

# Growing Closer

## by Growing Together



Community gardening allows novices and experts alike to grow food, save money, share their knowledge with others, and build community.

By Mary Whewell

Ask someone why they garden, and you are likely to get the same responses: I enjoy being outside; It helps me stay active; It saves me money at the grocery store. Gardeners always have the best things to say about gardening!

Research into the benefits of gardening is not scarce. Numerous studies have addressed the effects of gardening on one's wellbeing, mirroring the responses above. However, people are not the only beneficiaries; in *American Journal of Community Psychology*, issue 47, 2011, Heather Okvat and Alex Zautra showed that gardening can help stabilize climate change. It has been estimated that a 0.4 acre garden can offset approximately three years of the average American's carbon emissions. By consuming food grown in a nearby area, there is also a reduction in the amount of energy typically used to transport food.

After reading so much about the benefits of gardening, I began to ask myself why more people did not participate in the pastime. Most research focuses on why people garden, yet few articles discuss why people do not or how to change that behavior. To gain a better understanding on the subject, I sent out a survey, via email and social media sites, to learn people's reasons for not participating and what might encourage them to start. The survey was part of a project I was working on for one of my graduate classes. A total of sixty-nine individuals replied anonymously to a ten-question online survey.

Eighteen of the participants were non-gardeners and thus the focus of this study. Interestingly, two-thirds of the non-gardeners indicated an interest in gardening, but were not participating at the time of the study. When asked why they did not garden, they answered most frequently that they



thought gardens were hard to maintain and they did not know how to do it (responses can be seen in Table 1, to the right). When asked if there was anything that would motivate them to begin gardening, participants most frequently said they would garden if someone helped them to get started (responses can be seen in Table 2).

In my conversations with experienced gardeners, they always seem interested in sharing tips and telling stories about their gardens. From the results of the survey, non-gardeners just want some guidance. If you put these two things together, the solution seems obvious: These two groups need to be brought together.

You might be asking yourself how the two can be connected. How about community gardens? What better way to bring gardeners with experience and non-gardeners with interest but lack of know-how together than through pieces of land shared and cultivated by several different people. Of the participants in my survey, only twenty-five percent and seventeen percent of gardeners and non-gardeners, respectively, were not interested in community gardening. So there is a willingness to learn more about participating in a community garden.

The reasons to involve non-gardeners in a community garden are numerous. They get the help they need in learning about gardening and reap the health benefits that gardeners have experienced all along. Plus, more gardeners mean more environmental benefits. But why should someone who already gardens participate? What do they have to gain? First, they maintain the physical and mental benefits of gardening. They still get exercise and a place to release their creativity, but community gardening offers them the unique opportunity to share their knowledge, interest, and passions with others. It adds a social aspect which brings additional benefits, which I will describe later in this article.

In their study on gardening benefits, Heather Okvat and Alex Zautra showed that community gardens have positive effects on wellbeing, environ-

**Table 1. Reasons given for not gardening**

Reason	Number of Responses
Don't know anyone else gardening	1
Too expensive	5
Not enough space	5
Don't know how	7
Other *	8
Hard to maintain	9

\*Most of these responses dealt with not having enough time

**Table 2. Motivations to start gardening**

Motivation	Number of Responses
If it helped the environment	0
If it wasn't expensive	2
If I had a place to put it	3
Other *	4
If it helped me relax	5
If it saved me money	6
If I had someone to help me	6
If someone helped me start	10

\*Most of these responses dealt with having more free time

ment, and social groups. They also found that large community gardens can lead to job creation, training opportunities, and increases in property values. Green spaces, like community gardens, were shown to decrease crime reports in urban areas by Frances Kuo and William Sullivan in *Environment and Behavior* in 2001. Private gardens, like the ones in someone's backyard, have not been shown to have this type of impact on a community.

