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Bulletin #4300, Steps to Organizing Your Community Garden

Food for ME: Citizen Action for Community Food Recovery

Steps to Organizing Your Community Garden

Originally prepared by Extension Educators Marjorie Hundhammer and Joyce Kleffner. Revised and updated by Extension Educator Barbara Murphy.

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A community garden is typically a piece of public land tended collectively by a group of people who are interested in growing fresh fruits and vegetables, creating community, and establishing a connection to the environment. This fact sheet in the *Food for ME* series includes suggestions on how to set up a community garden project, recruit volunteers, and establish a garden plot.

Follow these steps to successfully organize a community garden

1. Organize a meeting of interested people

Determine whether a garden is needed and wanted. What type of garden should it be: flower, vegetable, organic? Will it have individual or group plots? Invite neighbors, friends, church groups, garden clubs, and apartment dwellers: anyone who might be interested in getting the project off the ground. It can take more than a year to get all of the pieces in place for a successful community garden.

2. Form a planning committee

This group comprises people who really want to make the community garden happen and have the time to devote to organizing it. Choose well-organized people as garden coordinators. Form subcommittees, if needed, to tackle specific issues such as obtaining land, writing guidelines, finding sponsors, and communication.

3. Find a sponsor

Some community gardens support themselves through membership fees, but for many, obtaining a sponsor is essential in order to obtain big-ticket items such as irrigation or fencing. Approach town recreation departments, civic groups, and churches with your idea, and emphasize the ways in which the town, as well as participating individuals, will benefit. Be creative: auction off square feet of land, offer to put sponsors' names on a wall of benefactors, or offer to donate produce to a specific cause in exchange for support.

4. Choose a site

Work with town members to find an appropriate site. For maximum yield, the site should receive a minimum of eight hours of sun a day during the growing season—preferably more. For a simple activity to determine how much sun a piece of land gets, place paper cups randomly over the area being considered for the garden. At 9:00 a.m., place a piece of popcorn in every cup that is in the sun. Do this every two hours until 5;00 p.m. The cups with the most popped corn at the end of the day received the most sun.

Good drainage is more important than fertility: nutrients can be added relatively inexpensively, while correcting poor drainage is time-consuming and costly. Also, think about easy access, a water source, and parking.

5. Prepare the site

In all probability, the site will need to be tilled, amended to soil test results, and laid out into plots and paths. Create a master plan and organize a work day or two to get the site garden-ready. Remember to consider room for compost piles, paths, tool sheds, a communication area, etc., as needed.

6. Consider a space for children

Including children is essential in terms of promoting family time and encouraging development of lifelong gardeners. Children aren't necessarily interested in the same goals as adults, so provide a separate space where they can explore, plant, play, and harvest at their own speed.

7. Determine the rules and put them in writing

Adults are more willing to comply with rules if they have a say in their development. Don't be so restrictive that new gardeners may feel unable to participate. The following subjects will need to be discussed:

- What the fees will be and how the will be money be used
- How common areas (paths, edges) will be maintained
- Whether pets will be allowed
- What practices and crops are acceptable
- How are plots assigned
- What happens when a plot is not maintained

8. Work together to create a community

Good communication will make it easier to follow the garden guidelines. Make sure the garden coordinator has contact information for all participants. Create a message area for updates and notices, take and post pictures, and celebrate regularly.

How you can help recover food

To get involved in community food recovery, use the ideas in the *Food for ME* fact sheets, call the National Hunger Hotline at 800-453-2648 (800-GLEAN-IT) or 866-348-6479 (866-3-HUNGRY), or visit www.whyhunger.org/get-involved.html [4].

Food Recovery Resources

- Feeding America [5]
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service [6]

Yarmouth Community Garden

Maine is home to a growing number of thriving community gardens. Established in 2003, the three-acre Yarmouth Community Garden (YCG) has become one of the largest and most diverse community gardens in the state. One hundred and forty 10-foot by 10-foot rental plots are available to area residents. The plots are provided with annual tilling, deer fencing, a convenient water supply, and compost.

YCG's popular Children's Garden features a living play space and a weekly Garden Explorers camp. Children grow and harvest produce from the pizza garden, cucumber tunnel, bean tepees, and strawberry patch. They are invited to practice their letters in the A-Z garden, hide out in the giant sunflower house, or fly through the butterfly garden on their way to the pumpkin patch. Children also help organize weekly donations to local food pantries.

The YCG Community Plot, which is planted, tended, and harvested by volunteers, continues to be one of the largest garden contributors to the Cumberland County Maine Harvest for Hunger program, distributing more than 5,000 pounds of fresh organic vegetables in 2010

- [WhyHunger](#) [7]

Legal Resources

Ground Rules: A Legal Toolkit for Community Gardens is a toolkit from Public Health Law & Policy. It contains legal resources for establishing community gardens on vacant land that is owned by individuals or other private entities, as opposed to public land.

to local food pantries and seniors in need.

For more information about YCG, visit [www.yarmouthcommunitygarden.org](#) [3].

The toolkit describes the rights and responsibilities of the landowner, the sponsoring organization, and gardeners. It includes these resources:

- Model Community Garden Lease (between a landowner and a sponsoring nonprofit)
- Model Gardener's Agreement (between the sponsoring nonprofit and an individual gardener)
- Model Community Garden Rules (outlining the way a garden will operate, including gardeners' privileges and responsibilities)
- Two discussion checklists (outlining points for the sponsor organization to cover when orienting new gardeners)

The toolkit is available at [www.nplanonline.org/nplan/products/CommunityGardenToolkit](#) [8].

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