

Growing Community Gardens

a guide to farming food in Vancouver



Inside...

Working with people

Land matters

Tips to get growing





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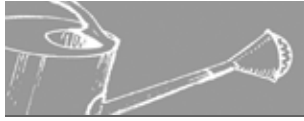
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Welcome to the garden!



Congratulations on taking the first step towards one of the most rewarding and challenging ways there are to grow food.

A community garden is not just a place to raise vegetables. A single site at different times may be a farm, a school, a playground, a temple, a gym, a stage, a sanctuary and a habitat for wildlife.

It may be a community itself, a model for the surrounding society and a living example of what dedicated people can achieve when they work together. Community gardens teach and celebrate values we cherish, including cooperation, volunteering, respect for diversity and ecological awareness.

This guide was written to help Vancouver residents start and manage gardens that will bring out the best in their own communities. Although it's based on decades of



collective experience in urban agriculture, it isn't the definitive or only approach. Like every person, every garden is unique. The tips offered here may be considered starting points for your own experiments. They're rooted in the following key beliefs, which you're welcome to transplant to your own garden:

1. Good projects reflect and improve local conditions.
2. Diversity adds strength.
3. A successful organization is built by empowered individuals.
4. The most important word in "community garden" is the first one.
5. The best community gardens are never finished.

Good luck and get growing!



Getting Started



With urban land in high demand, creating a community garden takes more than just seeds and shovels. The following will help you navigate the maze of plant politics.

1. Organize!

Who wants (or needs) a garden in your community? Would it benefit neighbours, youth, seniors, new immigrants, others? Get people talking early. Call a meeting and invite everyone. Don't forget building managers, tenants, community organizations, garden societies, local businesses, school reps. Community garden support may come from people far beyond those who end up as gardeners. The more people you have, the better your chances.

2. Got land?

You want a site with lots of sun, water access and healthy soil. Where to find it? VanMap (<http://vancouver.ca/VanMap/>) is a web-based map of the city with property lines, zoning areas and many more viewing options, including spiffy satellite pics.

If you discover your dream lot is on city land, congratulations, you (meaning we) already own it! Getting permission to tend it, however, will still involve some work.

If the site is on Park Board land, follow its procedures for starting a community garden (<http://vancouver.ca/parks/parks/comgardenpolicy.htm>). If on School Board land, liaise with the local school (a keen teacher or principal is key) to steer it through the VSB bureaucracy.

If on other City land. . . the municipal support system for community gardeners is currently in flux. For now,



try contacting the Green Streets program of the Engineering Department (604-873-7204 or greenstreets@vancouver.ca).

Also consider arrangements you might create on unused land owned or managed by other government agencies, private companies, Translink, BC Hydro, investors, non-profits, churches or. . . who knows?

3. Plan, plan, plan

A single devoted individual can do wonders, but community gardening really is a team effort. This is not the kind of challenge you want to tackle on your own.

Start a committee of core folks who share a dedication to make the project succeed. Everybody has something to contribute; you just have to discover what it is. Enlist people with diverse skills and experiences; the required tasks vary widely, and go well beyond simple planting and weeding.

Choose a group name and declare your “mission.” Consider teaming up with an existing organization or making your group official by registering with the province as a non-profit society.



Creating a society isn't a requirement to start a project, but the process is easy, costs under \$200, and lends your effort a legitimacy some funders require. If all the paperwork seems too bureaucratic for people who just want to grow food, remember that building a solid structure from the start will save you time later.

To register with the province as a society or association (legally they mean the same thing), you first must confirm that your name hasn't been taken by someone else. Start here for info on the process: (<http://www.fin.gov.bc.ca/registries/corppg/crsocieties.htm>).

Will you need liability insurance? A group rate is available by joining the BC Council of Garden Clubs for \$35 (604-929-5382). You'll then need to pay 80 cents per member plus a \$2 service charge to get the standard \$2 million liability package. You'll also be joining other garden groups throughout the province in common cause, and get regular bulletins mailed to you.

Why Ask Why?

Most people “get” community gardening right away, but you may need to convince others, including wary neighbours. Help them understand by explaining that community gardens can:

- boost community development
- teach organic practices
- conserve resources
- preserve green spaces
- reduce crime
- create economic opportunities
- bring neighbours together
- lower family budgets
- encourage self-reliance
- improve food security
- add cultural exchanges
- enhance civil society
- reduce “food miles”
- enhance biodiversity
- provide urban respite
- reduce stormwater runoff
- reintroduce the commons
- provide youth training



4. Asset check

What things will you need to start and run a garden?

First figure out what you already have. Make a list of the skills and resources you might use in your own community. You may be surprised to discover the level of expertise and access to materials among your own neighbours when it comes to horticulture, garden design, communications, finance, construction, organization building, fund-raising, etc.

Even those who aren't planning to join the garden may volunteer time or supplies to help a worthy group make the neighbourhood bloom.

5. Cash flow

Many gardens thrive on shoestring budgets, but expenses can pile up: fences and benches, tools and repairs, seeds and transplants, insurance and more.

Money may be raised in many ways: some gardens charge membership dues, others apply for grants or ask for donations of tools, seeds or money from agencies, local businesses or churches.

Get creative! Strategies could include seed and plant sales, harvest feasts, auctions of donated goods, benefits by local artists, and much more.

