Association - <http://communitygarden.org>

HandsOn Network - www.handsonnetwork.org

Los Angeles County Cooperative Extension, Common Ground Garden Program - http://celosangeles.ucdavis.edu/Common_Ground_Garden_Program/

Start a Teaching Garden - www.takepart.com/teachinggarden

Plant a Butterfly Garden at a School - www.handsonnetwork.org/node/2314

10 Steps to Starting a Community Garden - <http://communitygarden.org/docs/10stepsstart.pdf>

10 Tools Every Gardener Needs - <http://communitygarden.org/docs/10tools.pdf>

Victory Gardens are Growing Anew - http://aarp.org/home-garden/gardening/info-06-2009/victory_gardens_are_growing_anew.html

Share Your Garden Bounty with Local Food Pantries - AmpleHarvest.org

More on this Community Garden Toolkit

The primary content of this kit is provided by the American Community Gardening Association (ACGA). ACGA promotes community gardening to further its mission of building community by increasing and enhancing community gardening and greening across the United States and Canada.

ACGA acts as a clearinghouse for volunteers and independent organizers to find community gardens and to add their gardens to the national databank of community gardens; and to provide related information and materials to persons interested in starting gardens. In addition, ACGA holds annual conferences, trainings, and monthly teleconferences to help promote and encourage community gardening. Visit www.communitygarden.org for more information.

AARP and HandsOn Network encourage people to find ways to make a difference in their community. AARP, HandsOn Network and ACGA are not responsible for the organization of these events or the choice of site, organizers, volunteers or any incident that may occur at any gardening site, nor does AARP, HandsOn Network or ACGA design, supervise, control or monitor these events in any way.