

# Starting a Community Garden

## 10 Steps to Ease Your Way into Community Gardens

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*Community Gardens are planned garden plots designed to provide local produce for neighborhood communities, residential, schools or organizations. Community gardens provide opportunities to bring diverse personalities together to plan, problem solve, cooperate, work and share responsibilities and harvests of plenty.*

Many questions arise when planning a community garden long before breaking ground. Including who will benefit from the garden? Which location is ideal? What will the food/vegetation be used for? What kind of pest/weed management will you practice or promote in the garden? And where can you find local resources? Below are 10 steps that are designed to help the first time community gardener in their quest to start a new garden, but will also assist those already involved to find ways to enhance their growing space.

1. **FORM A PLANNING AND COORDINATION COMMITTEE:** Reliable groups of interested, committed people are needed to start, maintain and effectively create a community garden space. The committee will tackle the planning, fundraising and publicizing of the community garden. Involve enthusiastic and knowledgeable members who are committed to at least one component of the garden. A multitude of talents can contribute to a garden effort. Of course, it is always great to have a “green thumb” on board, but artists, construction workers and people with skills in advertising, fundraising and communication are also great assets. The more you can delegate and identify responsibilities early on, the less daunting the project becomes. A message board or other organized communication such as phone trees and group emails can help to communicate updates and tasks with your committee.

An effective committee is able to communicate the vision of the garden, support each other and share responsibilities. It includes diverse members and strives to incorporate the individual and group goals of the garden. The more members are invited to be part of the planning, the more invested they will be in the success and maintenance of the garden.

2. **IDENTIFY YOUR RESOURCES:** Identifying resources and skills already available in your neighborhood and community is a vital step to starting a community garden. An assessment or list of existing assets in the community will help identify missing links and needs and keep your group from having to reinvent existing programs or resources. Below are a few examples to get started.
  - View the list of several food and agriculture resources in La Plata County. (*Local Resources*).
  - Attend a local garden club meeting.
  - Visit the La Plata County CSU Extension office located at the La Plata County Fairgrounds.
  - Identify sources for tools, seeds, transplants, and soil amendments.

- Visit the land/garden link programs through Sustainability Alliance of Southwest Colorado, Durango Urban Army Link or The Garden Project. If you are looking for a city/county owned plot, talk with your local municipal planner about identifying a suitable site.
- And for some hands-on inspiration, visit local farms and school, neighborhood, and community gardens.

3. **CHOOSE A LOCATION:** Not enough can be said about finding the right location for a community garden. Water, sun-exposure, accessibility, safety, and permanence should be addressed and weighed when choosing the perfect location for your garden.

- **Water:** Ensure that your water source will be easily accessible. Water spigots and new plumbing can be added, but often carry an expensive price tag. In addition to identifying the source determine whether you will use an automatic drip system or start with hand watering. Dragging and moving hoses (everyday) is not a sustainable water practice. Think easy: plan ahead.
- **Sunlight:** Sun exposure will help determine which plants will grow well in your garden area. A minimum of 6 hours is necessary for most vegetables and flowers. Check potential sites throughout the day and throughout the seasons. What may seem like the perfect location in mid December will inevitably change come April. Check for trees, roofing, and other structures that may inhibit sunlight.
- **Access:** Accessibility to the community will often determine the amount of time the members work in and share the garden. It may be easier to find land, with irrigation, and prime soil outside city limits, but transportation will limit who can and cannot access the garden.
- **Permanence:** Keep in mind that as our communities grow so do roads, homes and stores. Choose a location that can be permanent and that will not have to be removed due to expansion. Talk to your landowner about the long-term plans for the property, so the site can remain a permanent fixture.
- **Security:** Choose a site that is safe for the garden residents and the neighboring community. Determine what wildlife may use the garden and whether a fence will be necessary. If possible, choose a site away from fast traffic, highways, etc. Invite a representative from Division of Wildlife to visit the sites and discuss possible impacts and precautions for wildlife.

4. **IDENTIFY A MEMBERSHIP STYLE & RULES AND REGULATIONS:**

Community gardens obviously come in all shapes and sizes and can also take on different guiding structures for members. Choose a membership style that matches the audience you hope to share the garden with. Traditional Urban Gardens often offer individual plots at a set fee and may have firm rules and regulations. An Open Style Community garden may be open to interested individuals or families, (often through word of mouth), are free (or nominal) and carry few restrictions or guidelines. Shared Community Gardens have all aspects of the garden communal responsibilities. Operating costs, planting, maintenance and harvest are all shared responsibilities and rewards. School and social service gardens are catered to a specific audience. Harvest as well as the day-to-day maintenance will most likely be a shared responsibility. In

this scenario, those who do the bulk of the work don't necessarily take home the bulk of the harvest.

