how to set up a community garden

Alice Cutler and Kim Bryan

This guide is for anyone, anywhere who has walked past a derelict bit of land or has seen an empty allotment and imagined ... what if it were full of life and activity? Planting a garden is a lot about dreaming, visioning and creating. It can also be a lot of work; sometimes things don’t grow, someone pulls out the carrots or slugs eat all the cabbages. But when things do grow and you can eat the results, seeing places transformed is amazingly rewarding.

Community gardens are small plots of land used for growing food which are organised along collective lines, usually for the benefit of the community. They have a huge range of potentially beneficial functions. They can:

- Provide fresh, organic vegetables, fruits and herbs on your doorstep (or down the road) offering health, environmental and social benefits.
- Bring people together to work on something which teaches useful skills, keeps people fit and healthy, and puts them back in touch with natural cycles and seasons.
- Be a positive, practical demonstration of more sustainable living and ‘doing it ourselves’.
- Turn around abandoned land and create a beautiful space which increases pride in the neighbourhood.
- Provide a home for birds, insects, newts, frogs and other wildlife as well as a space for humans to enjoy them.
- Lead to increased environmental awareness.
- Benefit people with learning difficulties, the elderly or people with behavioural problems through therapeutic work, positive activities and sensory gardens.
- Preserve local varieties and biodiversity.
- Provide spaces for kids, workshops for arts and crafts, bike repairs, social events or just a nice space to sit and chat.
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**setting up a community garden**

There are lots of ways to locate potential plots: speak to and visit existing garden projects, the allotment or green spaces officer at the council or check out the land registry to find out if there are any abandoned bits of land. There are many ‘squatted’ community gardens where disused land is transformed into an urban oasis. In Glasgow, the Cre8 garden is situated in the way of a proposed motorway development and is a positive, visible community based protest. Gardens can take a few years to establish themselves and many choose plots with longevity in mind. Check out the community garden and allotment resources list at the end of this chapter for details of support and potential funding sources.

**Dreaming and scheming**

A community garden means making lots of collective decisions, so establishing how you will organise is important. As well as deciding what you want to grow (vegetables, flowers, fruit trees) you also need to think about what your main aims are (to produce food, educational, a calm place for people to relax) and who the garden is for. Agree

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**Box 10.1 Moulsecoomb Forest Garden Community Food Project, Brighton**

'We started in 1994, and were rent free for the first year because the plot had been derelict for 20 years. We began by clearing the area and digging ditches to stop the soil being washed away as it's a very steep plot, constantly adding compost and manure to try and improve the land. Over time we started regular 'open to everyone, no gardening experience necessary workdays,' and became a charity - putting on regular events. Now there are seven plots, organic gardening, forest gardening, and an outlawed vegetable garden where we grow weird and wonderful heritage varieties not on the national seed list such as the Cherokee Trail of Tears, a French climbing bean. We have left areas open for wildlife, picnics and baking potatoes. We identify all plants that we weed and have found that nearly 95 per cent of plants have some use for us, one meal we had recently contained 26 different types of plant' (Warren Carter, Seedy Business).
on whether all or only some of the produce and tools will be shared as all these decisions affect your design. Come up with a name and think of the things you will need to create the garden (funding, materials to build with, structures) and divide up tasks and responsibilities. Consider logistics such as how can people contact the group, how much money you have got, how much you will need and who will look after the finances.

Ways of getting people involved
Once a garden exists, local residents are likely to stop and ask what it’s all about, but in order to engage with people open days are great ways to entice people.

- Food: Invite people to a picnic or barbecue to be held on the land. It’s a great way to meet people, use and appreciate the land and build a community sense.
- Open to all ‘no experience necessary’ work days: There will be lots of work clearing overgrown brambles or rubbish, preparing the beds, planting seeds, building sheds, setting up watering systems and a whole host more. Work days are a great way to share skills and get a lot done. Also, try non-work days, where people can nose about without feeling obliged to grab a shovel, such as bug hunts for kids, Halloween parties, etc.
- Give out excess produce: When there is a bumper crop of fresh organic vegetable sharing any excess with people who live nearby is a good way of letting them see what you are doing and getting them on side!

