

Starting a Community Garden on School Grounds

Why make your school garden a community garden? Such partnerships enrich academic learning, nurture relationships, and create a positive neighborhood environment that enhances students' lives outside of school.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY GARDEN?

A community garden is a garden that is planned, planted, maintained and sustained by individuals within a community. The "community" may be defined by physical location, such as a neighborhood or a city, or as individuals linked by a common organization or cause, such as a church or food bank.

Community gardens come in all shapes and sizes. They can be as small as a raised bed in front of a town hall or library or as large as a couple of acres outside of town. They may be located on empty lots, on land owned by nonprofits or government agencies, or acreage owned collectively by the gardeners. In some community gardens, each gardener has his/her own plot to maintain; in others, gardeners work cooperatively on group plots and then share in the harvest; some offer both options.

THE BENEFITS

Individuals come together to work towards a common goal and create a focus on an activity with positive outcomes. These include:

- **Beautification** – This makes the community a more pleasant and relaxing place to live in and improves the value of surrounding real estate.
- **Reduced crime** – Research shows that the presence of community gardens result in decreased vandalism, littering, and crime.
- **Food security** – Community gardens can increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables - especially important in areas with limited access to grocery stores and farmers' markets.
- **Environmental improvements** – In urban areas, gardens add to community green space, which can reduce stormwater runoff and provides habitat for pollinators and other wildlife.
- **Economic benefits** – Community gardeners can supplement their incomes by selling produce from their plots.
- **Improved health** – Gardening has been shown to contribute to participants' mental and physical health.

COMMUNITY GARDENS ON SCHOOL GROUNDS

Schools are often physical and logistical centers in communities. The difference between a school garden and a school-based community garden is that community members are more than just school volunteers: They're actively engaged in the organization, planning, decision making, and day-to-day maintenance of the garden. Beyond the benefits listed above for school-based community gardens, you'll also have:

- **A broader support network** – More people mean more networking connections especially important when you're seeking funding and donations of supplies.
- **Many hands** – There will be more people to maintain the garden - a big help when school is out of session.
- **Intergenerational connections** – Through positive interactions, adults and kids develop mutual respect.
- **Security** – More eyes on the garden, especially when school is closed, decreases the likelihood of theft and vandalism.
- **Parental involvement** – The community garden is a place to spend family time. It also gives parents who aren't comfortable or available for volunteering in the classroom or coaching sports another option for getting involved in their children's education.

GETTING STARTED

1. **Get administration permission** – There can be a number of challenges to starting a community garden on school grounds. Are individuals allowed to be on grounds after hours? Are gardens accessible? Is there water available? Is safety a concern? Your first step should be to find out your school district's policies on use of school grounds and have your idea approved by administrators.
2. **Engage your community** – Schedule brainstorming sessions, offering multiple times and dates to attract individuals with different schedules. Advertise meetings at local restaurants, businesses, and in newspapers. Send notes home with students and e-mail appropriate contacts. Ask local organizations to include an announcement in their newsletters. Get the word out as widely as possible. These initial meetings can help you gauge community interest. Does your community want a garden? Is there enough interest to begin a garden and keep it going? How should it be organized? What would you want to plant?
3. **Organize your group** – Dream big as a group, but also elect a smaller committee to be responsible for guiding the project. Members must be willing to take on specific responsibilities and share the load because planning a community garden is too much for one person. It's a good idea to have at least 10 families initially who are committed to your project for successful implementation and to ensure sustainability. This planning committee can later transition into a body responsible for overseeing the garden and keeping it running.