

## Organize a community garden

Assemble a group of people with an interest in gardening. There are many roles for people with different skills!

**Early leaders:** A small group of committed people who are willing to do the hard work of organizing and getting the project off the ground.

**Garden builders:** People with technical skills may be needed to lay out raised beds or build fences.

**Long-term gardeners:** People who will tend the garden long-term.

**General community support:** It's important to have the support of the local community, even those who don't intend to garden. Neighbors can keep an eye on the site, local businesses can donate food or other resources for work parties, community members can donate art or teaching skills or help distribute excess produce.

## Build a community

**Start by talking to people:** Ask neighbors to talk to people they know; ask friends to spread the word. Create a free email account, Facebook page, or group messaging app account with the name of the neighborhood, so people have a common point of contact.

**Identify neighborhood groups:** Attend meetings at schools, churches, neighborhood councils, etc. and let people know about the garden plans. Ask them to join the initiative!

**Make flyers:** Post in key places around the neighborhood (coffee shops, intersections). Ask local businesses to inform their employees, and put up a flyer in their place of business.

**Take flyers door to door:** A personal invitation is a powerful way to get people involved.

**Use social media:** Create a Facebook page for the garden and encourage people to join and start the conversation there.

## Organize the people

There is no "right way" to do a community garden, but there are some common issues that groups need to discuss. Plan a meeting and discuss important questions face to face; take notes and circulate the document, so that all involved can see what's being planned for the garden. It's important for people to feel involved in the process.

**Shared leadership:** Often, a strong leader is present who's capable of doing much of what is needed and making many of the decisions. But when people are invited to be involved with a project such as a community garden, they will want to be involved in decision-making processes. Sharing leadership can be challenging, but it is vital for long-term success. Groups tend to make better decisions when they hear from multiple people.

**Transparent decision-making processes:** There are many forms of decision-making processes that can work for community groups. Transparency is key.

**Conflict resolution procedures:** Successful community gardens represent thousands of small and large decisions, so it's inevitable that at some point disagreement will emerge. Having clearly defined conflict resolution procedures in place can greatly reduce the amount of stress and tension that occurs when a group does run into conflict.

## **Design a community garden**

**Define the purpose and management:** Discuss the goals of the garden and plan for enough volunteer and/or financial support to help achieve those goals. Is the purpose of the community garden to strengthen the community? To maximize fruit and vegetable production? Is there a shared vision for what types of practices will be used to produce the food? Who will primarily be responsible for the day-to-day operations that the garden requires? These are important questions to address as the garden gets underway. Getting clarification early on in the process ensures garden "governance" will have a good start. Another important aspect is the long-term sustainability of the garden. A project whose goals are only in the immediate term may be designed differently than one that aims for a longer timeframe. Garden projects require a lot of work. Preparing plans for who (or what groups) are responsible for what aspects of the garden is critical to do in advance.

**Community garden structures:** Will the garden be set up as individual plots or organized as a communal space? Individual plots are areas that gardeners use to do with as they choose. Many choose to grow food for home consumption. Many gardens have at least a portion of their garden in individual plots, and some are entirely that way. Other gardens are designed to have a portion of the space cared for by the entire community. The group works together to maintain the communal plot and shares in the benefits.

**Shared space, shared community:** Research has shown that levels of connection and interaction tend to be higher in gardens that reserve some area for communal space. The space can be used for many different activities such as gardening for donation, planting of demonstration gardens, and holding classes or community events.

## Garden location

The most important thing is that the site works for the community of gardeners who will manage it...and the plants to be produced.

**Visibility:** It's beneficial to have the garden in a clearly visible location. Some of the most successful gardens are situated in a place where the community naturally gathers. Visibility is also important for safety reasons. Locating the garden in a place where passersby can have "eyes" on the site may discourage unwanted behavior.

**Access:** In addition to being visible, the garden needs to be accessible to gardeners and vehicles. Consider parking, bus route availability, accessibility for the disabled, child friendliness/safety, truck delivery (compost, hay bales, etc.)

**Sun, wind and drainage:** The vast majority of vegetables and fruits need at least 6 to 8 hours of full sunlight daily. Too much wind will stunt plant growth. Choose a location that does not flood.

**Soil quality:** Good gardens start with great soil! Urban soil is often compacted, full of weed seeds, and sometimes contaminated. Take a pick or shovel and dig a few holes around the prospective site. Is the soil heavy clay, sandy, full of rocks, rubble, or trash? Is it dark with organic matter or does it look like the topsoil was long scraped off? Find out about the site history. Determine if nearby industries might have shed pollutants on the site.

## Landowner considerations

While many landowners are willing to host a community garden, the differences between them most often boil down to the differences between public landowners (such as a city) and private landowners (such as an individual, citizens' group, or an agency like a church). Some considerations that relate to the type of landowner include:

**Permission and land tenure:** In many cases, urban farmers and community gardeners will arrange to lease land from an individual landowner or city agencies. Approach the landowner with a brief proposal in a letter. If they reply favorably, meet to work out further details (from garden design to clean up at the project close) and finalize everything in writing. Individual landowners might be easier to negotiate with than city agencies with their bureaucracy, but municipalities might be willing to give a longer lease. Land tenure will affect whether you want to plant fruit trees in the ground or in barrels, the amount of soil building and physical infrastructure you build, etc.

**Purchasing land:** While land ownership means a certain amount of stability, it also means full responsibility for things like utilities and insurance.