Up until recently, back garden vegetable patches and allotments were very common, and someone who has had 50 years experience growing vegetables can be a gold mine of information. It’s worth approaching people that have lived in the area for a while. They might know what the land was used for, soil type, local weather and what grows well there.

Design ideas
One of the keys to success with gardening is knowing the lay of the land, weather, soil acidity and having a design that makes sense to that place – it’s important to take the time to do a land observation. The following is a basic design workshop which is a good way to create a collective vision of what you want to do in a few hours. It could be expanded to fill a whole day or a smaller group could expand on the plans. The designs could be displayed in a public place for comments and to get more people interested in the project.
Box 10.2 Design Workshop for Community Garden

1. Introduce the idea and share ideas about all the benefits of a community garden.

2. Ideastorm the things people would like to see in the garden such as: vegetable patch, sensory garden, wildlife areas/pond, leisure/barbecue area, comfrey/nettle/wildflower patch, kids area, workshop area, seating/shaded area, shed/polytunnel/greenhouse/indoor area for bad weather, security hedges, raised beds so that elderly and disabled people can also participate in the garden.

3. A design tool frequently used by organic and permaculture gardeners known as OBREDIM helps to plan the design. It stands for Observations, Boundaries, Resources, Evaluation, Design, Implementation and Maintenance.

Observations. This stage is potentially endless as there will always be things changing. In small groups fill in an observation sheet looking for the following:

- Access to the land
- Plants already growing - this can help you work out loads of things about the land from soil quality and type, humidity, etc.
- Any signs of wildlife present
- Sun and prevailing wind direction
- Water supply and possible water collection points
- Shaded areas from buildings/trees
- Slopes and rough/smooth/rocky areas
- Wet/dry/swampy areas
- Signs of contamination/nearby roads.

Pool the information that everyone has found on to a large, rough map of the site.

Boundaries. What boundaries are there to the land, both physically (waterways, hedges, trees, existing structures, slopes) and more generally (financial, opinions of people nearby, etc.).
Mulching

Covering the land you want to grow with mulch is an excellent way to start off a community garden – it’s not technical but it has immediate benefits and gets people thinking about soil, water, light and bugs. Many materials can be reused as mulch such as straw, chipped bark, stable sweepings, lawn clippings, sawdust, newspapers, cardboard, leaf mould, seaweed, pine needles, nutshells, clothing, stones, old carpet and roofing underfelt. Mulching has many functions:

- Prevents weeds from growing as there is no light
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- Keeps the soil at a more constant temperature
- Prevents water from evaporating and keeps the soil moist (i.e. less watering)
- Prevents vital minerals from being zapped by strong sun
- Improves soils (biodegradable mulches) when breaks down
- Defines areas that are to be planted and pathways.

Start mulching by laying down a layer of wet newspapers and then placing material on top of it to a depth of 6 inches. Make sure that all the existing vegetation is covered. When the mulch is in place, you are ready to sow by tearing a hole in the bottom layer of newspaper, adding a handful of ripe compost, and planting the seed or seedling in the small mound. When the mulch breaks down it can be dug into the soil and helps improve soil quality. Clover, allfalfa or black plastic are also commonly used as mulch.

**Crop rotation**
This is the practice of planting crops in a different plot each year. There are a number of reasons to do this: it prevents diseases building up in the soil, controls weeds

Figure 10.1  Design for a community garden

Source: Alice Cutler and Kim Bryan.
by regularly changing their growing conditions and prevents the soil becoming exhausted.