6. Mobilize!

Building and maintaining a site can involve a lot of physical work. Community groups and individual neighbours may help get a project going if you spread the word widely (and include refreshments). Regular work parties are a good habit to get into. Not only do they lighten the load by bringing many hands to a task, they help newcomers get into the group spirit.

7. Success by design

Community gardens are, unlike allotment gardens, more than a collection of plots. Consider including space for group activities, walkers and joggers, wildlife habitat, tool storage, compost bins, school field trips, picnickers and more.

Plant attractively around the edges and entrances of the site to promote goodwill with non-gardening neighbours and municipal authorities.



Wide, level paths and at least some raised planting beds signify that seniors and the less-mobile are welcome too. Remember, you're creating something to benefit not only the green-thumbs but the community itself.

8. The littlest gardeners

A kid-friendly place makes everyone happy (except a few grumps). Children are more interested in the gardening process than the size of the harvest. A separate area lets them explore at their own speed.

Earth Works

Compost: The Engineering Department's Green Streets Program (604-873-7204) or the Social Planning Department (604-873-7487) deliver free yard-trimmings compost (YTC) to community gardens once a year (or more for new gardens). Otherwise it's \$226.80 for an 11-cubic-metre truck load or \$447.30 for a 27-metre load. Save by buying directly from the city composting facility at 5400 72nd St. in Delta (604-940-3211) where it's \$10 per one-tonne pickup truck (about 1 cubic metre). YTC quality varies. Some loads are woody, and none have enough nutrients to be a complete growing medium, but do well as a soil amendment with organic fertilizer, composted manure, topsoil, etc.

Mulch: Wood chip deliveries can be had for free from private arborists (try directories) or the Park Board's Arboriculture Department. Contact: 604-257-8631 (south side) or 604-257-8573 (north side).

Seeds: Try organic, non-GMO seeds from West Coast Seeds (westcoastseeds.com), Saltspring Seeds (saltspringseeds.com) or Stellar Seeds (stellarseeds.com). Join the campaign to protect our future in food by saving/trading seeds through Seeds of Diversity Canada (www.seeds.ca).

9. Good ground rules

People are more likely to follow guidelines they've helped create. Ground rules help all gardeners understand their rights and responsibilities. Clear rules from the beginning prevent disputes later over dues, plot assignments, regular maintenance tasks and meeting responsibilities. Think of it as a code of behaviour that makes life easier for everyone.

10. Keep 'em talking

Good communication is vital if you hope to build a strong community garden organization.

Form a telephone tree; create an email list; start an internet chat group; install a rainproof bulletin board on site; have regular events, workshops and celebrations that draw people together. Community gardens are all about creating and strengthening communities, so remember to pass the word on.





Frequently Asked Questions



What is a community garden?

A community garden is a portion of land shared by people growing food or other plants. They are found in cities throughout the world, especially where residents without space of their own want to grow food and/or create a shared sense of community.

Is that the same as an allotment garden?

No, although the terms are often confused. An allotment garden is a sub-set of community gardening in which an agency (such as a city department) assigns plots for a seasonal fee while handling most of the organizational work. In this type, an individual may tend an allotted space without taking responsibility for others or the site overall.

Does Vancouver encourage community gardening?

In theory, yes, with City Council having unanimously approved a call to create 2,010 new plots in community

gardens by the year 2010. In practice, our approximately 1,000 community gardeners rank us considerably lower than cities with active municipal support such as Toronto (about 5,000 growers) and Montreal (about 10,000). Some residents here say the bureaucratic steps required to get a project up and going are too confusing or discouraging, particularly when the desired lot is on city land. City staff and urban agriculture supporters are working on a more effective approach to help anyone interested grow their own food.

How do I join a community garden?

To locate a garden near you, walk around your neighbourhood or try checking a list such as this one (but note that conditions are always changing and it's difficult for anyone to keep a comprehensive tally of all gardens and their present contacts: <http://cityfarmer.org/vanccomgard83.html#vanccomgard>). Visit a site and ask the gardeners there how to join. Many have a waiting list procedure which the garden coordinator should be able to explain. Patience may be in order: some waiting lists go back two years or more.



How do I start a community garden?

Keep reading, for one. But note that there's no easy answer to that question. Different people, different groups and different land managers make each case unique.

Whatever situation you find yourself in, don't get discouraged if the process sometimes seems futile. Try to keep things moving forward and celebrate small victories. Remember there's always greater strength in numbers. Continue supporting each other while building a solid organization. Eventually a strong, vibrant, dedicated and vocal community will get the garden it deserves.

How long will it take?

It all depends, on too many factors to even start a list. The Park Board advises residents to expect an 18-month process for projects on land it oversees. Other groups working with non-city land managers such as private corporations have



gone from their first meeting to groundbreaking in a few weeks or months.

What if I don't know how to grow a thing?

Then you're going to love community gardening. There's no better place to learn basic skills. Even old hands enjoy sharing and learning from each other, and know that every year is another chance to experiment.

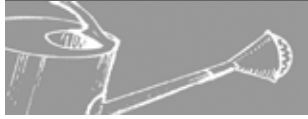
The Dirt on Delivery

It's cheaper to buy topsoil, manure, sand, compost and/or combinations in bulk rather than to haul bags from a garden store. Check directories or ads for companies/contractors which also deliver. One is Lawn Boy at 8655 Cambie, which charges \$29 per yard plus approximately \$50 for delivery (604-322-8771). Another is Fraser Richmond Soil in North Van and Richmond which charges \$35 per yard including delivery with a 10-yard-minimum order (604-924-0261).

