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People+Plants is a multimedia series on how to build, maintain, and make the most of community gardens. For more titles and topics in the series, visit learningstore.uwex.edu.



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Community Gardens— Where people and plants come together

If you ask 10 people to describe a community garden, you will probably get 10 different answers. That's because the concept of a community garden often varies from person to person and community to community.

Some people will say a community garden is a grassy park where children play, surrounded by beds of beautiful flowers. Others will describe it as a field of subdivided plots where individuals and families work the soil to produce organic food. Still others will say it's an empty city lot that's been converted to a sustainable garden to beautify the neighborhood, or that it's simply a small raised bed at a community center that allows elderly gardeners to sit while tending the flowers.

Community gardens are all of these things, and more.

Which one is a community garden?

- A pantry garden growing food to distribute to families in need
- A youth garden at a school, church, or community center
- A rental plot garden on a city lot where neighbors can garden together to grow food for their families
- A courtyard garden at a correctional facility where youthful offenders grow vegetables and donate them to the local food bank
- A demonstration or teaching garden where gardening classes are held
- A volunteer garden devoted to therapeutic benefits for seniors, hospital patients, the incarcerated, or people with disabilities

The answer, of course, is that these are all community gardens. A community garden is any space that is used by a group of people to grow plants, whether for beauty, education, therapy, or food.



Whenever people and plants come together for individual and communal good, you have a community garden. A community garden is what the people involved make of it, what the community wants it to be. And the success and longevity of a garden is determined by who participates and how the garden is integrated into the community. Successful, enduring community gardens—sustainable gardens—require more than just growing plants and food; they require people growing together.

What are the benefits of a community garden?

The act of gardening is therapeutic in many ways. Working the soil, nurturing plant growth, harvesting delectable fruits, and even just viewing green space have all been shown to improve the health and mental well-being of those involved. When gardening and green space are combined with the spirit of a community working together, those benefits are enhanced.

A research project conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha found that 92% of gardeners surveyed agreed with the statement “I eat new kinds of food,” 84% agreed that “I feel more involved in this neighborhood,” 76% donate or give extra food to other people, and 77% agreed that “I spend more time with my family” (Bubinas 2011). Research continues to prove that gardeners make great neighbors, great neighbors build healthy communities, and healthy communities garden.

Overall well-being

Gardening remains the number one hobby in the United States for many good reasons, but perhaps the most important is that it improves the way people feel. An abundance of research has shown that people and plants grow well together. Plants thrive when people care for them, and in return, plants provide amazing therapeutic benefits to humans’ health. Studies present hard facts on decreased blood pressure, increased cognitive function, and an enhanced sense of well-being, but any gardener can tell you that even without the research to back it up.



Nutrition and health

Those who garden tend to eat better. A study of community gardeners in Cleveland, Ohio found that “community gardening contributes to a change in diet among ¾ of both new and continuing gardeners” (Blaine et al. 2010). A survey of community gardeners in southeastern Wisconsin found that those who participated in com-

munity gardens ate more than twice as many servings of vegetables per day as those who did not (Lackey 1998).

Gardening has a number of health benefits as well. Gardeners at community gardens in southeastern Wisconsin reported more than twice as many hours of physical activity per week as those who were not gardening (Lackey 1998). In Racine and Waukesha, 71% of community gardeners reported that they were more physically active because of their work in the garden (Bubinas 2011).

A recent study examining the medical records of more than 345,000 residents of the Netherlands found that those living in a predominantly green environment were significantly less likely to have an anxiety disorder than those living in an environment with less than 10% green space. The study also found links between amounts of green space and other health issues (Maas et al. 2009).

In 2010, a *Wall Street Journal* article summarized the findings of several U.S. research studies on the therapeutic value of gardening. From lowering and stabilizing heart rates in cardiac





patients to significantly increasing participants' self-rated health and happiness, working with plants was well documented as a beneficial activity (Chaker 2010).

Economics, food security, and local food

Community gardens can have a significant positive impact on local economics and food security. They also make fresh, locally grown produce available to more people. Some community gardeners sell their garden produce at local farmers' markets as a way to supplement their income. Others simply reduce their food costs by growing their own fruits and vegetables.

Pantry gardens run by volunteers are a great resource for supplying fresh, locally grown produce to local food banks, shelters, pantries, and meal preparation sites. Tailoring the selection of garden items to local needs and cultural tastes is one way community gardens can reduce food costs for families while supporting and celebrating different cultures.

Community wellness

Numerous studies have shown that communities benefit from community gardens. Sociological studies done in neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side have shown that communities where neighbors garden together have lower crime rates (Hurley 2004). Studies in large urban areas and smaller communities throughout the nation have shown that people who live in neighborhoods with community gardens are generally more satisfied than people in neighborhoods without them. And according to a report on community gardeners, "A profile of participants in an Extension urban community gardening program reveals that the program is successful in bringing together a large number of people from diverse income and age groups" (Blaine et al. 2010).

The American Community Gardening Association tracks gardens all over the United States and has found that the benefits to neighborhoods are far-reaching: They bring youth and adults together in a common bond and provide a place where neighbors, friends, and families can work together, creating memories that will last a lifetime.