The solution seems clear. Help yourself, help others, help your community, and help your planet by starting a community garden. Whether you live in a city, suburb, or rural area, you can and will benefit from it. Check to see if you have a community garden in your area. If you do, consider joining it and encourage others to do the same. If there are no community gardens in your town, don't give up. That just presents you with the opportunity to start one! ▷





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## How to create a community garden

For those interested in starting a community garden, here are seven easy steps to help you get started.

1. Find interested people. Even if it is in the form of a small group, you will need help organizing and creating a community garden. It is a good idea to hold an initial meeting to discuss options. Advertise your initial meeting in local newspapers, on social media sites, with bulletins, or at a neighborhood gathering like a city council or homeowner's association meeting. If a large number of people are interested in the beginning stages, consider starting a planning committee with a small number of devoted members.

2. Find a site. Many people do not have the space at home to garden, so finding a shared space gives many non-gardeners a chance to participate. Future steps will depend on the location chosen. There are a lot of questions to ask about potential sites. How much sunlight does the area receive? Many vegetables require at least six hours of sunlight a day. This cannot be easily achieved in a plot between two large buildings, although suitable urban locations can be found. Is water easily accessible? Depending on your resources, you may have some flexibility here. For instance, it may be possible to purchase and install rain barrels if water is not available otherwise. Is the soil contaminated? Contact city officials to ask about the area you are interested in and look through historical property records. If possible, collect soil samples to analyze pH and organic content. Who owns the land? Other things to consider here include lease options and liability insurance.

3. Gather resources and sponsors. How do you plan to fund your community garden? First, consider the people who attended your informational meeting. What assets do they bring? If someone has a shed they can donate, that is one fewer thing you need. Perhaps someone owns a landscaping business and they can help get the plot ready. There may also be grants for which you could apply to aid in funding the start of a community garden. (In the U.S., a good place to start looking for grants is [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov).) Your planning committee should discuss whether or not participants will be charged for planting in the community garden. Some gardens charge annual membership dues. Others look for local businesses to sponsor the garden and pay for supplies.

4. Prepare the site. Gather community members to volunteer to help clean the plot. Rid the area of debris and trash. Toward the entrance of the community garden, consider planting a flower garden



for curb appeal. By naming your garden and placing a sign, you can mark it as a community space and attract other community members, including non-gardeners, to join you.

5. Organize the garden. This is the time to design the garden and gather supplies. How many plots will there be? Consider having a few raised beds, which are easier for members with limited mobility to work with. How will you make the pathways between the plots? Make sure that pathways are wheelchair accessible to ensure the garden is accessible for all community members. Will you have a storage shed? Compost bin? Rain barrels? How will the shed be secured? Will tools be kept on site for everyone to use? Purchasing gardening tools may be too expensive for some non-gardeners, preventing them from participating. Having some basic tools on site may allow them to get involved. This is also the time to discuss the possibility of including other areas within the garden, like a children's play area with its own garden, sand box, or swing set. Members may also like to have a shaded area with picnic tables or benches to rest.

6. Determine the rules. It is good to discuss the rules with a large group of people so you receive more input. The planning committee should have the final say. Keep in mind that if your community garden is sponsored by a larger entity, like a city, that entity may want to determine the ground rules. The rules should be written down and given to all new garden members. It is not a bad idea to post them on a permanent sign at the garden as well. There are several basic rules to discuss. How are the plots assigned and for how long? What happens if a member quits caring for their plot?

7. Garden with your community! Remember that you set out to start a community garden, not a backyard garden, so interact with the community. Be sure to encourage the members to talk with each other. Perhaps you can set up a weekly or monthly meeting. Share gardening tips with less experienced or novice gardeners. Trade food and recipes with each other. Take care of someone else's plot while

they are on vacation. Consider starting a group on a social media site or create an email list for easy communication. ▶

## Safe Soil

A study by researchers at Johns Hopkins University's Center for a Livable Future, which was reported earlier this year in the online academic journal *PLoS One*, notes that aside from the many benefits of community gardening, gardeners must be aware of the potential health risks from exposure to contaminants such as heavy metals and organic chemicals that may be present in urban soils.