But will 10 yards be enough?

People often underestimate the size of a cubic yard or cubic meter, only to be stunned by the mountain dumped on their front lawn. Figure that one yard is about 8-12 wheelbarrow loads.

To calculate how many yards you need, multiply length x width x depth, then divide by 27. For a 100-square-foot plot needing 4 inches of compost? $10 \text{ feet} \times 10 \text{ feet} \times 4 \text{ inches (0.3 feet)} \div 27 = 1.1 \text{ cubic yards.}$



Site Assessment

Choices may be limited when looking for unused land, but you needn't accept anything. A site assessment is a good way to evaluate a place's potential to be a garden.



The Four S's in Site Assessment

Sunlight: Most garden vegetables require full sun (at least 6 hours of direct light). This usually means good southern exposure, so if there are tall trees or large buildings along the south end of the site you may want to look elsewhere. However, some crops can be grown in as little as 3 or 4 hours of sun. If you can, observe the site in the morning and afternoon to determine whether or not it receives adequate sunlight. Remember, deciduous

trees viewed in the winter will create more shade come spring when their leaves emerge.

Shade: On a hot July afternoon, thirsty and exhausted gardeners will need somewhere shady to relax and enjoy the garden atmosphere. Look for trees as an excellent source of shade. Placing benches or café style tables and chairs underneath them creates a place where gardeners and community members can enjoy the garden surrounding in comfort.

Soil: Finding urban land with healthy soil can be a challenge. Often sites will be on disturbed land where the topsoil has been removed, leaving behind the layers of sand, gravel or clay deposited by the last Ice Age. Learning the recent history of the site by talking to neighbours or city staff can give you an idea of what you might find below ground.

Vancouver, with its frequent leaching rains, tends to have acidic and nutrient-poor soil. You can often get by with a simple strategy of regularly adding organic matter (natural fertilizers/compost/leaves) to create the best possible growing medium, though a soil fertility analysis may help you pinpoint specific nutrient deficiencies at your site.

Garden shops sell inexpensive kits to gauge basic nutrient and pH levels. Labs such as Pacific Soil Analysis Incorporated at 5-11720 Voyageur Way in Richmond (604-273-8226) can provide a more thorough fertility test for approximately \$50 a sample. They'll also provide recommendations based on what crop you want to grow. You can also assess important soil characteristics yourself such as: texture, structure, compaction, drainage and soil



depth. This can help you determine how much soil amendment, such as organic matter, you should add. Your goal is to provide the plants with a living, nutrient-rich, well-draining growing medium. The best food gardens start under ground with healthy soil.

To test for the presence of heavy metals or other contaminants (a justifiable concern on former industrial sites) bring samples to a professional lab. ALS Environmental at 1988 Triumph St. (604-253-4188) and Cantest at 4606 Canada Way in Burnaby (604-734-7276) can check for specific contaminants, charging about \$150-\$250 per sample.

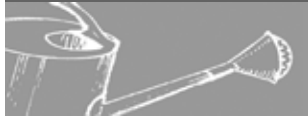
Slope: While flat land is preferable for a garden site (with optimal drainage and minimized erosion), it's also possible to create beautiful gardens on sloped land. Garden plots on hillsides can be terraced and held secure with wooden or stone frames, similar to raised beds, with switchback pathways. Some sites on hills too steep for regular recreation can be put to better use as community orchards.



A Few Sample Site Questions:

- Could nearby schools, community centres, co-ops or senior housing buildings provide partners?
- What's the neighborhood like? Does it change at night?
- Would gardeners feel safe being there alone?
- Will theft or vandalism be issues? Will fences be needed?
- Is the past land use a concern? Will testing for contaminants be needed?
- Is the site easy to reach by foot, bike, bus, car? Are traffic patterns likely to change?
- Is there room for deliveries, parking, group visits?
- Does the site get enough sun? Will the trees there now grow to shade plots later?
- Are there any cold or warm or wet “micro-climate” areas?
- Is the soil healthy or will it need amending? Does it drain well or will it need to be re-graded?
- Does it feel right? Is *this* the place we were meant to make bloom?





Permission to Grow



Securing land to grow food can be one of the hardest things about starting a community garden...or one of the easiest, if you look widely and think creatively.

Urban land use is a complex issue with many competing interests. As any realtor will tell you about land, they aren't making any more of it, which is why it's particularly important now to secure community-led green spaces that can be preserved for future generations.

There are plenty of areas where food could be grown, even in the busiest parts of the city. From empty lots, to unused street ends, to neglected park spaces, every neighbourhood has land that might better be gardened. Your first

task after locating a suitably sunny, well-drained and accessible spot is to figure out who manages it.

If the land is private, and you can locate the owner, ask whether neighbours may use it to grow food until other plans kick in. A group in the Downtown Eastside started one of the city's most successful C.S.A (community supported agriculture) farm projects with support from the owner of an empty lot. The growers agreed to get insurance and to leave if he decides to sell or build; until then both sides are pleased to know that a former wasteland (the guerrilla gardeners began by hauling away truckloads of trash) is now feeding dozens of people. Churches are also private entities which may have unused land and an interest in seeing the community tend it.