Tiered growing

Often we think about gardening taking place on the ground but by being a bit creative it's possible to grow things all over the place. Especially in smaller gardens tiered plants look great as well as maximising space. One well known example is ‘the three sisters’ (corn, squashes and beans) which all grow really well together. Plant the corn and beans first and let them establish themselves, and after around three weeks plant out the squash. The corn grows up to about 2 metres, the beans wind themselves around the maize as they need to climb and the squashes grow on the ground. It's a perfect relationship.
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**Potato tyres**

Take an old car tyre, fill it with a nice healthy soil and plant a couple of potatoes that have seeded. When you see green leaves appearing, place another car tyre on top of the first one and half fill that with soil. As soon as green leaves appear again, fill the rest of the tyre. When green leaves appear, place another car tyre on top of the first two, and so on. All being well, when the white flowers die back on the plant (normally 5 car tyres high) you should have a bumper crop of potatoes. The tyres can also be painted to make interesting garden sculptures.

**Archways**

Climbers can be trained along willow rods of equal lengths formed into an archway. Cucumbers, beans, and tomatoes also like growing up walls, sheds, fences and trees. Train the plant up the willow and during the summer you will have created a shady, cool archway.

**Companion planting**

This is the practice of planting species in close proximity to each other so that they benefit each other. It works for several reasons; some plants are more attractive to pests than others and ‘trap’ insects stopping them from eating other more needed or useful crops. Plants such as peas, beans and clover keep nitrogen in the soil which other plants need to grow. Other plants exude chemicals that suppress or repel pests and protect neighbouring plants. Tall-growing, sun-loving plants may share space with lower-growing, shade-tolerant species, resulting in higher total yields from the land. They can also provide a windbreak for more vulnerable species. Companion planting works because it encourages diversity. The more you mix crops and varieties the less chance you have of losing all your crop. For example, the cabbage family is well companioned by aromatic herbs, celery, beets, onion family, chamomile, spinach and chard while tomatoes grow well when planted near nasturtium, marigold, asparagus, carrot, parsley and cucumber.

**Making simple garden compost**

Composting kitchen waste used to be commonplace and is a really important way to cut emissions of methane from landfill sites. Even if people don’t have time to work in the garden, many would be happy to see their vegetable peel turned into a lovely rich hummus.

You need a site that’s at least 1 m by 1 m and a container (see below). Start by spreading a layer that is several inches thick of coarse, dry brown stuff, such as leaves,
twigs or old newspapers, and top that with several inches of green stuff (grass or plant cuttings). Add a thin layer of soil. Add a layer of brown stuff. Keep layering the compost heap in the same way and every couple of weeks use a garden fork or shovel to turn the pile. If you turn the pile every couple of weeks and keep it moist, you will begin to see earthworms throughout the pile and the centre of the pile will turn into black, crumbly, sweet smelling soil. When you have enough finished compost in the pile to use in your garden, shovel out the finished compost and start your next pile with any material that hadn’t fully decomposed in the previous one.

Building a compost bin
Many councils will provide free bins but it’s also easy enough to build your own. Wire mesh compost bins are versatile, inexpensive and easy to construct. A circular wire mesh bin may be made from poultry wire, hardware cloth or heavy wire mesh.

Figure 10.3 Circular wiremesh compost bin
Source: Alice Cutler and Kim Bryan.

Four wooden pallets can also be hinged or wired together to construct a compost bin. The bin should be constructed with at least one removable side so that materials can be turned easily.

Box 10.3 Composting Trouble shooting

Rotten odour = Not enough air; pile too wet. Try turning pile, adding coarse, dry materials (straw, corn stalks, etc.).
Ammonia odour = Too many greens (excessive nitrogen/lack of carbon). Add browns (straw, paper or sawdust).
Rats = Cooked food in compost bins.

(Adapted from Composting for All website by Nicky Scott).
The problem is the solution

‘The problem is the solution’ is a permaculture principle which states that by anticipating problems we can learn how to deal with them – we can turn problems to our advantage by being intent on creating solutions. Here we look at some common problems and solutions.

