

Keys to Community Garden Success

Every community garden is as different as the gardeners that belong to them. There are some common traits that the most successful gardens share, despite their other differences. These are:

Establish good lines of communication among all participants

Everyone likes to feel that their voice matters, that what they say and think is acknowledged on an equal basis with everyone else. Good communication is the key to ensuring this. There are often many major decisions to be made in the development of a community garden, especially at the outset. It may sometimes seem easier for one or two people to make decisions for the group, but this usually backfires, especially at the beginning before everyone has had time to get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses.

A good garden coordinator will recognize this and give people the opportunity to express their opinions before decisions are made. Obviously there are some things that the coordinator can and should decide independently or why else have a coordinator. But it is better to err on the side of caution than to pre-empt discussion for the sake of (often imagined) expediency. In addition to regular group meetings, a notice board in the garden is a good way to keep everyone informed about important issues, as is a regular newsletter. And so that no one person is overburdened with the task of telephoning, it is best to set up a

telephone tree system.

Develop partnerships within the community

Involve as many like-minded groups and individuals in your project as possible. It is not necessary to be a gardener in order to enjoy and participate in a community garden. Create a “Friends of the Garden” membership category for those people who want to help the project but aren’t able, for whatever reason, to take a garden plot. Actively seek out local politicians and other community leaders, members of the media, health professionals, the landscape industry, anti-poverty activists, and anyone else that could help. The more people that feel a personal attachment to the project, the better.

The perfect garden coordinator

A good garden coordinator is all things to all people. She or he is dynamic, enthusiastic, inspiring, a diplomat, a veritable garden encyclopedia, tireless, devoted, able to deal with any problem with ease...and just about impossible to find. Since that’s the case, make sure that the candidates fully understand the scope of the job and that as many garden members as possible are involved in the selection process.

Don't rely on only one person

As important as a good coordinator is, it is equally important to have a good organizational team. The success of the project should not rest on any one person’s shoulders. If the garden is associated with a community center or other institution, the coordinator is often a staff member of that organization. But what happens when that person moves on to another position? Without the active involvement of a committed team, the entire project could go into a rapid nose-dive.

Start small

Especially in the first year it is always better to have a small success than a big failure. Taking on too much at the start of any project usually results in burn-out after only a short time. You can always expand in the years to come. Most people are very enthusiastic gardeners in the spring, when that heady combination of sunshine, warm temperatures and sweet smelling soil is too intoxicating to resist. By mid-summer that enthusiasm has waned considerably as the less than glamorous garden

chores, like weeding and deadheading, compete with swimming, baseball and other summer fun. Don't get too discouraged when this inevitably happens. Instead, create some sort of special event or activity that will draw the gardeners back to the garden and help them to recall the excitement they felt in May.

Choose your site well

Look for a site that is visible, safe, centrally located, in an area that will benefit from a community garden, has plenty of sun (at least 6 hours), good access, both by foot and for deliveries, and has the support of the neighbours. The area should be as flat as possible and should have good drainage (no wet spots). Make sure the location you've chosen has easy access to water. To cut down on pollution from cars, try to find a spot that isn't too close to a stop sign or traffic light or adjacent to a parking lot. Don't hide the garden away from view--vandals prefer not to be seen. The more people can see you, the safer the garden will be. Do a soil test for nutrients & heavy metals if the past uses of the land warrants it. (Call the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs for a list of labs and the simple procedures for taking a soil sample)

Keep the garden well maintained year round

Vegetable gardens often have the reputation of being less than attractive. This is usually the result of haphazard maintenance by the people rather than an aesthetic short-coming on the part of the plants. Don't give any would-be detractors ammunition against the garden. Let the gardeners know what is expected of them with a clearly defined, written set of garden by-laws. Keep the grass trimmed, common areas neat, the beds weeded (or better yet, mulched), pick up trash daily, locate the compost area out of sight as much as possible, plant flowers around the edges of the site as well as within the plots, and try to design the site with imagination—there is no rule that says a garden has to be laid out in perfect 10ft x20 ft rectangular plots.

Build a strong sense of community

Most community garden projects don't start out with this elusive quality already intact unless the group has come together before for other projects. Quite often most of the gardeners have never met before, or are the all too common kind of neighbours who say hello to each other but never really get beyond that. A community garden provides an excellent setting in which to get to know other people without many of the normal

barriers to communication that we, unfortunately, create. It's hard to develop respect for someone when you don't have the opportunity to get to know them. When people are working together for a common cause, enjoying the fresh air, with their hands in the soil and the beauty of nature all around, things like how much money they make and where their grandmother was born don't seem to matter as much as they did before.

When we can come together to create something with other people, especially something that adds beauty to our lives and helps us to feel that we are contributing something positive, a very special bond can begin to grow. And with careful nurturing it can blossom into that essential ingredient to human happiness: connection, a sense of belonging, a feeling of community.

Provide educational opportunities for the gardeners

Not all, or even most, of the participants will be knowledgeable gardeners when they join the garden. A wise coordinator will understand that a first time gardener's enthusiasm is linked to a successful harvest. That doesn't mean that the first year has to yield a record bumper crop, but it can be very demoralizing if nothing does well. Many novice gardeners will benefit from a bit of guidance from a more experienced gardener, either formally, as in a workshop, or informally, from the life-long gardener in a nearby plot.