No matter where your potential Eden lies, dealing with its owners or managers can be wonderful, or horrible, or both if it turns into a long legalistic slog with many ups and downs. No matter who you work with in trying to secure land, be respectful but direct about what you want and why.

And don't forget that "no" is often just a step on the way to "yes." Some of the most successful gardens around today were built by folks who simply would not give up. Also note that many community gardens got their start on a somewhat less-than-official basis. You may want to consider the classic guerrilla gardeners' question: Is it better to ask for permission now or forgiveness later?





Project Planning



Community gardens are made so people can grow food, not attend more meetings. But good planning (yes, through meetings) can build a solid structure that makes everything run more smoothly.

Once a piece of land is secured, it's time to germinate ideas on just how to use it. A planning session in which all get to draw out or explain their thoughts is a good way to turn your dreams into reality. Some of the questions discussed in the first gathering could include:

What type of garden do we want to create? Will we rent plots to individuals

or work and share the land and food communally? Will space be set aside for social needs (food banks, etc.)? Will it have opportunities for seniors? Children? School groups? People in wheelchairs? Will the plots be in-ground or raised-bed boxes?

Questions such as these, as well as your goals and objectives (the way you reach those goals), are all brought to the table to guide the planning stage. With this information you can begin to draw up both the physical layout of the garden and its operational rules and regulations.

Plot sizes vary from garden to garden. A single plot can mean anything from 24 square feet (3'x8' or 1x3m) or less to 200 square feet (10'x20' or 3x6m) or more.

Smaller plots are less intimidating to newcomers and those unsure of how much time they'll have for upkeep. Plots no wider than 4' (1.2m) can be reached from either side, meaning you needn't step in and trample the soil, or if it's





a raised bed, have to climb up into to plant, weed and reap.

This is also the time to figure out where you water will come from – it's not much fun hooking up hoses on a hot day if your plots are more than a single hose-length away from the tap.

Once the physical elements have been mapped out, begin drafting garden rules and regulations to determine everything from gardening methods allowed (organic only) to establishing the date when individual plots must be worked at the beginning of each season (or else forfeited to someone on the waiting list). Among the organizational questions you may want to consider:

How will group decisions get made?

How much should membership and plot fees be? How will plot assignments and waiting lists be determined?

Will there be conditions for membership such as proximity to the site? Will participation be required to help with general work beyond the individual plots?

Work It Out

Volunteers are the co-creators of your collective dream, not free labour to be exploited. Some tips collected from various sources on how to encourage a strong volunteer program:

Ask what volunteers are interested in to match tasks with skills (or eagerness to learn). . . Let volunteers choose from a number of options. . . Have volunteers devise new ways to do things. . . Match new volunteers with experienced ones. . . Keep volunteers up to date on things. . . Remind them that their role is important through words, notes, certificates, awards, newsletter announcements. . . Involve volunteers in planning and setting policy. . . Finally, take it easy: building a good volunteer program takes time.

Each group will have its own take on how formal a system it wants to introduce from the start. Conflicts may be expected, at some point, but they don't have to be a draining experience if you have a structure and rules which everyone can easily understand.

The following two examples are taken from the membership forms gardeners sign when first paying for and getting assigned their plots. Having the gardeners sign on to the agreement may help settle an issue in their own minds later as to just what they've agreed to do.





Sample Rules

Sample Garden Rules #1

(with thanks to the Collingwood and Cedar Cottage community garden groups)

The Sunnyhood Community Gardens provide space for people to grow healthy, organic, affordable food. This is a place where people welcome each other, look out for each other's plots and learn from each other about garden techniques and skills. At Sunnyhood Community Gardens, we grow not only plants but also connections within our community.

As a SCG member, you agree:

To garden organically. The gardens are part of a diverse ecosystem and we use organic methods to encourage plant diversity, attract beneficial insects, and create conditions unfavorable to plant diseases. Inorganic pesticides are banned in Vancouver and are strictly prohibited at the gardens. Use



only natural fertilizers, never synthetic fertilizers. Be careful with so-called natural remedies, which can also be toxic. Environmentally-friendly options are available in most garden stores; always read the label and follow directions exactly. Observation and good soil fertility are your best allies against pests and diseases.

To attend at least one work party per month or the equivalent in alternate tasks. The garden survives only through the dedicated efforts of its volunteers. Remember: “many hands make light work.”

To help maintain the SCG grounds. Keep the area outside your plot weeded and trimmed. Paths should be kept level and clear to allow access to strollers, wheelchairs, etc. A well-tended area where vandalism is immediately reported sends the message that people here care -- the biggest deterrent to further destruction.

To maintain your plot. Annual garden membership must be renewed by March 1st. Plots must be worked by May 1st. Neglected plots will be reassigned without refund. Show consideration for others by planting only within your plotlines and allowing space for spreading crops. Don't grow tall plants where they will shade neighbouring plots.

To care for the common goods. Treat the shared tools with care. Clean off tools and wind up hoses before storing. Keep sheds and storage boxes locked except when removing or replacing tools, and never leave personal valuables unattended. Double-check before you leave the site to ensure that all tools have been locked away.

No smoking inside the gardens. Pets permitted on leash only.

Sample Garden Rules #2

(with thanks to Brian Emerson's "From Neglected Parcels to Community Gardens: A Handbook")

"Cukes and Kids" Community Garden Rules and Responsibilities



Each gardener must understand and agree to the following rules and responsibilities before gardening with Cukes and Kids Community Gardens:

Chemical fertilizers and pesticides are not allowed.