The researchers' interviews with seventy gardeners from fifteen community gardens in Baltimore, Maryland revealed that gardeners may be unaware of these risks and how to manage them. They identified a range of factors, challenges, and needs relative to the potential soil contamination, including low levels of concern and inconsistent levels of knowledge about heavy metal and organic chemical contaminants, barriers to investigating a garden site's history and conducting soil tests, limited knowledge of best practices for reducing exposure, and a need for clear and concise information on how best to prevent and manage soil contamination. In some cases, soil tests are inadequate, not measuring carcinogenic contaminants like petrochemicals left behind by cars, or cleaning solvents, which might have seeped into the soil from an old laundromat, or asbestos left over from a building that was demolished on the site.

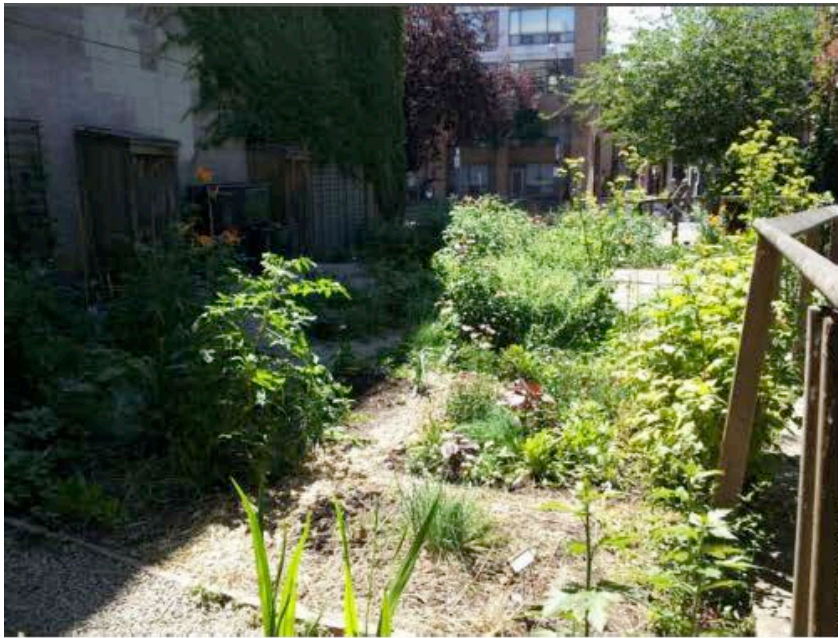
Key informants discussed various strategies for developing and disseminating educational materials to gardeners. For some challenges, such as barriers to conducting site history and soil tests, some informants recommended city-wide interventions that bypass the need for gardener knowledge altogether.

The researchers caution urban gardeners to learn as much as they can about the history of the plot of land in order to get some clues about what might be lurking in the soil. Then get the soil tested before deciding on the site for the community garden. Mulching with safe materials can help to prevent contaminants splashing onto crops during rain storms and watering. And the researchers suggest caution around washing produce and allowing children to play in a community garden where the soil might be contaminated.

Another consideration involves the materials used to build raised beds, which are increasingly popular in community gardens. Recycled wood from old construction sites or shipping pallets is cheap (or free) and might seem to be eco-friendly. But the wood could have been treated with chemicals. The researchers suggest avoiding wood altogether unless you know for sure its origin, and using stones to build raised beds instead.

~Editor





This forty-plot community garden in downtown Toronto has been growing strong since 1998.

## Case study

Sometimes it is most helpful to have a model, like the Alex Wilson Community Garden in Toronto, Canada. Seana Irvine, Lorraine Johnson, and Kim Peters examined this community garden as a case study and published their findings in *Local Environment*, Volume 4, Number 1, 1999. It all started when a group of people got together and decided they wanted to create a community garden in memory of their friend, Alex Wilson, who passed away in 1993. They started planning the garden in 1994.

When trying to locate a space for the garden, several areas were considered. Unfortunately for the founders, many of the sites became unavailable or were sold to developers. Eventually a site was located in a downtown neighborhood, and the owners of the land donated it to the City of Toronto with a conservation easement to guarantee that the land would always be used as a community garden. On one side of the garden stood a non-profit housing complex and on the other an organization that provided food and safety to homeless people.

