



Bulletin #4300

Organizing Your Community Garden



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.

Plan Ahead with Purpose

Community gardens can address people's needs in many different ways. To be effective, start by getting support of many people who share a similar goal and purpose for the garden. It is best to find a sponsor organization or agency, such as a public housing department, a church or the University of Maine Cooperative Extension.

Individual Family Garden Plots

Garden plots can be set up for people who want to grow their own food but do not have a suitable site. To be successful with family garden plots, make sure the participants understand what responsibilities they have. What tasks can be delegated to the land owner, an overseer or rotated among all the participants? For example, tools and equipment might be shared and kept in a central place; watering may be scheduled so a central sprinkler or shared hoses can be used. Guidelines for planting, weeding and pest management methods should be set-up ahead of time. Gardeners might also discuss their plans with each other so abutting plants will complement and not compete with one another for sun, water or space.

Community Gardens to Support a Food Pantry, Shelter or Vegetable Stand

Fertile land may be set aside for volunteers to grow food for a community soup kitchen, food pantry, homeless shelter or vegetable stand (where proceeds benefit a group or cause).

There are many tasks and responsibilities involved in a volunteer effort to plant, manage and harvest produce. Knowledge, skills, availability, flexibility and commitment are important considerations.

It helps to have one person, a coordinator, in charge of the overall effort. He or she will develop a schedule with daily, weekly and seasonal tasks, determine what resources are needed and how they will be obtained, and keep track of tasks. Small group leaders can be helpful if many people are working together. Leader roles might include directing volunteers parking, providing water or cool beverages for volunteers, arranging for bathrooms access or documenting the group's progress.

Recruiting and Screening Volunteers

Develop a job description and list of potential tasks before you recruit volunteers. The more tasks and people you involve, the greater the support and chance for success. Use both written and verbal methods to let people know about the need, when, how long and for what tasks they can volunteer.

What's Food Recovery?

Food recovery is the collection of wholesome food for distribution to the poor and hungry. The four most common methods for food recovery are:

- 1. Field gleanings:** The collection of crops from farmers' fields that have already been mechanically harvested or on fields where it is not economically profitable to harvest.
- 2. Perishable food rescue or salvage:** The collection of perishable produce from wholesale and retail sources.
- 3. Food rescue:** The collection of prepared foods from the food service industry.
- 4. Nonperishable food collection:** The collection of processed foods with long shelf lives.

Source: "A Citizen's Guide to Food Recovery," USDA, April, 1997.

Word of mouth, press releases, posters, announcements in church bulletins and school newsletters, radio public service announcements, and signs in the post office, garden shop, senior center or other public places are just a few ways you might recruit volunteers.

Interview everyone who wants to help so they understand what is needed and what they are committing to. Don't forget to consider youth and seniors as potential volunteers.

Organizing Volunteers

Volunteers who are avid gardeners may want to bring their own tools and equipment to use during their shifts. Others may need tools and training to be good helpers. Involve volunteers in scheduling so those who want to work together can, people can share equipment or skills or car pool. Decide if and where volunteer hours and tasks completed will be logged in or checked off.

Discuss potential problems and how they will be addressed. Develop a plan of action for volunteers who cannot or do not fulfill their commitments. Decide where to report problems with tools, equipment and pest, animal or vandal problems.

Visibility, Publicity and Public Relations

Public recognition of your project can either bolster or embarrass volunteers. Be sure to plan ahead with the community garden participants and those who will ultimately benefit if you want to draw attention to your project in any way.

Ideas for increasing visibility and support include:

- Signs and posters to recruit volunteers or participants
- Newspaper feature stories
- A television news clip
- Signs and banners at the garden site
- Public speaking opportunities at clubs, groups and schools where participants may be recruited
- Volunteer recognition events
- Business and community club or group solicitations

Planning Your Community Garden

Use this step-by-step checklist to start a community garden plot:

1. Gather materials you'll need.

- Planting, growing and harvesting tools
- Seeds, seedlings and organic material, such as compost, manure or peat moss
- Long-handled shovels, hoes, rakes, garden spades and three-pronged hand cultivators
- Scissors, knives and containers (baskets, bowls, or cardboard boxes)

2. Pick a spot.

- Make sure the vegetable garden gets at least six hours of sunshine a day. If the plot chosen doesn't have enough sunshine, try growing leafy vegetables, such as lettuce.

- Keep drainage in mind. A garden needs to drain well, so try to avoid low spots.
- Cultivate. It is better if your garden spot has been cultivated before. If you are starting with a brand new site, take the first year to prepare the soil, following soil test recommendations.

3. Plan your garden.

- Point north. Find the north side of the plot, because that's where the tall plants should go, so they don't shade shorter ones. Stand facing the sunset, north is the direction to the right.
- Sketch out the basic shape and size of the plot. Plants can be grown in rows or raised beds, so the garden will be square or rectangular.