Poor quality soil

Soil type and quality are arguably the biggest determinants of your crops success. If the land has been steadily depleted over the years by the application of pesticides and fertilisers or is too stony, sandy or acidic there are a number of things that can be done to help the soil regenerate. Green manures (nutritional rich plants), such as

Box 10.4 Case Study: Community Composting Schemes

Micro processing of your own waste is about taking direct responsibility for your actions. Yet many people do not have the space for compost bins. Community composting schemes are the perfect solution and provide compost for local parks and gardens.

A successful group in London (East London Community Recycling Project, ELCRP) promoted their project as a way to reduce the smell of rubbish in estate stairwells and have had a very high take up rate – 80 per cent in some cases. As well as encouraging residents to keep their food waste and advising them how to store it, the scheme offers regular doorstep collections.
alfalfa and clover, grow quickly providing a ‘living’ mulch that helps to recondition soil depleted by putting in valuable nutrients. Applying seaweed, which is rich in all trace elements and minerals, also helps. Earthworms improve soil fertility through aeration, drainage and by incorporating organic matter. Adding lots of compost will increase their numbers.

Contamination

Find out as much as you can about what the land has been used for in the past. If the land is contaminated it can be dangerous to eat foods grown there. Identify the source of contamination and assess whether it is liable to reoccur. Sources are most likely air, upstream water, imported products and landfill. Solutions are dependent on the type and severity of the contamination. Trees with high water uptake, such as poplars and willows, absorb toxic water through their root systems and break down toxic compounds inside tree tissue. Mustard plants and corn are able to absorb heavy metals and pollutants from the soil. Raised beds using large plastic/porcelain/wooden tubs and filled with soil from elsewhere can be built in order to grow food. Although they require more watering, raised beds are also good for kids, the elderly and people with mobility problems as they require less bending and are less easily trampled.

A weed is just a plant in the wrong place!

Nettles probably make most people think of stings, but the nettle is a great example of a common plant considered by many to be a weed which to those in the know is a multifunctional miracle plant! Nettles attract butterflies and moths (which eat aphids, which eat cabbages and beans), have a high vitamin C content, are a compost activator, can be used to make rope fibre, have many health

Figure 10.5 Earthworm
Source: Graham Burnett.

Figure 10.6 Stinging nettle (Urtica dioica)
Source: Graham Burnett.
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benefits as a herbal medicine/tea, make an effective liquid fertiliser and can be used to make soup.

Fat hen is entirely edible and can be used as a spinach substitute or eaten raw in salads. The leaves are applied as a wash or poultice to insect bites, sunstroke, rheumatic joints and swollen feet, a green dye is obtained from the young shoots while the crushed fresh roots are a mild soap substitute.

Figure 10.7  Fat hen
(Chenopodium albo)
Source: Graham Burnett.

Pests
You will inevitably be sharing the plot with a variety of other bugs and grubs. But even those that are pests have their part to play, such as providing a source of food for beneficial insects; so aim to manage them rather than wipe them out. Many conventional pesticides kill everything, good and bad. Provide habitats to attract insects by planting small flowering plants. Keep down dust and provide water as it attracts insects. An old baby bath can be a replacement pond and hedges provide a barrier to prevent dust and pollution settling on plants. Learning to recognise who is who will help. For example, discourage millipedes, which eat bulbs, potatoes and plant roots, but encourage centipedes, which are fast moving predators that live on small slugs and other soil pests.

Aphids are tiny insects that form colonies that suck sap. The larvae in particular will debilitate plants especially broad beans and brassicas but they are eaten by ladybirds.

Figure 10.8  Aphid
Source: Graham Burnett.