Planning the design of the garden included many people. The company that originally donated the land held a competition to solicit designs for the garden from the community. The City of Toronto Parks

and Recreation Department also got involved in the planning to make sure the garden would be sustainable. All of the planners decided they wanted the Alex Wilson Community Garden to be a place that met the needs of low-income residents while promoting the natural history of the landscape of the area. They wanted to honor the garden's namesake's interest in creating an important urban space. To accomplish this, they ultimately selected a design that featured three elements of the landscape of Toronto: lakeshore, agricultural, and woodland landscapes. The planners decided to use only native plant species. The lakeshore landscape was placed in the front of the garden to make

sure the view of the garden was not blocked from people passing on the street. The woodland landscape was placed in the rear of the garden and assisted in buffering unwanted sounds from the streets behind.

Two workshops were held in the community to ensure that input was received from community members in addition to the landscapers, environmentalists, and garden specialists. The garden was advertised by flyers placed in local businesses. The planning committee wanted the local residents to have a sense of pride in the garden, as they would be the ones helping to keep it clear of debris and graffiti. Based upon the discussion at the workshops, the planners decided that half of the plots would be given to social service agencies to provide not only food growing opportunities to groups that would not otherwise have them, but also a chance to be in a naturalized area in an otherwise compact urban environment.

The Alex Wilson Community Garden had forty plots, twenty of which were given to social service agencies, when it opened in June of 1998. Due to the generosity of the community volunteers and the original owner of the land, the City did not have to provide much funding for the project. Once the



garden was established, it was important to the founders and the City to monitor the ecological and social impacts on the neighborhood. To do this, they started to keep a community garden journal, which recorded the activities and results of each participant's individual efforts. The City was negotiated that the upkeep of the garden would fall to a non-profit organization made up of both community members and city representatives.

According to the Toronto Community Garden Network this two thousand square foot community garden is still operating successfully. Due to its location between buildings, it has not grown in size and still features forty plots. The garden is described as being organic and diverse, with each year bringing different plants and flowers.

## Conclusion

While creating a community garden may seem almost impossible, examples like the Alex Wilson Community Garden help illustrate that it isn't. Creating a community garden is a commitment that takes a lot of hard work, but the benefits that you and your community will experience are worth it. You can bring your neighbors together and create strong community bonds. You can help the environment by reducing carbon emissions. You can help your city by creating beautiful green spaces and potentially reducing crime.

Community gardens are a growing trend around the world and there is reason for that. Join the thousands of communities who are already reaping the benefits of community gardening. Do not let your town or yourself miss out on the opportunity. Start a community garden today!

*Mary Whewell is a graduate student at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio in the Advanced Inquiry Program through Project Dragonfly. She is pursuing her Master of Arts in Zoology with a focus on urban areas. She would like to thank everyone who helped her throughout the project. Data presented in this article was approved by Miami University's Institutional Review Board (Reference Number 01007e).*

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## Community Garden Basics

1. Get a group of interested people to help you.
2. Find a good location.
3. Gather resources to fund the community garden.
4. Get the site ready.
5. Organize and design the garden.
6. Determine the rules for all participants.
7. Start gardening! Be sure to help others and stay connected through communication.
8. Consult the Internet for a wealth of information about how to start and manage a community garden, and for locating existing community gardens in your area, either to tour as inspiration or to join. Many cities have networks of community gardens that will share information, resources, and inspiration.



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## Learn More

*Community Gardening* (Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guide) by Elizabeth Tehl Peters, Ellen Kirby, editors (Brooklyn Botanic Garden, 2008)

*Growing a Garden City* by Jeremy N. Smith (Skyhorse Publishing, 2010)

*Greening Cities, Growing Communities* (Land and Community Design Case Studies) by Jeffrey Hou (University of Washington Press, 2009)

*City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* by Laura J. Lawson (University of California Press, 2005)