Based on your garden or membership style, create a set of rules that are acceptable for all involved. Examples may include a system of expectations and consequences such as behavior, payment of dues, selection of garden coordinators, assignments of duties and responsibilities, expenditures of funds, sharing tools, and harvest sharing. The financial and working responsibilities of your members will set the tone for building these expectations.

5. **FUNDING THE GARDEN:** After determining the membership style and goals for the garden, determine how you will to achieve those goals through creative financing and through community participation. Brainstorm where the funding will come from: grants, in-kind donations, fundraisers, annual membership fees or sponsorships. In-kind donations are always appreciated, but can narrow the design, and planting options, when relied on too heavily. Consider potential expenses such as tools, gardening supplies (soil, construction materials, seeds), drip irrigation, water bills, trash pick-up, consultants to help develop or design the garden and expenses for special events. Adding fencing (if necessary), installing a drip system, purchasing lumber for construction materials and initial soil amendments will be start up costs, that will (typically) taper after the first year.
6. **DESIGNING THE GARDEN:** Based on whether your garden will contain individual or shared plots, some key pieces will need to be decided early on. Designate room for tool storage, composting, recycling and trash receptacles (if desired), pathways for movement around the garden and an area for children. Whether you want a kid's garden or just a play space, designating an area for kids play will offer families more time at the garden and avoid troubles from too much "foot traffic" in less than ideal places. For traditional community gardens, design often starts by dividing the space into several plots and assigning them to groups and individuals. Less formal gardens can use a more consensus-based design. Other design decisions may include garden art, the use of flowers and herbs as an aesthetic enhancement to a food production garden, raised bed materials, and plant and garden signs.

**PLAN FOR A YEAR-ROUND GARDEN CALENDAR & PLANS FOR HARVEST SEASON:** Two calendars may be necessary: one for planting and one for goal setting. Goals are most effective when they are attached to specific outcomes and a timeline. Identify an individual to spearhead individual goals. View sample calendars (available on The Garden Project's website) or create your own to determine when to fundraise, organize, and plan with when to prep, plant, and harvest. Determine the process for food distribution and how food will be shared between members. Extra food can be donated to schools, soup kitchens, senior centers or local food pantry. Add seed saving to your list of fall projects and spend time in the fall amending the soil and putting the garden to rest for the winter. Plan for a community space/time to share knowledge of the seasons' successes as well as a time to gather and preserve food. Below is a sample calendar with both operating and planting goals.

### August through October

Form Committee  
Choose Location  
Enlist Support and Seek Permission  
Sheet Compost Proposed Site  
Lay Ground Work or Fencing

### November through February

Order Seed Catalogs  
Choose a Garden Theme or Design  
Develop Fundraising and Grant Research

### March

Gather Supplies  
Plant Seeds for Indoor Starts  
Choose and Plan for Groundbreaking Day  
Install Water System

### April

Groundbreaking  
Build raised beds or till soil  
Late April/Early May: plant cool weather transplants or seeds (greens, root crops)

### May

Early May: Plant hardy perennials  
Late May/ Early June: plant warm weather plants (tomatoes, squash, corn, beans)

### June through July

Community Work Days  
Maintenance: Watering, Weeding, Harvesting

### August- October

Plant Perennials  
Harvest Crop and Harvest Party

7. **ENLIST THE COMMUNITY:** Good internal and external communication channels will increase the level of support from your garden community.
- Stay in communication with local newspapers, radio programs, nurseries, and businesses about the advancement and general needs of the garden.
  - Inform, in the early stages of the garden plan, various local and regional professionals, city and county officials and (of course) neighbors. Develop a supportive network with local/state representatives, city and county officials, other area farmers and producers, and the general public sector.
  - Circulate a directory of members with contact information.
  - Community workdays, garden tours and celebrations can be organized surrounding set times (new/full moons, spring and fall equinox, summer and winter solstice).

- Designate specific days available to volunteers and interested people within your community. Inviting the community to be part of the garden program will go a long way in soliciting resources down the road.
8. **EXIT STRATEGY:** Take into account what will be done with the garden if it does not gain the momentum or participation that was envisioned and funding or memberships are no longer able to sustain the project. What will happen to this piece of land that has been potentially donated or leased? It is important to have a timeline to reach certain determined measures of success to see if those goals are being obtained or if an exit strategy is necessary. Make a plan for how you will restore the space used for the garden and materials used to construct raised beds and storage spaces, in terms of recycling within the community and replenishing the land. Community gardens are an incredible **VISIBLE** display of community support, and can equally have the potential of an opposite effect if abandoned.
  9. **GROUNDBREAKING DATE:** Set the date for groundbreaking day either in the spring or fall and bring the community together with some type of celebratory ceremony. Ceremonies can be short and sweet or creative, in-depth and official. A ceremony can involve poetry readings, ribbon cuttings, native blessings, ceremonial shoveling, and an explanation of the garden and how it came to fruition. Treat this day as a great way to begin advertising (invite the local newspaper) and a great way to excite both gardeners and the larger community about the potential for growing!