4. Decide what to plant.

- List what vegetables you'll grow and decide on the number of plants you'll need.

5. Design the site.

- Draw a picture of the garden and plan out what plants will grow in which rows or beds. Figure how far apart the plants should be based on how wide the plants will get. This will make it easier on planting day.

6. Test the soil.

- If the soil has not been tested, conduct a soil test. Call your county Cooperative Extension office for a soil test kit. A basic soil test shows three things: (1) lead level of the soil; (2) whether the soil is acid (sour), alkaline (sweet), or neutral (neither sour nor sweet) and (3) the nutrient levels in the soil. Lead is a poison and if it gets into the plants, it will get into your food. Plants will not grow well in soil that is either too acidic or too alkaline. Nutrient levels determine how well plants grow.

7. Get the tools.

- Long-handled shovels, gardening spades, spading forks, hoes and rakes are all excellent tools for beginning a garden. To care for the

From the Wholesaler to the Hungry

In 1987, Mickey Weiss, a retired produce wholesaler, was visiting his son at the Los Angeles Wholesale Market. He watched as a forklift hoisted 200 flats of ripe, red raspberries, raspberries that had not sold that day, and crushed them into a dumpster!

Weiss' retirement didn't last long.

Working out of donated office space at the market, he enlisted student volunteers to call community kitchens, while he persuaded friends in the produce business to "put good food to good use."

To make his ream a reality, he formed a team that included the Los Angeles Wholesale Produce Market and the Los Angeles County Department of Agriculture. Today, Mickey Weiss' Charitable Distribution Facility distributes more than two million pounds of produce a month throughout southern California.

The project, From the Wholesaler to the Hungry (FWH), an offshoot of Weiss' work, continues to help cities establish programs to channel large donations of fresh fruits and vegetables to community agencies.

Source: "A Citizen's Guide to Food Recovery," USDA, April, 1997.

garden, use hand tools such as 3-pronged hand cultivators, hose and nozzle, and/or watering cans. If the group doesn't have their own tools, find someone who has what is needed and ask to borrow the tools. Or check yard sales for good quality used tools.

8. Prepare the soil.

- Once the soil is dry enough, dig it and loosen it. Remove grass and weeds (roots and all).

Take the time to do this well. Dig as deep as the blade of the spade and turn the soil. Or find someone to till the soil with a rototiller.

- If the soil test said to add lime, sulfur or fertilizers, do so at this time. Add organic material such as compost or aged manure. This helps feed the plants and improves the soil. Spread evenly on top of the turned soil in a layer no deeper than three inches. Blend everything well using a spading fork. Rake the soil until it's smooth and level, with no hills or holes. This will allow the water to seep down to the roots.

9. Get ready to plant.

- Children will enjoy helping buy vegetable seeds or seedlings (also called transplants). Some plants do better if you start with seedlings rather than seeds. Seedlings are the fastest way to grow plants, and the easiest.
- To identify what you have planted write the names of the plants on stakes with a waterproof marker. Place the markers in the soil at one end of the row.
- Youth can also help plant. First, make a shallow straight line (furrow) in the soil with your finger. Put the seeds in the furrow to the depth noted on the seed package. When the seeds are in the furrow, squeeze the furrow closed with your thumb and finger. Water the soil right after the seeds are planted.
- If you're planting seedlings, first mark the spot where the plants will go by poking a hole in the soil using a finger or the end of a pole. Do the entire row at one time. Set each plant in the soil so that it sits just above the root ball. Cover the root ball with soil and press the soil gently so there are no empty spaces near the roots.

Feed the seedlings with a mixture of fertilizer and water. Water each plant once, let the water soak in, and water a second time. Depending on what plants you grow, you may need to feed them every two to three weeks.

(Check with your county Extension office for more information on fertilizing, weed and pest control.)

10. Work in the garden.

- Visit the garden daily. Check if the garden needs watering, weeding, feeding and thinning. Make sure to bring the proper tools. Take youth to the garden and have them help care for the plants.

11. Harvest.

- Gather your harvest tools: scissors or knife, baskets, bowls, or cardboard boxes.
- As the vegetables are picked, place them carefully into containers. Put the heavier ones on the bottom so they don't damage lighter vegetables.
- Store vegetables under the proper conditions until you use them or deliver them. (See Food for ME fact sheet #4303, "A Donor's Guide to Vegetable Harvest and Storage.")

How You Can Help Recover Food

In today's world, where so many wake up in poverty and go to sleep hungry, each of us must ask: "How can I help?"

To get involved, use the ideas in the Food for ME fact sheets or call "1-800-GLEAN-IT," a toll-free hotline of the USDA and National Hunger Clearinghouse.

Prepared by Extension educators Marjorie Hundhammer and Joyce Kleffner.

Source: "Team Nutrition Community Nutrition Action Kit," USDA, September 1996.

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