Community Gardens

In a Nutshell

Community gardening is a group of people growing produce for their own consumption. Sometimes community gardens produce food for a local school or shelter. Community gardens are not the same as urban farms, which are usually larger and produce food for purchase and consumption by others.

The “How To”

Seed St. Louis has a map of community gardens in St. Louis, and you can find one that is close to you. Alternatively, you can start your own community garden.

Starting a Community Garden

Starting a community garden requires planning, but luckily there are already plenty of people who have started these gardens, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Muncipalities can encourage community gardens on publicly owned land where appropriate. There are a couple of different ways to go about establishing a community garden. Here are a few of the basics:

Find a group of willing participants

Participants may come from all kinds of people with common interests, a religious or faith based organization, a small school using the garden as an after school program or science class alternative, or a retirement community. When you invite residents to participate, give some information on the benefits of gardening, as well as the responsibilities.

Choose a site

Choose a site that is inexpensive. As these gardens typically do not produce any profit, if possible land should be LRA owned or community owned, or a privately owned option that is affordable, such as a backyard that operates under an agreement for use. The site often determines the group that will work in the garden. A city-owned vacant lot can be an eyesore, or it can become a means of bringing neighbors together for the common purpose of creating a garden.

Prepare and Develop the Site

When developing the site, plan for separate interests, crops, and groups. Some people may want to grow vegetables, and others may want fruit. Therefore, plan to divide plots. Dividing plots allows for more people to have a say in individual plots and can foster a diversity of vegetation grown. Have connection to a watering source. Access could be from a participating neighbor’s hose, a water spicket, or a watering can, which may work for very small plots. Another option is to have an irrigation system in place connected to a hose or an onsite water collector such as a rain barrel (see OneSTL’s Rain Barrel tool for more information).

Ask someone with a background in gardening, landscaping, or agriculture to help plan the garden space. They may have a better understanding of soil conditions, materials used for beds, and where to procure seeds, soil,

and gardening material. For example, some crops may need more sunlight than others; therefore planting under a large tree canopy would be unwise. Or they may be able to identify invasive plant species or bugs that pose threats to your crops.

Organize and Manage the Garden

When organizing the site, having a coordinator is very helpful. This coordinator may be the liaison between separate plot owners and may hold contact information. People may agree on having days to do work in the garden together as a community. Other people may want to visit gardens and have a leader speak about the garden. Duties may be subdivided, and it is helpful to have a schedule for watering, weeding, mulching, composting and vermicomposting. You can learn about the benefits of composting and vermicomposting in the OneSTL Toolkit.

Garden seasons vary. Fall does not mean the end of the growing season; there are vegetables still you can grow. However, if you are not going to grow plants in the fall, have a dormant plan for your garden.

It often helps to give the garden a name. Some gardens can take the name of the surrounding neighborhood or street, like the North Florissant Community Garden. Others can be more imaginative such as “Welcome to Farmville”.

Planning & Zoning

One of the big differences between community gardens and urban agriculture has to do with the ordinances governing them. Planning for Healthy Places, a project of Public Health Law & Policy, publishedEstablishing Land Use Protections for Community Gardens. This document has examples of land use polices/ordinances for the creation and preservation of community gardens. Dr. Jane Schukoske developed these nineteen best practices for successful community gardens.

Local Ordinances

Section 240.030 of Creve Coeur’s code of ordinances lists community garden member fees. These are fees for individuals wanting to participate in Creve Coeur’s city run community garden.

Dollars & Cents

Benefits of Community Gardens

- Less expensive than parkland areas (80% of cost is labor borne by the gardeners).
- Composting saves landfill space.
- Seen as an amenity and retreat from noise and commotion of urban environments and thus an attractor for people (i.e. "creative class").
- Increase values of nearby properties.
- Social values, such as aesthetics and connection with living things.
- Provide an area for recreation and exercise.
- Increase locally produced food.
- Increase consumption of fresh, local food, which reduces exposure to chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
- Provide access to nutritionally rich foods in areas where there may be little or no access.

- Allow people without land to produce their own food.
- Conservation of resources by reducing the hops in the commodity chain (i.e. reduction in transportation costs and packaging).
- Filter rainwater, decreasing pollution in the watershed.
- Reduce soil erosion and runoff.
- Restore oxygen to air and reduce pollution.
- Reduce the "heat island" effect experienced in inner cities.
- Serve as an outdoor classroom.
- Connect community members.
- Stress reduction and other health benefits.
- Crime reduction through a growing sense of community.
- Focal point for community organizing.

