Starting a Community Vegetable Garden

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Revised by Ron Walser, Urban Small Farm Specialist

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Community vegetable gardening has become a popular way to supplement food sources for many low-income people in New Mexico. With more than 16 percent[1] of the population in New Mexico experiencing food insecurity, community vegetable gardens offer apartment dwellers, low-income families and retirees a chance to improve their health and outlook by producing fresh produce and interacting with neighbors. Community vegetable gardening also teaches young urban children that food is not a product of the supermarket, but the result of tilling and nurturing the soil.

Types of Community Vegetable Gardens

There are many types of community vegetable gardens. Three major types are individual or family plots; community gardens that support food banks, shelters, church missions or select communities, or vegetable stands that benefit a group or cause; and school projects that emphasize education.

Individual or family plots normally involve a fee system for people who want to grow their own food. Volunteers usually are involved in community support gardens. Low-risk prisoners, such as driving-while-intoxicated (DWI) offenders, also may participate in garden labor. Some involve Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, in which individuals pay a yearly fee to receive a specific amount of produce from the community garden association. School projects may involve early spring programs that terminate after the school year or continue through the summer.

Forming a Planning Committee[2]

The first step in setting up a community vegetable garden is to organize a meeting of interested people to determine if there is a need and desire for such a garden in the community. Ideally, the desire should originate from the community not an individual. The community may consist of a low-income housing complex, a neighborhood surrounding a public park, a school, a senior citizen center complex or other community association.

The committee's first objective should be to develop a questionnaire to survey the community to determine interest, extent of commitment and clientele characteristics. If the project is to benefit a particular group or an entire neighborhood, it is important that the clientele be involved in all aspects of planning and implementing the project. At some point, it is important that city or county planners become involved to assist with planning and making sure the garden complies with various ordinances. If possible, find a volunteer lawyer (legal aid) to help with legal issues. Decide on a name for the garden for legal documents.

The next step is to determine the type of garden. Will individuals or families be assigned plots to grow their own vegetables or will volunteers or other laborers grow vegetables to support the community, food bank or rescue mission? Is the main goal to educate kids? Will it be limited to vegetables and small fruit crops or will flowers be allowed? A border of flowers surrounding the entire garden as a community project often will help improve the aesthetics of the entire neighborhood.

At some point, committees should be appointed to address certain tasks, such as selecting the site, raising funds, finding sponsors, addressing legal issues, handling publicity, obtaining insurance and developing by-laws and other regulations. A structure needs to be developed to determine who maintains the irrigation system, whether it includes individual faucets, drip systems or furrows. A structure also should be developed for the overall project management.

Identifying a Coordinator

Selecting an overall coordinator for the project is crucial to the success of any community vegetable garden. Someone must emerge with the time, patience, leadership skills, creativity and stamina to solve the numerous problems of bringing it all together. Usually, in the initial organizational meetings, an obvious leader will arise. Other essential qualities a coordinator should exhibit include a background in horticulture and the ability to interact with local government officials and business leaders. The coordinator also must have some means of transportation.

[1]Associated Press. Nov. 15, 2007. *USDA Report.*

[2]American Community Gardening Association, "Starting a Community Garden", www.communitygarden.org/pubs/starting.html

The most ideal individuals are those employed by local government, who are paid to coordinate such activities. No matter how idealistic a person may be, burn-out rates can be high. Retirees also make good candidates. It always is a good idea to have backup coordinators who can step in and pick up the slack.

Identifying a Site

A committee should consider a number of sites, if possible. Begin looking for sites at least six to eight months before planting. Available spots might include open-space properties, government lands, vacant lots, church or school properties, city parks, unused farmland, industrial parks, land trusts, apartment complex grounds or fairgrounds. City, county, state or federally owned properties are ideal, since there is little chance they will be sold. Check with appropriate government planning offices for available space. Participants must agree that the land will be used for the public good and maintained in an orderly fashion.

Private land sites should be identified and owners contacted to determine land availability. Be sure the owner has clear title to the land with no lien holders. Given the potential investment in improvements to the garden site, any lease agreement should be for at least three to four years. Check with city officials for any possible code restrictions.

Stay away from industrial sites that may be contaminated. Some lots where trash has been dumped may be contaminated with hazardous chemicals. Old parking lots may be compacted and require extensive renovating to improve soil drainage. The ideal site would be level with fertile, well-drained soil.

Stay away from lots surrounded by large trees. Roots and shading will hamper crop growth. An isolated tree, however, can provide shade for gardeners during the hot part of the day or at lunch. Trees used as windbreaks on the southwest corner of the project will help limit wind damage in the spring.

Bindweed and other perennial weeds also can be a nuisance. Sites should be scouted the previous fall to note potential perennial weed problems. Hoeing perennial weeds every week can be very discouraging.

Sites should have at least eight hours of full sunlight. Depending on access, fencing may be required to deter animals, vehicles and vandals. Gates may need to be locked for security.

