

Tips for Starting Faith-Based Community Gardens

A community garden is a shared space gardened collectively by a group of people, or a cluster of individual plots tended by different people within a garden. It is a perfect addition to a faith community, as gardens foster social involvement, opportunities for healthy activity and connection to the land and environment. They may serve as a place for gatherings, classes, mentoring opportunities and friendship. Community gardens build food security by offering access to fresh produce at little expense, especially for apartment-dwellers who lack land or other essential gardening resources. They can also serve as gardening and nature education venues for children and adults. With proper planning and upkeep, your faith-based community garden may also provide thousands of pounds of nutritious, organically grown food to families in need, as well as habitat for beneficial insects and wildlife.



Challenges

In the faith community, there are a few issues to consider before starting a garden on your land. All of the concerns can be overcome with careful planning and clear goals.

Potential challenges include:

- Cost of infrastructure required to create and maintain a garden, including ongoing expenses such as water, soil amendments and plants (unless you can solicit donations)
- Engaging a core group of advocates with gardening expertise to spark communitywide enthusiasm
- Outlining a clear plan and long-term vision for the garden
- Development of an overall garden management plan, including plot allocation, use of the garden, maintenance of plots and seasonal cleanup
- Transportation and accessibility for low-income gardeners
- Ongoing management and volunteer coordination

Initial material needs generally include:

- Irrigation system
- Fencing
- Shed or storage area
- Soil amendments
- Tilling or plowing equipment
- Basic gardening tools
- Soil test

Ongoing expenses may include increased water usage. Having a plan and keeping people motivated and enthusiastic even as you tackle start-up costs will insure that your garden thrives.

Nonprofit organizations and coalitions working on community food security and sustainable agriculture in your area will want to know about your garden and may be able to contribute volunteer labor, publicity and donated items. Service clubs and youth organizations are often a good source of volunteers. Faith-based gardens are more sustainable and successful if they involve others in the community. It is worth the time and effort to spread the word about your garden.

Types of Gardens

Your congregation may want to discuss the various types of gardens before you start. Each of these models requires leadership and coordination to operate smoothly, resolve conflicts as they arise and ensure continuation of the garden for many seasons. Community gardens can be a beautiful and productive use of your congregation's land.

The least resource-intensive way to facilitate creation of a garden is to find an outside organization to coordinate the garden on your land. Some areas have organizations that run community gardens that may be interested. In this case, you will want to carefully outline roles, responsibilities, expectations and rules—essentially a lease agreement between your faith community and the organization responsible for the garden.

Another option is a food bank garden, tended and harvested by a group of participants for donation to local food pantries or soup kitchen. This garden might also serve as a demonstration garden which models such techniques as composting, rainwater catchment and organic methods as an example for your members and the greater community.

A traditional community garden consists of many small plots that are rented or claimed by individuals or families who plant, weed, maintain and harvest their plots throughout the season. Your congregation may choose to reach out to a particular audience to fill its garden, such as low-income people, residents of your immediate neighborhood or members of your own or other faith communities. Charging a fee for garden plots will help offset costs and encourage people to develop a sense of ownership over the garden.

Getting Started and Keeping Your Garden Going

Forming a committee of engaged members, who are informed and excited about gardening, is the best way to develop a plan.

Ask yourselves a few financial, logistical and legal questions:

- Do you need to raise funds or can you solicit donations to get started?
- Will you charge a fee for garden plots?
- Will you be creating an application form?
- Who will serve as the primary coordinator or contact person for the garden?
- Will your faith community's insurance cover gardeners?
- Will your organization need to write a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or lease agreement?

Choose a site with the following characteristics:

- Good soil
- Abundant sun
- Adequate drainage
- Nearby neighbors

Nothing is more frustrating for a first-time gardener than having plants fail to thrive because of a poor site choice. In urban areas, and often rural as well, it is essential to have the soil tested for toxins before you break ground. If there was a buried heating oil tank at one time or the land was used for industrial uses, the soil might contain high levels of toxins that you should take into consideration before growing food. Once the site has been chosen and the soil tested, begin designing your garden to fit your faith community property. Remember to include space for community gatherings, compost,

paths and signage. Your community gardeners will be an essential source of labor over the years. Monthly work parties, required work hours and a jobs list can help you ensure that the garden is cleaned and prepared each year. The garden committee or coordinator will need to be responsible for oversight.

Upkeep will include the following types of tasks:

- Soil amendments
- Tilling
- Cover-cropping in common areas
- Maintaining pathways
- Removing invasive weeds and mowing common areas
- Maintaining picnic tables or other communal gathering places
- Maintaining signs and bulletin boards
- Winterizing
- Maintaining irrigation systems and fences

Sample Garden Expenses

Soil test, Nitrogen-Phosphorus-Potassium (NPK), lead, cadmium and organophosphates, \$200

Irrigation (pipe, fittings, 24-inch trenches, posts, spigots, signs, permit), \$1,000

Hoses \$120

Shed (concrete pad, materials, door, paint, caulk, lock, hardware, gravel, roof), \$2,600

Two accessible (ADA) beds (cedar or Trex lumber raised beds 4x8x2 ft tall), \$800

Pathways around the ADA beds (5 ft wide and paved or crushed granite or gravel), \$400

Plowing and tilling, \$300

Lime and fertilizer for soil amendments, \$200

Compost, manure, leaves - donated

Straw or wood chips for paths, \$100

Shovels, rakes, hoe, garden fork, pitch fork, wheelbarrows, garbage cans, \$250

Stakes, string, \$75

100-foot tape measure, \$50

Banner, \$180

Bulletin board, \$950

Bike rack, \$300

Port-a pot, \$45 per month

Mileage per year for garden coordinator, \$300

Office supplies (printing fl iers, posters, application forms), \$100

Postage (for communicating with gardeners and doing outreach), \$42

Plant seeds and starts, donated

Total Garden Expenses, not including fencing, access road and gate: \$7,570

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