This blog, by the manager of a large community garden, reviews some of the issues/downsides to community gardens they have experienced. These include people not planting plants in a convenient place, or people taking fruit/vegetables they did not grow.

Measuring Success

Benefits of community gardens can be measued through the following:

- Food production and access
- Social engagement, community building, neighborhood revitalization
- Education
- Nutrition

Discover More

There are several websites available with information on the process of starting a community garden. University of Missouri Extension and University of Illinois Extension serve as a database for gardening information.

The American Community Gardening Association provides very detailed instructions and organizational concerns. From Neglected Parcels to Community Gardens: A Handbook explains why blighted vacant lots can make great places for gardens. City Girl Farming and Urban Farm Guys have good information on running community gardens including innovative techniques or gardening. The Texas A&M Agrilife Extension is a resource for teachers and students to develop gardens at school.

Horticultural information

- Cooperative Extension Service in your county
- Garden Clubs
- Horticultural Societies
- Garden Centers

Seeds

- America the Beautiful Fund
  725 15th St. NW, Suite 605,Dept. AG
  Washington D.C. 20005
  202-838-1649
- Garden Centers and Hardware Stores

Bedding Plants

- Local nurseries
- Vocational-Tech Horticulture Department
- High school horticulture classes
- Parks Department

Case Studies

Old North Restoration Group 13th Street Garden

Contact

Claire Wolff
MSW, Community Engagement Specialist
314-241-5031
claire@onesl.org

Address

2718 N. 13th Steet - St.Louis, MO 63106

Description

At the 13th Street Community Garden, we do a number of projects. The space is there to provide healthy food options to a community that lacks accessible grocery markets with fresh fruits and vegetables. The garden, which is just over half an acre in size, has 22 raised garden beds, each measuring 4'x8', which are available for community members to rent for a year at a economically sensitive price. To any of the gardeners who rent space, the garden coordinators provide access to tools, soil, seeds, and other resources, and all produce grown in the raised beds is for the renters to use as they please. In the center of the garden are 8 raised berms where food is planted directly in the soil; these crops are maintained by a core group of volunteers, and donated to the Old North Grocery Co-op or various local charities, or sold at the North City Farmers Market on Saturdays. Besides garden resources, the garden also hosts volunteer opportunities, youth activities, educational classes, and social gatherings.

Cost $0

Lessons Learned

Community engagement is a continual challenge, as typical communication outlets like email are not always available. So, throughout the lifespan of the project, all volunteers and staff have had to learn how to be flexible in getting and staying in touch with neighbors.

Urban Harvest STL

Contact

Mary Ostafi
Founding Director
314-810-6770
urbanharveststl@gmail.com

Description

The garden is fairly new. It was established in 2011, so this is only the second growing season. This is the first community garden located in downtown St. Louis. The garden is located on 1/8 of an acre that they lease. They built the garden from the ground up. It contains 20 4x10 raised garden beds in one half of the garden and the other half is devoted to farm rows. The garden uses composed soil.

There are 30 highly diverse downtown families who lease the plots and work the garden. In the plots, the families are allowed to grow whatever they like. However, all the families collaborate and work together on the communal farm rows.

Cost

All materials and utilities have been donated to the garden. The amount that the families pay to lease the plots covers the rest of the costs of running the garden.

Lessons Learned

It is important to have permanency in the location of the garden. They originally signed a three year lease, and since they have put so much work into the garden, they would like to stay in the same location, yet are now having to re-negotiate a longer lease. They recommend signing at least a 5 year lease to ensure that the gardens will stay and flourish in the same location.

The gardens are more about growing community than growing food. The garden has partnered with St. Patrick’s Center to donate food for use in their kitchen. The garden also partners with other charities to donate food. They like to invite non-members from the community to come and visit the garden to learn about food, food growing systems and to enjoy the green space the garden provides within the city.

They have found that you need to have people committed to the working entire garden and not just their own personal plots.

They also found that it was very helpful to visit existing community gardens. This way they could learn from other’s successes and use the other gardens as helpful resources.