Garden fees are \$15.00 per plot, payable when gardener registers for plot.

Plots are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Gardeners are limited to one plot (approximately 10' X 10'). Gardeners may have more plots and may be put on a waiting list for extra plots, if extra plots are available by ____ (date) of the gardening season.

Disrespectful or abusive language, or destructive behavior can result in the immediate loss of all gardening privileges.

New gardeners must attend a Garden Orientation in the Spring. Returning gardeners are strongly encouraged to attend Spring Orientations as well.

Gardeners are responsible for weeding their plots by ____ (date), and clearing their plots at the end of each growing season (usually by ____).

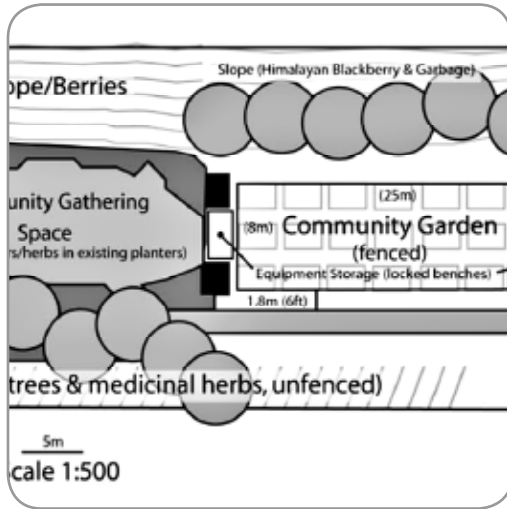
Gardeners are responsible for planting, cultivating and maintaining their own garden plots.

Gardeners are responsible for assisting with maintenance of common areas at each garden. Gardeners must contribute 4 hours on a monthly basis in the maintenance of common garden space.

Gardeners are responsible for keeping the weeds clear in their gardens and adjoining pathways.



Garden Design



Straight lines or curves? Single plots or shared spaces? Vegetables or fruit?

Designing a new community garden may at first seem overwhelming. But if your group is well run with meetings where all opinions are valued, the design stage can be one of the most exciting and fun parts of the whole process.

Design sessions vary in style from loose (friends around a kitchen table with some scrap paper and markers) to structured (a facilitator encourages suggestions which are drawn out on a white board or poster paper). Larger groups may benefit by dividing into smaller

sections to encourage ideas which are then brought back to the main group for discussion and approval.

Coloured markers and a lot of cheap paper help people draw out ideas on entrances, path location, plot size and arrangement, etc. Those with less confidence in their drawing ability may be teamed with the more artistic types to make sure all views get recorded. If it's a meeting on the site, bring a tape measure, stakes (or sushi shop chopsticks)

and a ball of colored yarn to mark out what the pieces might look like when put together.

Together the group should agree on a concept plan which includes the major areas and structures on the site (food plots, fruit orchard, berry patch, habitat area, tool shed, bench, compost bins, etc.). This can later be refined into a final site plan with as much detail as required. In some cases, a concept plan will be enough to get you digging and planting. A more detailed plan drawn to scale (maybe 1:20 or 1:50) can help communicate just what you want to others (such as volunteers who need to know how far apart to set the fence posts) and serve as a valuable reference for future improvements.



Among the things to consider when creating your site plan:

Circulation: How will people enter and move around the space? Will it be accessible to all (wheelchair users appreciate a firm surface and paths at least 1m wide).

Water: In May 2008 City Council agreed to provide community gardens water without charge. But getting the hook-up can still be costly. Hauling hoses is tiring work so try to get as many taps as possible where you're going to need them, now and in the future. Try to design water-wise features from the start such as rainwater harvesting and drip irrigation.

Plots: A 100-square-foot plot can supply a family of four with a healthy variety of crops, but some may prefer smaller (say for children or



newcomers) or larger plots to start. In-ground plots are the easiest to create. Building low wooden borders helps define and contain the plots, and can prevent a dragged hose from wiping out an entire row of seedlings. If you include at least some raised beds you'll open the opportunities for wheelchair users and the less bendable.

Common spaces: The best community gardens are about more than individual plots. Consider a play zone for kids, a picnic area with outdoor stove, a community orchard, a wild habitat area, etc.

Tool Shed or Box: While some community gardens require the gardeners to bring their own tools each time they work, most have either a toolbox or a tool shed for shared goods. It makes more sense than having everyone buy shovels and so on.

Compost Area: Although some individuals prefer their own mini-bin, most community gardens have a designated area for composting. Throughout the season there will be plant material that needs to be discarded. Composting on site is a free method of disposal and will save money on fertilizer and other soil amendments. Composting is also an integral component of sustainable gardening. Some community gardens have aspired to become completely sustainable (after some initial inputs) by growing cover crops and creating their own compost instead of buying nutrients from an outside source. Place your group compost in a convenient but not necessarily prominent area.

Restrooms: Gardeners will need access to a washroom at some point during their

activities. Is there one on site? Are there community centres, businesses or agencies nearby willing to offer their washrooms to gardeners? If not, can something be built? Can a temporary one be installed?

Don't forget: Seating... a shady area... a welcoming sign... a notice board... and what else? Visit other gardens (or community-led projects) for ideas on what to try in your site.

One last thing to keep in mind when designing in nature: flexibility is your friend. Conditions are always changing, so expect to embrace new ideas. Some gardens prove so popular their biggest challenge becomes how to expand.