A soil test in the fall will indicate nutrient deficiencies and any heavy metal problems that may be associated with industrial lots. Make sure the site has access to good quality water and has appropriate water rights. Some areas of the state may have water restrictions during the summer. This could be a problem for a community garden. Lots with independent wells and water rights may be more appropriate. It is important, however, that water-saving techniques, such as mulching and drip irrigation, be used to help conserve water. A water test should be conducted to determine water quality.

The landowners may require that the community gardeners obtain extra insurance to cover liability problems. Insurance can be a major problem. The policy should be reviewed by a lawyer.

The site also should include sufficient parking if participants or volunteers are commuting to the site. The site should be sufficiently large to accommodate a composting area, shed for tools and benches and tables to rest. The site must be accessible after working hours and on the weekends.

Identifying Sponsors and Funding Sources

Although some community gardens can be supported by membership fees, others require a sponsor, or an organization or individuals to support the garden financially or through donations of water, seed, plants, mulch, compost, tools, supplies or services. Some government and corporate sponsors may help with liability issues. Sponsors may include individuals, schools, churches, private businesses, foundations or city governments. Funding also may be obtained through various government and private grants. Signs erected in front of the garden can recognize sponsors.

Garden Organizational Structure

Garden organizational structures vary significantly. Some are informal, while others include advisory boards. Larger, more complicated gardens demand a fairly structured program so that each individual can participate and so the group as a whole functions efficiently. The structure should be kept as simple as possible and should be based on trust.

Things to be considered in the organizational structure include goals and objectives. What is the purpose? How are the leaders chosen and how will decisions be made? How is communal work done and who is responsible? How much will be charged for membership dues and how will the money be spent? What other fund-raising methods will be used?

Most simple community gardens can be managed by a list of guidelines and rules. When incorporating, formal bylaws must be developed to govern the organization's internal affairs. Bylaws cover the organization's goals, objectives and philosophy and establish its name and legal address. Membership categories are defined, including dues required and when they're to be paid. Bylaws also define when regular and special meetings are to be held, including annual meetings of the board of directors. It also includes officers, terms of office, their duties, special committees, and liability clauses. Bylaws also explain how disputes will be resolved.

Guidelines and Rules[3]

Most coordinators of and participants in successful community gardens agree that all participants should adhere to an agreed-upon set of guidelines and rules for the garden. Guidelines and individual responsibilities should be set up and agreed to before gardening begins. The rules should be simple and enforceable. The following is a list of some typical guidelines and rules:

- Registration for plots begins on February 15, with plot preference being given to past participants with one plot per participant. Unassigned plots will be allocated after May 15 on a first-come, first-served basis.
- The registration fee is $*growing season* for each plot and is due at registration.
- Plots and the surrounding paths around the plots will be kept free from weeds. Participants with weedy plots will be given a week's notice to clean up the area. Failure to clean up the plots will result in forfeiture of the plots and any future participation in the project.
- Dogs are not allowed except on leashes.
- Keep garden gates closed at all times.
- Do not leave your irrigation system unattended.
- Do not work alone in the garden, but on a buddy system.
- Plots and the surrounding paths will be kept free of trash and litter.
- Tall crops will not be planted in an area that will shade neighboring plots.
- Vining crops will not be allowed to spread into pathways or other neighboring plots.
- Pick only crops from your assigned plot.
- No pesticides or fertilizers will be used that could affect neighboring plots.
- One hour per week will be devoted to maintaining the community garden as a whole as determined by the project coordinator.
- Dispose of weeds and other plant residues in composting area.
- Supervise young children and keep them out of neighboring plots.
- Borrowed tools should be cleaned and returned to the storage shed.
- Cleanup deposits will be returned in the fall after plots are cleaned and inspected by the garden coordinator.

Application Form and Fees

At a minimum, the application form should include the participant's name, address, telephone numbers (day and night), along with other appropriate information. Fees should cover irrigation costs and other expenses not covered by sponsors or grants. Generally some fee is appropriate to get participants to take ownership of the project.

Vandalism Problems

Vandalism can be a major problem for many community gardens. Fences define the area and will keep out most dogs and motorcycles, but will not deter determined vandals. A sign letting the public know that the garden belongs to the neighborhood will help deter local vandals. Getting kids involved will help them take ownership of the project. Keep all ripe tomatoes and other fruit picked to deter temptation to steal. The coordinator should visit the project at least once or twice a day to check plots for vandalism and irrigation problems.

Problems with Neighbors

If the garden becomes an eyesore, complaints from neighbors may arise. Weeds should be controlled at all times. Flowers surrounding the garden will improve the aesthetic of the neighborhood and the overall environment. Sharing produce with the neighbors is also great for public relations.