Preserving green space, water, and wildlife

Carefully planned community gardens can help meet all sorts of conservation and preservation goals. In urban areas, the green space that community gardens provide reduces city heat from concrete and asphalt and reduces stormwater runoff.

Many communities struggle with water issues, and while it might seem that community gardens consume significant water resources, a well-designed community garden can actually conserve water. Community gardens can collect rainwater for use in the garden and reduce stormwater runoff by absorbing rainwater. The rainwater soaks into the ground and filters slowly through vegetation before entering the groundwater system.

Community gardens also introduce a diverse selection of plants into the environment, helping to support native wildlife such as birds, bees, and butterflies.

Volunteering and giving back

Community gardens enrich communities by offering an opportunity for community members to volunteer and give back to the community in a variety of ways. As more people retire and some find themselves looking for a meaningful purpose in their daily routine, community gardens offer a beautiful way to fill a day and do meaningful work. Community gardens also provide venues for teaching youth and adults to be more self-sufficient—a reward unto itself. Community gardeners grow flowers, fruits, and vegetables, but most importantly, gardeners grow communities.

Life and leadership skills

Community gardens come with many responsibilities and therefore offer many opportunities for youth and adults to learn valuable skills and lessons. Community gardeners can develop skills as simple as starting a tomato plant and as complicated as scheduling water usage and volunteer time.

Planning skills play an integral role, whether you are drawing the dimensions of your space or plotting the activities for the season. Watering and weeding are responsibilities that must be performed routinely if your goal is to successfully produce food. And study and teaching skills—developed through activities such as reading and learning about ways to manage pests, researching which plant types and cultivars will work best, and teaching that information to others—are skills that will last a lifetime.

Resources needed

If you think a community garden might be right for you, consider whether you have everything you need to grow a *sustainable* garden before you take the plunge.

First, determine whether your community is interested: Talk to your neighbors, your community group, and your local government to see whether they will support the effort. Consider the volunteer roles needed for the planning process, and schedule a meeting to discuss the vision for your community garden. Having a vision, a short-term plan, and long-term resources are all crucial to the ultimate success of your garden.

Consider these questions:

- Do you have a site? Do you know who owns it?
- Do you know the history of the site? Are there dry cleaners, gas stations, or other potential contaminants nearby?
- Is water available? If so, who will pay for the water?
- Who will manage the garden and make decisions on rules and guidelines?
- Will there be a fee associated with gardening?
- Who will assume liability for the garden?
- Do you have a horticulturist or garden educator to assist with planning, teaching, and developing community garden guidelines?

If you are ready to take the next step, consult the UW-Extension publication *Starting a Community Garden* for step-by-step instructions to translate your ambitions into action. (See the **Additional Resources** section for full details.)



Dr. Felton Earls of Harvard University conducted an extensive sociological study of Chicago neighborhoods and community gardens, which was summarized in a 2004 *New York Times* article. “Cities that sow community gardens, [Earls] said, may reap a harvest of not only kale and tomatoes, but safer neighborhoods and healthier children” (Hurley 2004). Dr. Earls’s research emphasizes that community gardens are about collective efficacy, or the betterment of a community and its members by the members themselves. When people come together to clean up a city lot and grow plants, their respect for each other—and themselves—grows also.

Done well, community gardening benefits individual gardeners and the community as a whole. Properly planned and maintained gardens beautify the area, promote healthy living, and foster community growth. At its heart, that’s what community gardening is all about: people building partnerships, sharing resources, and working toward a common good.

Additional resources

To find more titles and topics in the People + Plants series, including ***Starting a Community Garden*** (A3905-02), visit <http://learningstore.uwex.edu>.

For more information on community gardens and their benefits, see also these resources:

American Community Garden Association (ACGA)

www.communitygarden.org

A nonprofit of professionals, volunteers, and supporters of greening in urban and rural communities. Offers research, publications, and other resources.

Community Food Security Coalition (CFSC) www.foodsecurity.org

A coalition of diverse people and organizations working from local to international levels to build community food security. Includes links to community garden sites around the nation.

Food & Ecosystem Educational Demonstration Sites (FEEDS)

<http://feeds.uwex.edu/index.cfm>

This grant-funded project facilitated by UW-Extension links individuals involved in common ground gardening projects to share research and resources. The “Checklist for Getting Started” offers ideas for starting and maintaining a community garden.

Gardening Matters

www.gardeningmatters.org

Provides training and resources to help community gardeners establish successful and sustainable community gardens.

Urban Harvest

www.urbanharvest.org/index.html

Offers helpful resources on the many aspects of urban community gardening, including why community gardens are valuable and the details of budgeting.

UW-Extension Cooperative

Extension Horticulture Team

<http://hort.uwex.edu>

Provides information on gardening topics, including disease and insect identification. Includes links to hundreds of vegetable and fruit publications.

Yards to Gardens

www.y2g.org

Whether you have extra gardening space, tools, seeds, or seedlings, or whether you’re looking for a space to garden, Y2G makes it easy to share and find all things gardening.



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