Green Is Good

Green manuring is a great way to get plants to do your work for you. Farmers as far back as the ancient Greeks and Romans knew how helpful it was to occasionally grow beans and lupines not for the dinner plate but to feed the living soil itself. A green manure cover crop costs little, is easy to sow and adds to your soil's productivity. Some, like white and crimson clover, look good enough to double as ornamental flowers.

Try clover, fall rye, hairy vetch, oats or buckwheat. Winter covers are typically planted in August or early September, then dug into the soil two weeks before you plant your food crops in spring.



Beet Crime



Not all visitors will be content to simply ooh and ah at your horticultural feats. Thieves are a fact of life in many urban gardens, although not to the degree some newcomers fear. They probably do less damage than other pests such as slugs and aphids, although it's little solace when your favourite plant gets pinched.

There are ways to outwit the casual low-motivation thief. Consider some of the following:

- More people = fewer opportunities for crime. Try to minimize times when the gardens have no “eyes on the crops,” particularly near harvests. Schedule events, coordinate visits, get volunteers to keep watch. If your garden is in view of nearby homes, make sure the residents know who you are.
- Hide your prizes. Most thieves are opportunists. They won't dig through straw to uncover a squash. Yellow tomatoes are as tasty but less likely to tempt grabbers as red ones. Plant easy-to-grab desirable foods (such as raspberries) behind less enticing crops like parsnips.
- Agree on prevention measures before problems arise. Work out a common strategy to question suspicious

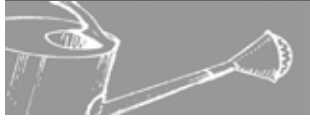
visitors. Thieves hate a place where people talk to them. Try, “Can I help you find the plot you’re looking for?” Or “Would you like to sign our waiting list to join?”

- Keep the area tidy. Fallen fruit, overripe vegetables and general disarray send a message that no one cares. A well-managed site is harder to steal from because the crime is obvious.
- Put up a sign: a reminder not to steal with a mention of who gardens here (volunteers) may deter those with at least some conscience. Be creative. Some gardeners sprinkle a harmless white powder such as flour along with a sign warning of some bizarre scientific test in progress.
- Grow more than you need in a variety of crops so you won’t lose a season’s bounty to one sack-toting thief. Finally, consider that gardening, like life, is about the journey not the goal. If you do have things taken, don’t let the thought ruin you. Invent a better scenario where the food somehow ends up in the stomachs of people who need it.

Shady Characters

Tall buildings, transit infrastructure and even trees are realities of the urban experience that may detract from your site by blocking sunlight. But that doesn’t mean you can’t still use these areas for compost bins or tool boxes or summer resting spots, or even to grow vegetables.

Leafy things to try in shady areas include lettuce, spinach, kale, chard, Oriental greens and others that, unlike tomatoes and eggplants, don’t require flowering into a fruit that must ripen in the sun. Also consider crops such as broccoli, beets, carrots and turnips that may grow slower for not having sun all day but will reward your patience with food eventually.



Interview

To Get One Going

A chat with Muggs Sigurgeirson of the Strathcona Community Gardens

So, how do you start a community garden?

Lots of people have asked me this over the years. I would say you need at least

three solid committed people. One person cannot do it. Well, one person can get things started. What happened here was two people went around putting up notices in the neighbourhood to hold a meeting at the community centre to start a community garden. And people came out. There was a clear demand.

Is there always a demand for this kind of thing?

That depends. If you're in a neighbourhood where everybody's living in a single family home and has a back yard, no, it's not going to work. It works where there's a high density of people and low availability of land. In that kind of population I think you will always find a core group of people who really want to garden. Then you have to have three people who are prepared to build an organization. You can't have a community garden without the infrastructure.

What do you mean by infrastructure?

You have to have people who are prepared to make signs, call people to meetings, come to meetings, open a bank account, keep track of the money, solicit donations in an organized way.

An organization.

Yup, a group with structure.

You can't just do it with you and your pals even though you're all really keen?

That's the thing. The overwhelming number of people just want to come and garden and get away from it all. The

difference in this garden from most community gardens is in the fact that people really believe in the ownership of it. Look at the P-Patch gardens in Seattle. We went down there to look at them, and we were shocked. On one hand it's absolutely fantastic you've got the municipal infrastructure that will pour money and resources and staffing into setting up and maintaining gardens for people, but people have no feeling of ownership or of building something.

Is that bad?

It's not bad, it's completely different. It's not what I call a community garden. It's an allotment garden, where an individual goes and grows their own thing and goes home. And they take no overall responsibility. And actually in Seattle each year there's a staff person who opens it up and you apply for a plot, you don't necessarily get your own plot, they just allot them out. There's no feeling that this is mine. Whereas if you maintain your own organization, then there is a community feeling of ownership and responsibility for that area.

So keep us walking through the steps. We put up the notices, we're at the meeting.

We actually met every two weeks, I think, to talk about the principles of the garden. Number one was that it would be organic. Number two was that it was community, it wouldn't just be allotment, there had to be space here for people who weren't actively gardening or people who didn't necessarily need a plot but had to have access to the community. Which we've honored and maintained all these years. We came up with five principles, but the first was organic. So what does organic mean? If somebody brings in slug bait, is that non-organic? We went through all those discussions.

Before you got to the details of the size of the plots or anything else?