Garden Design and Preparation

The first step is to clean the site and develop your design. Decide on the size of each plot and width and length of paths between plots. Determine where tool sheds, composting sites, rest areas and outdoor toilets will be located. The irrigation design should address whether there will be faucets at each plot, a common drip or sprinkler irrigation line, or a furrow irrigation system with an appropriate slope from the main irrigation ditch.

New sites probably should be worked up with a commercial tractor and tiller the first year to break up hardpans and improve drainage. Thereafter, a rototiller may be used to work up individual plots. In furrow-irrigated plots, a tractor with a lister, bed shaper and cultivators may continue to be used to maintain the furrows for irrigation.

Applying compost will help improve soil tilth. Be careful with the application rates of manure-based composts that may be high in salts. A soil sample can serve as the basis for a season-long fertility program.

After leveling, the appropriate irrigation system should be installed and plots staked out with appropriate pathways. Most plots vary from 12 by 12 ft (144 sq ft) to 25 by 30 ft (750 sq ft) in size, depending on the overall garden size and the number of participants. Nationally, the average size plot is about 700 sq ft and will supply a family of four with fresh vegetables all summer.[4]

Raised beds may be used in some areas where poor soils are a problem. Boards or bricks can be used to line beds. Beds can be filled with appropriate topsoil mixed with compost.

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[3]*City Farmer, 1997* (January 23), Canada's Office of Urban Agriculture, www.cityfarmers.org/gardenrules.html

[4]White, John. 2002. *Organizing a Community Garden.* Doña Ana County Extension Service. Las Cruces, New Mexico (Adapted from Texas A & M Extension Circular).

Mulching the pathways will help control most weeds and prevent mud problems. Sawdust or bark are excellent mulch materials. Pathways should be at least 3 ft wide to accommodate wheelbarrows and rototillers. Fences with locking gates and utility areas can then be developed. A shed that locks can be used to store tools. Shaded rest areas will help provide relief from the sun in the summer. Portable toilets also are a necessity. A first aid kit should be kept handy in case of accidents.

Mulching plots is encouraged to conserve water and reduce weed problems. Battery powered meters may be used on individual drip systems to automatically turn water on and off. This will help prevent individuals from flooding the garden or wasting water. In furrow irrigation systems, a schedule for irrigation should be developed to let participants know when plots will be too wet to work.

Most gardens are best managed as organic or pesticide-free gardens to prevent liability and philosophical problems between participants. Participants may wish to be assigned the same plot year after year, if they intend to follow a strictly organic program.

Participants should be encouraged to follow horticultural techniques that save room in the garden and don't shade or compete with other plots in the project. Vining crops should be trained on trellises and tomatoes on cages. "Bush" varieties of vining crops that use less space should be encouraged. Crops should be grown in succession—for example, radishes in spring followed by green beans in the summer—to produce more in one growing season.

Although raspberries or blackberries may be planted in individual plots or around the edges of the garden, make sure the roots are contained with a border of buried tin (at least 12 inches), aluminum or stout plastic. Do not plant fruit trees or asparagus in leased plots or other plots that may not be permanent.

The garden also should have a rainproof bulletin board to post messages and workdays or educational events. Workdays help take care of common problems faced by the garden community as a whole, including installing irrigation systems, controlling weeds in utility areas, building compost, working on fences, preparing the soil, or cleaning up in the fall to prepare for winter. Planting a cover crop/green manure crop like winter wheat, rye, oats, or barley in the fall on all plots as a community project will not only help encourage good soil tilth but also make the site aesthetically pleasing during the winter. Green manure crops should be incorporated into the soil the following spring at least one month before planting vegetable crops.

Publicity and Public Relations

Recruiting participants or volunteers can be done through signs, posters, radio and television spots and newspaper articles. It also is important that good relations be established between the community vegetable garden and the local business community. The business community is a great source for soliciting sponsors for the garden. Extra produce can be donated to local food banks, rescue missions and other charities as a way of giving back to the community.

Other Problems

Labor problems can be a major issue for community-supported vegetable gardens. Volunteers often have great intentions, but may not be consistent in their participation. Prisoners like DWI offenders come and go, and you may spend all of your time training new people to hoe or to distinguish weeds from crops. School gardens inherently have problems with school schedules. Warm-season crops planted in the spring may not be maintained in the summer. Relying on a custodian to maintain the garden during the summer is not realistic. Kids also may not be rewarded for their efforts, since crops are harvested in the summer.

School gardens are best limited to early spring gardens that are harvested before summer vacation. Another option is to get kids involved with a community garden run by adults that they can visit on field trips to plant, weed or harvest.

Educational Programs and Resources

Educational programs can be conducted periodically on horticultural and food preservation techniques by NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service, Master Gardeners, and other garden clubs. Publications also are available from the NMSU Extension Service on planting vegetable gardens and food preservation. Search online by topic at aces.nmsu.edu/pubs/. Seed and plants may be do-nated by local nurseries or other commercial outlets. Seed also is available from the America the Beautiful Fund.

Original author: George W. Dickerson, former Extension Horticulture Specialist