

TOOLKIT FOR STARTING A COMMUNITY GARDEN

*A great way to engage members of your community in the fight against childhood obesity
by increasing access to fresh produce and providing safe physical activity*



A program of the Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi

www.cfnm.org

STARTING A COMMUNITY GARDEN

GATHER A COMMITTEE

Organize a meeting of interested people including groups you hope to involve. You may want to include:

- Seniors
- Youth
- Master Gardeners & Horticulturists (i.e. MSU Extension Service)
- Local gardeners
- Health champions
- City Parks & Recreation

Determine if the garden will be the project of one main group or whether you will engage families and groups in gardening their own plots with the garden.

Identify core leadership of at least three people who are all familiar with pertinent information, such as planning, construction, funding, and actual gardening. You may wish to form sub-committees to lead each of these tasks.

Set up a Planning Committee to work out details including a mission statement, possibly a “motto” and a timeline.

THE RIGHT SITE

Find a good site – talk to city officials, owners of vacant lots, and residents with large open spaces.

A good site will:

- Provide at least 6 hours of full sunlight daily
- Have suitable soil or soil that can be made suitable – uncontaminated from previous use
- Include an available water source
- Be usable for more than one year

PLANNING

Garden layout - even if you start small, lay out a sketch on paper including plans for any areas for future development. Plans can be adapted overtime, but starting with one minimizes having to tear things out and redo them later. Keep it simple but remember to include space for:

- Compost
- Tool storage
- Arbors and benches

FUNDING

Approach potential local sponsors, such as a garden supply, fencing company, Garden Clubs, churches, schools or service organizations (like Kiwanis). Having a concise mission statement and a thorough long term plan in place will help when asking for support.

PREPARING & DEVELOPING THE SITE

- Clean the site, remove debris
- Use string, stakes, etc. to mark spaces
- Install a weatherproof board for announcing plans, layout, messages
- Arrange for plowing, tilling, raised beds or “lasagna style” planting
- Consider a flower border to make the space more attractive and promote good will with non-gardening residents and neighbors

ORGANIZING THE GARDEN PROJECT

Whether large or small, a community garden project should be kept simple as possible. Many garden groups are organized informally and still operate successfully. Leaders “rise to the occasion” to propose ideas and carry out tasks. However, as the work load expands a more formal structure can be helpful. Structure can help a project last, promote trust, help the group grow and create opportunities for leadership development.

A plan and structure can evolve from a series of planning meetings, by trying ideas and suggestions and over time, developing organizational guidelines and rules.

If in the future you want to establish a non-profit organization, bylaws and a formal board structure will be necessary. You can locate examples from other organizations when the time comes.

Issues to consider at the beginning:

- Will there be membership dues or “plot fees”? If so, how will these funds be used?
- How will participants be selected and how will plots be assigned if you choose to engage families and groups?
- How large will plots be?
- Will the group do certain things cooperatively (such as tilling in the spring, composting)?
- Will there be a separate area for children?
- Will the gardeners meet regularly?
- Will gardeners share tools, hoses and other such items?
- How will common areas – like flower borders, weeding between areas, sitting areas – be handled?
- Will there be a set of written rules which gardeners are expected to uphold? If so, how will they be enforced?

MANAGING THE GARDEN PROJECT

Use a simple form to collect names and contact information for all participants in the project and don't neglect to get email addresses. It may be helpful to have participants in the garden project sign a simple agreement promising to abide by the written rules.

Some of the following rules and agreements may be appropriate for your project:

- I agree to work _____ volunteer hours toward community gardening efforts.
- I will not bring pets to the garden.
- I will pay a fee of \$_____ to help cover garden expenses.
- I will not use fertilizers, insecticides or weed repellents in any way that will affect other gardening efforts.
- I will keep trash and litter cleaned from the garden plot.
- I will have something planted in the garden by _____ and maintain it all summer (or season).
- I will plant tall crops only where they will not shade neighboring plots.
- I will abide by recommended compost guidelines.
- I will pick only my own crops unless given permission by another gardener to pick their crops.
- 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.

INSURANCE

Landowners may require you to obtain liability insurance. Perhaps you can be covered under a municipal policy, or that of an organization such as a church or school, etc. Larger insurance carriers may be more flexible than smaller carriers.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Messy, unkempt gardens or noisy behavior will make for unhappy neighbors and poor PR. On the other hand, a well-organized garden with strong leadership and a proactive, inclusive approach by committed members can overcome almost any obstacle!

Vandalism is a common fear among community gardeners. Consider these proven methods to deter vandalism:

- Location is important. A remote spot may be less accessible to vandals than one in plain site.
- Make a sign for the garden to let people know to whom it belongs and its purpose.
- A fence can be both attractive and practical to mark the perimeter and limit access.
- Regular on-site work by project participants can be a deterrent.
- Invite everyone in the neighborhood to participate from the very beginning. Persons excluded from the garden are potential vandals.

- Make friends with someone who lives adjacent to the garden and offer them flowers and vegetables in exchange for a protective “eye”.
- Plant raspberries, roses or other thorny plants along the fence as a barrier.
- Harvest produce on a daily basis.
- Plant potatoes, other root crops or some less popular vegetables along the side walk or fence.
- Consider planting a “free garden” outside the fence and mark it with a sign: “If you need fresh produce, please feel free to take it from this space.”

YOUNG GARDENERS

Involve children in learning gardens. They can be the garden’s best protectors and the opportunities for teaching them life skills are bountiful and rewarding! Learning opportunities associated with youth gardening include:

GARDENING/HORTICULTURE

- Soil preparation/composting
- Learning how and when to plant various things
- Water conservation (rain barrels, mulching, etc.)
- Beautification of spaces
- Food independence
- Increased consumption of fresh produce
- Increased appreciation for nature and natural resources

Other SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES for YOUNG GARDENERS

- Project planning and management
- Construction of:
 - Raised beds
 - Fencing
 - Arbors
 - Erecting a pre-fab greenhouse
 - Pathways
 - Signs
 - Benches
 - Concrete work (like molds for round stones for pathways with artistic imprints), laying a rock wall
 - Use of equipment to till soil

MARKETING

- Photography and artwork to beautify and promote the garden
- Flyers or other printed materials
- Taking people on tours
- Signs
- Sharing produce with neighbors, seniors
- Selling produce at Farmer's Markets ("Grow Memphis" – more info at <http://www.midsouthpeace.org/GrowMemphis/Home.html>)

INTERGENERATIONAL ASPECTS and OTHER BENEFITS

- Seniors and other adults
- Co-Op with MSU Extension Service – Youth Master Gardeners Project?
- "Roots & Shoots"
- Connection to classroom instruction including math, science, English, geography, history
- Pride in work
- Teamwork
- Community Service

RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY GARDENERS

Connect with horticulturists at your local MSU EXTENSION SERVICE office: www.msucare.com

America the Beautiful Fund: (202) 638-1649 www.freeseeds.us/OperationGPform.html

National Gardening Association: NGA@garden.org

Community Gardening Month by Month: http://www.foodshare.net/toolbox_month01.htm

Urban Harvest Community Garden Guide: <http://www.urbanharvest.org/programs/cgardens/startguide.html>

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