Yup. Maybe it wouldn't unfold that way for other people but I think it saved us a lot of grief. Every so often a wave of new people come in and they want to garden the orchard or they want to garden the top area. I remember these two guys came in and they had fabulous plots and one was a landscape architect and they wanted to change the entire top area and turn it all into garden plots and open it up. We said, we have a design we've all agreed on, these are our principles, so you'd have to go through a whole process to change that. And it was too much trouble for them. I think having these principles saved us a lot. So then, we started pulling the community into it for support and resources.

You mean money?

Well, in the beginning it didn't mean much money. It meant getting places like Finning Tractor to donate a tractor for the day and the union to agree to provide a driver and a truck to bring it over here. A gardener had a partner





who was working there so she asked him. People did that who were good at it. It wasn't me, for sure, I wasn't good at getting donations at that level in those days. And them coming over and doing it. We organized the community to come out for coffee and 50 people, working with their bare hands, showed up to pick out all the rocks. Not only gardeners. Landlords from the Downtown Eastside, people who were so poor they didn't want to garden but were completely excited by the concept of the community building it. This was like the worst farmer's field, just full of rocks. So we spent the whole day just picking out rocks with our bare hands. We didn't even have money for gloves. And this was in February or March, not summer.

So now you've got the place and you're ready to plant.

We started but it was still a lot of work, mostly because of water. The Downtown Eastside Women's Center were growing potatoes in stacks of tires, but they had to pack buckets of water over from the park field house. The biggest turn-about in terms of developing things was when the Ray-Cam Community Centre gave us \$3,000 to

put the first water line in. That's when the whole place turned around.

Water was key.

It was. You've got to have three things. You've got to have people, you've got to have location, and you've got to have access to water. Once you have those three things, I think the garden can go in any which direction. That's the lesson. If you've got committed folks, and you've got a site, and you've got water, you'll have a community garden. One two three.

Winter Wonderfood

One of the great things about living in Vancouver is the fact that we can grow food year-round. Who wouldn't want fresh, organic greens to liven up a salad or some hearty root vegetables to spruce up a stew on a chilly January night?

The key to getting a good winter harvest is to plan ahead by planting in summer. Some crops, such as leeks and Brussels sprouts, may be started as early as spring. Many others including kale, broccoli, turnip and cabbage can be seeded directly in July-August. Fast-growers such as lettuce, spinach and radish can be tried at the end of the season with the hope that the fall onslaught of rain and cold won't come too early. If your plants are well on their way size-wise by the end of October, they'll probably be tough enough to last until you decide to harvest.

Providing protection from chilly winds and soggy cold ground can make a huge difference. Think of plastic covers, wind breaks, raised beds and "micro-climate" spots where plants can last.



Basic Tools



Good tools can mean the difference between work and pleasure. A quality tool treated with care may be considered a life-long investment into doing things the right way.

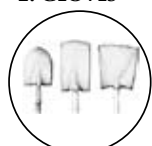
A valuable tool should be treated with respect, kept in optimal condition and well protected. A visibly strong lock on a solid shed may deter most thieves from even trying. A tool shed can be made out of anything from scavenged wood to natural building materials like cob, but must be sturdy. However you store things, every community garden needs certain tools. The following is a top ten list of things you might use to get started. If you can't afford to buy new, look for sales and/or donations of used goods. Well-made older models often outperform cheaper new ones.



1. TROWEL



2. GLOVES



3. SHOVELS



4. HOSE



5. RAKE

Trowel to dig in transplants and remove small, pesky weeds. Get a sturdy one that won't bend or break at the first rock. Gloves are essential to prevent blisters and protect you from thorny plants such as Himalayan blackberry. Shovels come in many types, each with a different purpose, and can't be beat for planting trees and large perennials, breaking ground, moving soil, and much more. Keep the cutting edge sharp with a sharpening stone to make digging surprisingly easier. A Hose and a proper water hookup are the only way to really keep your plants going through a hot summer (hauling buckets is noble but tiring work). As with most tools, the cheapest varieties may represent "false economy" if they soon need replacing. A Rake is good for gathering leaves to use as mulch and also to smooth out the soil surface for a seed bed. Secateurs or pruners are used to prune shrubs, clip-harvest greens and deadhead perennials. Add a simple belt holder and you'll always know where they are. Wheelbarrows take much of the burden of moving heavy objects such as soil and large plants. Digging Forks are good for loosening difficult soil and dividing perennials. Shears/Loppers are used to lop off branches too thick or too hard to reach using secateurs. A Hoe can keep weeds at bay, form planting rows and even turn a lawn into a garden bed. Again, sharpness counts!



6. SECATEURS



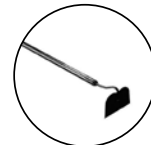
7. WHEELBARROW



8. DIGGING FORK



9. SHEARS/LOPPERS



10. HOE



Seed Planting

Start your seeds in a protected area (or indoors) to give your plants a leg up before they go out to take on the world. Timing is key, but some gardeners delight in pushing the climate boundaries.



