

Starting a Community Garden¹

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Figure 1.
Credits: Adrian Hunsberger, UF/IFAS Extension



Figure 2.
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A community garden is a collaborative greenspace in which the participants share in both the maintenance and the rewards. There is a long tradition of community gardening in various parts of the United States and around the world. This publication has been developed to assist those who wish to form a community garden in Florida.

Why Get Involved with Community Gardening?

Reasons abound for involvement in community gardening, including the chance to:

- increase self-esteem, bolster confidence, and encourage learning in children
- create beauty
- provide positive work experiences for at-risk youth
- increase accessibility to fresh herbs, vegetables, and fruit
- improve nutrition and fitness
- share the joys and wonders of gardening
- learn new things and socialize
- promote healthier communities
- be neighborly and involve elders
- reduce stress
- reduce crime
- have fun

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Who Gets Involved in Community Gardening?

Many different groups are involved in community gardening, including:

- homeowner associations
- neighborhood block groups and community activists
- religious organizations
- primary and secondary schools
- colleges and universities
- social service agencies
- health care facilities
- correctional institutions
- corporations
- garden clubs and plant societies
- parks departments, municipalities, city/county governments, and military organizations

Management Approaches

There are two major approaches to managing a community garden: 1) individual plots and 2) common greenspace.

In the individual plot approach, the garden is subdivided for personal use, similar to the “allotment” system common in the United Kingdom. Individual plots can be chosen, randomly selected, or assigned. Individual plot management is often used for vegetable gardening.

In the common greenspace approach, garden members cooperate in managing one area. Often, each member is responsible for a set of tasks within the shared area. Common greenspace management is used for a variety of garden types. Some examples include ornamental landscapes, educational gardens, and entrepreneurial gardens. Ornamental landscapes are pocket parks meant to inspire community beautification in order to clean-up degraded urban landscapes. Educational gardens can be used for job training, horticultural demonstrations, or outdoor classrooms. The goal of entrepreneurial gardens is to sell the products from the garden and share the profits among members.

Getting Started

Planning and communication at the outset of a community garden project often helps to avoid problems in the future.

Some key questions to be considered early on in garden development include the following:

Is there sufficient interest? The interest must come from the individuals who will actually be using the garden—not just from well-meaning supporters.



Figure 3.
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What are the group’s purposes and goals? To provide a source of fresh food crops? To beautify the location? To foster a greater sense of community and cooperation? First, have a group brainstorming session where all dreams and ideas are welcome, then sort out the priorities and practical alternatives.

Where will the garden be located? One of the first practical tasks will be to secure a usable plot of land. This could be leased from or donated by a private individual or organization. Another option is to use city- or county-owned land. The area to be used as a garden should have a reliable source of water. Have the soil tested for heavy metals, especially lead.

Is the land tenure secure? *Land tenure* refers to the rights of access to and for the use of real estate. If the community garden site lacks secure land tenure, the members risk losing the property in the future. If the gardening group does not own the land, try to get a long-term written lease, even if there is no fee for using the land.

How will the property be planted and maintained? Draw up a master plan, showing how each section of the garden will be developed. Discuss and decide whether to use individually managed plots versus common growing areas. If the site allows, include fruit trees and vines. In edible gardens, place the tallest plants on the north side of the area so that smaller plants are not shaded.

What tasks need to be done? Who will do them?

Determine whether there will be employees or member volunteers. It can be helpful to have one person who will act as a general garden coordinator. This individual would serve as the contact person for any initial interactions with external agencies (i.e., local authorities, local businesses, or private foundations).

You may want to create subcommittees to manage the many tasks involved with getting the garden “off the ground.” Some subcommittees might be:

- site acquisition and land tenure
- garden layout and master planning
- site preparation, workday management, care of common area plants, and pest management
- finances and fundraising
- communications and social events
- membership management

Consider allowing members to choose their responsibilities from a list of tasks. Leftover tasks can be tackled on group workdays or by teams.

How do you want to operate? Write a set of guidelines or by-laws to convey the group’s expectations for behavior (e.g., hours that the garden is open, fees for membership).



Figure 4.
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What are the garden’s financial needs? Create a budget. Include costs for site clearing, soil improvement, and the purchase of tools and structures (i.e., soil testing for heavy metals, raised beds, fencing, work bench, well and irrigation equipment, tool storage shed, arbors, pergolas, chairs and

benches, or a chickee). Who will manage the bank account and pay the bills?

How will funds be raised? Funding can be obtained through a variety of ways: fund-raising drives such as plant sales; sponsorships from local businesses, and grants from government agencies or private foundations. Before applying for grants, consider becoming a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

What are the legal issues? Consider the legal issues, such as the question of liability. An attorney may help to determine the need for contracts and liability insurance.

How will membership be formed and organized? How many members will be allowed to join initially? Will there be a membership fee and how much will it be? Consider establishing rules on upkeep, pest management (weeds, insects, and diseases), and plot abandonment. Which member will be involved in event organization and who will be the liaison to the local Extension office?

How will members communicate with each other? Newsletters, email, social media, meetings, garden parties? Many languages are spoken in Florida, so translators may help with communication among garden members.

What will the garden be named? Having a name can help establish a sense of place and create an identity for the garden. Place a sign at the garden.

The Role of Cooperative Extension

It is up to the members of each community garden to perform their own fundraising, site preparation, materials purchasing, planting, maintenance, and harvesting. Among many other services, the Florida Cooperative Extension Service provides education to enable community garden development throughout the state. Cooperative Extension agents and Master Gardener volunteers can provide educational assistance for community garden projects. An Extension specialist, agent, or Master Gardener may be available on occasion for a garden site visit to assist community gardeners at key stages of garden development. Numerous horticultural Extension publications are available on the EDIS Website, at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/>, and in county Extension offices. With sufficient interest, Extension workshops can be organized on a wide range of topics, from horticulture to irrigation system design, to food preservation and nutrition.

Useful Resources

Vegetable gardening in Florida: https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_vegetable_gardening

Vegetable gardening in south Florida: http://miami-dade.ifas.ufl.edu/lawn_and_garden/home_gardening.shtml

American Community Gardening Association: <https://communitygarden.org/>

Community gardening and food safety: http://solutions-foryourlife.ufl.edu/hot_topics/lawn_and_garden/community_garden_food_safety.shtml

Finding your county Extension office: <http://www.extension.org/>