

# Steps to Starting a Community Garden

## What is a Community Garden?

According to the American Community Gardening Association, community gardens are gardens that grow anything to benefit a community. At Topeka Common Ground, we define a community garden as a piece of land that is gardened by multiple households or a group of community members.

## Why Start a Community Garden?

Community gardens benefit their local communities in many ways. They bring healthy food and attractive green spaces to the local community. They may serve as a gathering point, bringing together members of the neighborhood for the shared goal of growing food. They often provide a source of fresh food to underserved populations. They provide exercise and physical activity for the garden participants. And, they provide a teaching and learning environment where participants share knowledge and learn together about growing food and horticulture skills. Research has shown that households where a family member is involved in a community garden consume more fruits and vegetables than those who do not participate.

## How to Get Started

### 1. Find Available Land

Before you can build a new garden, you will have to find and gain access to a suitable space for it. Look around in your community for open spaces or lots and consider possibilities. Look for spaces that receive plenty of sunlight, and would have access to a source of clean water for watering plants. Consider safety and security of the location. Avoid lots where soil may be contaminated with toxins due to previous industrial or business activities. Vacant lots may be a possibility, if you can identify the owner and gain their permission to use the space. You may be able to negotiate a nominal lease or rent the land for one or more garden seasons. Some churches or other community service organizations may have unused land available that they would make available to a community garden. Check local zoning laws and codes to be sure that your garden won't be in violation.

## 2. Engage Your Community – Get Commitment

Talk with your friends and neighbors to identify a small group of people who share your desire to start a community garden. It is important to have solid commitment from one or two people who agree to serve as coordinators and organizers, and at least another 3-5 people who want to share in the work of establishing the garden space and gardening there for at least the initial garden season.

## 3. Develop a Plan and Budget

- **Clarify the Purpose and Goals of the Garden** – What is your purpose? Are you growing food to be consumed in the households of garden participants, to share with underserved community members, to use in programming and meals for clients of your organization, or for other purposes? Is the purpose garden primarily to support educational programming?
- **Plan the Garden Space** - How large will the garden space(s) be? Will there be individual plots, or shared plots, or both? How will they be laid out? If individual plots will be included, how many will be available? How will the garden get access to water? In addition to providing growing space, consider options to make the garden more attractive and visually appealing. You may want to install benches or a picnic table in a shaded area (or a shade structure) where gardeners can rest. Storage sheds and composting bins may also be helpful.
- **Develop a budget and financing plan** - Creating new garden spaces usually involves some costs. Determine what will be needed, research costs (don't overlook free or donated resources!), and develop a budget. Decide how the costs will be covered – will garden participants chip in to split the costs, or are there grants or other community resources available to help? Will there be ongoing costs such as water bills, and how with the group pay for those? Will garden participants be asked to pay an annual garden “lease” fee to help offset costs?
- **Other issues** – What is the garden's philosophy in regard to the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers? Will the garden encourage organic or environmentally-friendly practices? If the use of chemical pesticides is allowed, how will over-spraying onto adjacent plots be avoided? Who will be responsible for mowing or weeding in plots and the shared garden paths and perimeters? How will that work be assigned and coordinated?
- **Develop Rules and put them in writing** - Having clear written guidance about how the garden will operate and the responsibilities of garden participants will help to ensure that all garden participants know what to expect when they sign up, and will help to avoid misunderstandings or conflict later.

## 4. Prep and Build the Site

Schedule work days and recruit garden participants and other community volunteers to help in preparing the garden space for planting. This may involve clearing and tilling the land, building or installing raised bed frames, hauling in soil or soil amendments, installing fencing to keep out animals, etc. You may want to install signage that identifies your garden, and (politely) tells passers-by whether or not it is permissible to pick produce from your garden.

## 5. Plant and Cultivate

Now that the hard work is done, the fun begins! Consult available resources to learn about what varieties of fruits and vegetables grow well in your locality, and when and how much to plant. Obtain seeds, seedlings and starts (some may be available for free from Topeka Common Ground!), and plant your garden space. Water and cultivate as the plants grow. Be sure to keep up with basic weeding and maintenance so that the garden is attractive and does not become viewed as a community eyesore.

## 6. Harvest and Share

It has been a long journey, and a lot of work, but finally the garden is producing and crops are ready to harvest! You may want to schedule a garden-to-table feast or some other group event to celebrate. If your harvest is abundant, consider sharing the bounty with a local food pantry or group(s) of underserved community members.

***Happy Gardening!*** *The mission of Topeka Common Ground is to encourage and support community gardening in Shawnee County, Kansas. We would love to hear from you with your questions, needs and suggestions.*

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