Planting chart sample courtesy of West Coast Seeds. For the full version, check their informative (and free!) annual catalog: www.westcoastseeds.com

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
BEANS					—	—	—					
BEETS				—	—	—	—					
BROAD BEANS		—	—	—						—	—	
BROCCOLI		(seed inside-mar)		—	—	—						
CABBAGE				—	—	—						
CARROTS				—	—	—	—	—				
CELERY		(seed inside-feb)			—							
CILANTRO			⤿	—	—	—	—	—	⤿	(cover mar/sep)		
CUCUMBERS				(seed inside-may)	—							
GARLIC			—						—	—		
KALE			—	—	—	—	—					
LEEKs			(seed inside-feb/mar)	—	—	—						
LETTUCE			(seed inside-mar)	—	—	—	—	—	⤿	(cover sep)		
ONIONS				—								
ORIENTAL MIX			—	—	—		—	—				
PEAS		—	—	—	—	—	—	—				
SPINACH			⤿	—	—	—	—	—	—	⤿		
SQUASH			(seed inside-may)	—	—							
TOMATOES			(seed inside-mar/apr)		⤿	(transplant w/ cover-may)						



Tree Care



Trees are an asset to the urban environment many community gardeners overlook. Plan well and plant properly for a healthy start and life-long benefits.

Some things to consider before you plant a tree:

1) Objective - Why is this tree being planted? Do you want it to provide fruit, shade, habitat, seasonal color, act as a windbreak or screen, or all of the above?

2) Space - What is the size and location of the planting site? Does the space lend itself to a large, medium or small tree? Are there overhead or underground wires or utilities in the vicinity? Do you need to consider clearance for sidewalks or paths? Are there other trees in the area? Are there barriers to future root growth, such as building foundations?

3) Soil - What soil conditions do you have? Is the soil deep, fertile and well-drained, or is it shallow, compacted and infertile?

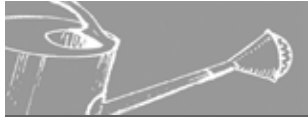
4) Maintenance - How much maintenance are you willing to provide? Do you have time to water, fertilize and prune the newly planted tree until it gets established? If it's a fruit tree, will you have the time, energy and knowledge to prune for fruit production? Will the fruit be picked before it falls?

5) Planting - Properly planted trees grow faster and healthier than those placed too deeply or in the wrong area. Allow enough room between the planting site and buildings, trees, power lines or other obstructions for the tree to “fill its space” when full grown.

Dig a hole as deep and 3-5 times the diameter of the root ball or container. Try to handle the tree by the root ball rather than the trunk or branches which may break, and keep the root ball and soil intact. Trim off any broken or damaged roots and branches. With pot-bound trees, tease out any girdling roots that may have encircled the root ball. Place the tree in the hole so that the natural root flare is above ground (planting too deeply, a common problem, can drown or suffocate the roots). Refilling with the same soil encourages root growth beyond the root ball, but compost can be added to the wider area to improve poor soil. Pack the soil in the hole by gently stamping it with your feet. Water the tree well, and plan to keep the roots from drying out (and killing the tree) before it can get established. Newly planted fruit trees usually benefit from being staked. Some on dwarfing root stock will need stakes for their entire lives.

Local experts, books and the internet are good sources for more information. The International Society of Arboriculture website explains how to plant trees: http://www.treesaregood.org/treecare/tree_planting.aspx





Local Resources

From sharing backyards with neighbours to connecting with a local farmer's market, help is available for anyone interested in growing food in Vancouver. Here's a short list to get you started:

City Farmer (www.cityfarmer.org)

Since 1978, City Farmer has supported urban agriculture in Vancouver and beyond.

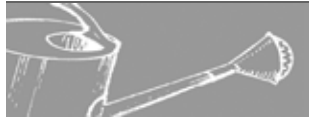
Evergreen (www.evergreen.ca)

Excellent workshop resources on school greening, urban stewardship and native plant landscaping.

Edible Garden Project (www.ediblegardenproject.com)

A north shore based network for growing, harvesting and sharing local food with those in need.





Some Links We Like

The American Community Gardening Association provides a voice for gardeners continent-wide as well as tips on starting a project. <http://www.communitygarden.org>

Plants For a Future is a resource centre for rare and unusual plants, particularly those which have edible, medicinal or other uses. <http://www.pfaf.org/index.php>

A community gardening resource kit for Aussie growers but the tips on garden planning and design will work here just as well. http://www.canh.asn.au/community_gardening/



World Hunger Year is an American non-profit advocating community-based solutions to poverty and hunger, including gardening advice in the section on Community Food Security: <http://www.worldhungeryear.org/fslc/>

The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens is a UK-based charity sponsoring programs and publications such as the one on the “true value” of urban agriculture: <http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/>

If more people had listened to J.J. Rodale on organic farming in the 1940s the world would be a better place today, but at least his group is still going strong. <http://www.rodaleinstitute.org/home>



Notes and Numbers

Use this space for workshop notes or to jot down numbers/links you may want later...

Care to try?

- Every \$1 spent on seed and soil can save \$2.50 in food purchases, according to the Free Range Network's "own grown economics."
- A 10'x10' plot can provide a family with 322 pounds of food, based on the Ecology Action group's "biointensive agriculture" program.
- Adults with a household member in a community garden were found three times more likely to eat fruits and vegetables at least five times a day in a study of 766 Michigan adults reported by the Society for Nutrition Education.
- The two biggest barriers to growing in Vancouver were lack of land (15% of respondents) and lack of knowledge (12%), according to a VCAN survey of 120 adults interested in community gardening.
- Now that you know the opportunities and how to work them... why wait? Grow ahead!



For more info (and an online version of this guidebook) click www.vcan.ca