**Water and other utilities:** Is water available at or near the garden site? A public agency may be better able to pay for installation of a water point/meter than a private citizens' group. Pipes and drip irrigation can convey water from the meter to the garden's location, and then throughout the garden. Gardeners are usually held responsible for the cost of the water they use throughout a growing season. Other utilities include electricity (handy for operating power tools and lights), collection of trash or green waste (you might not compost everything yourself!) and possibly sewage if you intend to have on-site restrooms – important if your space will become a more developed community or youth center. Be sure to negotiate who will pay for what.

**Insurance:** If garden owner is a public agency that insures public spaces, then treating the garden like a public space (and/or having gardeners sign a waiver) can often satisfy the agency's requirements. Churches or other land-owning nonprofits are also familiar with the costs of insuring the land they own, and changes may not be necessary to turn parts of their land into a garden. A private citizen, however, probably won't want to buy additional insurance to let a group of gardeners use his or her land. In this case, it may be best to seek out a third party that would be willing to support the community garden by handling the insurance.

## **Build the community garden**

**Assess the soil:** The first step in building a garden is to assess the soil. Do a soil test and amend the soil if necessary with compost or topsoil.

**Garden design:** Gardens can include physical infrastructure, ranging from a simple shed for tools to raised beds, hoop houses, greenhouses, and cold frames. More involved infrastructure might include community gathering places, produce stands, and food preparation areas. Garden design links together this infrastructure to support your garden goals. As you sketch out the design, think about the physical elements at the site. Consider the direction of sun and wind exposure. Will there be good access to water? Factor in the influence of adjacent buildings and trees, as well as low-lying areas prone to flooding. Consider proximity to the street and entrance.

**Beds: to raise or not to raise?** Think about bed layout and whether or not to make raised beds. Raised beds can range from soil mounds separated by paths to shallow boxes resting on the soil. They can even be boxes several feet tall. The type of raised bed will be based on the soil at the garden site. If the soil is contaminated, consider raised boxes with imported soils.

A weedy area in an uncultivated vacant lot may have a relatively high amount organic matter and be ready for cultivation. Poor quality soil -- soil with low organic matter that has been compacted by traffic or other factors -- will need rehabilitation.

**Appearance:** If the appearance of the garden is important (for example, it's on a busy street corner or located on public property), consider building raised beds. Even if they are full of weeds, they have a more "tidy" look than in-ground gardens.

**Ease of gardening/accessibility:** Consider raised beds if the soil in the garden is hard to work or some gardeners struggle to bend over. Often the soil is easier to work in a raised bed. There may be fewer weeds, and beds can be constructed at heights that are easier for gardeners with limited mobility to reach and work.

**Cost:** The cost of raised beds makes a garden much more expensive to build. If cost is a limiting factor, consider amending the existing soil rather than bringing in the soil for a raised bed. Simple mounded beds with high-quality soil are another option.

**Existing soil quality:** Sometimes soil in urban areas has been neglected and can take several growing seasons to rehabilitate. Importing soil from elsewhere can be a way to speed up the time to a productive vegetable garden. Be sure to bring in good quality, uncontaminated topsoil.

**Reduced risk:** Soil contamination can be a factor in some urban areas. If there are high levels of heavy metals in the soil, build raised beds and mulch all surrounding soil to reduce risk.

**Water dynamics:** Raised beds can dry out faster than native soil. Depending on the climate and local drainage, this can be a pro or a con.

**Layout garden with pathways:** Well-designed garden paths invite people into the garden and make moving materials easy. Plan paths and reasonably-sized garden beds so gardeners can access the bed without stepping directly on the soil. Over time, stepping directly on bed soil compacts the soil, leading to poor water infiltration, and issues with drainage and air flow, which impede plant growth. Popular bed designs include 1-m wide rectangular beds, curving beds, and circular beds with keyhole paths for access. Leave plenty of pathway space in between for wheelbarrows, wheelchairs, and groups of people. Pathways should be covered or mulched to protect from erosion and dust. If your garden is to be truly accessible, the paths should be paved with paving bricks.

**Watering:** How will the garden be watered? Rain with occasional sprinkler use? Drip irrigation? The right garden design can make watering easier, whether that means beds are all the same size so they all take the same length of drip tape, beds that a sprinkler can easily cover, or a nice wide path for pulling a hose.

## **Other garden infrastructure**

A small **shed** is good for secure and dry tool storage. Check with local authorities to find out if a permit is needed to build a shed.

**Fences** can help control unwanted access by wild and domestic animals. Fences also can control when people have access to the garden and may provide some safety. Think carefully about how the garden fits into the surrounding community.

**Greenhouses, hoop houses or high tunnels** are useful for starting seeds and extending the growing season.

**Food preparation areas and farm stands** serve as points to sell or share vegetables grown in the community garden. Produce and handwashing areas can be low-tech and simple to install. Check local regulations for food safety and vending requirements. Selling produce is often easier to do than selling value-added products, like pickles or jam. However, these value-added products can bring in more income and create more jobs.

**Community gathering and education spaces** play an important role in building community, so consider including space in the garden for people to gather. This can be a simple picnic table for garden meetings and sharing food or a more developed area for community events.

If possible, provide **access to restrooms and handwashing stations** in community gathering spaces.

## **Amend the soil**

Soil amendments add organic material back into soil, reduce compaction, and improve soil life.

**Compost:** Decomposed leaves, grass, vegetable waste, straw or other organic material can be returned to the soil. For tips on composting, see this [compost-making guide](#).

**Manure:** Manure can give a garden an incredible boost in nutrients. It should be well-aged or composted.

**Biosolids:** The digested, solid portion extracted from urban wastewater treatment may be available in some locales. Community gardens should seek out Class A biosolids.

You can add amendments to soil anytime. Generally two to three inches of the amendment is sufficient. Just spread it around the garden, and mix it into the soil with a shovel or a small tiller.