Figure 10.9  Ladybird
Source: Graham Burnett.
Any gardener will tell you how much they dislike slugs as they chomp their way through a garden eating seedlings and plants. Here are some tried and tested methods for slug management in the garden:

- Slugs love certain plants and totally ignore others. Ones they love include any type of squash or courgette and mint. They hate onions and garlic (maybe it’s a breath thing!). Work out which ones they particularly go for and concentrate slug defences in those areas. Larger slugs prefer dead vegetation and are less of a problem.
- Slugs can hide under the mulch. Go slug hunting on wet days as this is the type of weather they love the most and will come out from under the mulch.
- The sweet intoxicating smell of flat beer entices slugs and they come in their droves, drowning drunk must be better than drowning sober.
- A plastic bottle with the top cut off can be used to protect plants from slugs.
- Slugs cannot crawl over salt and ash so try sprinkling around crops.
- Ground beetles are also predators of slugs, mites and other pests. Create a habitat for them by leaving pieces of wood for them to shelter under.

**Unwelcome guests of the human variety**

Whether kids really are worse these days or it just seems that way, it’s a sad fact that community gardens can be an easy target for bored kids. Many community gardens and allotments are protected by metal fences with spikes, which not only characterises a fearful and defensive society, but can also be seen as a challenge to bored young people looking for something to do. There’s no easy answer to the carrot pulling youth, a much maligned and misunderstood part of any community. Remember, people that feel excluded from the garden won’t respect it. Try making the garden an obvious community project through signs, lots of open invitations and inclusive design and implementation processes. Find space and offer to co-organise events that they may come to such as DJing or graffiti competitions. Invite the local school for a tour or work session and offer neighbours produce in return for a watchful
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Eye. Red tomatoes falling from the vines are tempting trouble, so harvest all ripe fruit and vegetables on a daily basis. Fences serve to mark possession of a property as well as prevent entry. Nothing short of razor wire and land mines will keep out a really determined person, short picket fences or chicken wire will suffice to keep out dogs. Make fences attractive but thorny by planting fruit bushes such as gooseberries or blackberries.

Conclusions

Living gardens are places of learning, social contact and connection and are fun, practical and very necessary. As well as all of the benefits it brings to the environment and your community it can also benefit you – by being outdoors, digging, planting and taking time to observe patterns and changes in nature, seeing seasons change from one to the other. Everyone benefits from a connection with nature, but it’s something that can frequently be put on the back-burner due to the stresses of everyday life. Urban areas have lots of energetic people who, when putting their minds and hearts together, can create beautiful, healthy, living environments. And bear in mind these golden rules: start small, build up gradually, take it easy and enjoy it!

Alice Cutler and Kim Bryan both campaign and facilitate educational projects around climate change and sustainability issues. Alice has been involved with several community garden projects and is a regular cook at the Cowley Club cafe in the Cowley Social Centre in Brighton. Kim is a trained permaculture designer and teacher with experience working in organic, community gardens and a number of different land projects including Escanda in Spain (see www.escanda.org). Many thanks to all the people that contributed to this chapter, particularly Ruth and Graham Burnett.

Resources

Books
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Websites
American Community Gardening Association www.communitygarden.org (A superb website with lots of hands-on advice and publications.)
Can Madeu Social Centre www.cannasdeu.net
Community Composting Network www.communitycompost.org (Supports projects and has a library of books, display materials, presentation materials and videos.)
Community Supported Agriculture Scheme www.hillandhollowfarm.com/csa.html
Composting for All www.savvygardener.com/Features/composting.html
East London Community Recycling Project www.elcrp-recycling.com
Food Agricultural Organisation www.fao.org
Food Not Bombs www.fnbnews.org
Guerilla Gardeners www.guerrillagardening.org
Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group www.hhacg.org.uk
Hedgehogs www.ukcouncil.org (Adopt a hedgehog.)
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy www.iatp.org
International Movement for Food Sovereignty www.viacampesina.org
Landless Peasant Movement: Brazil www.mstbrazil.org
Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project www.mstbrazil.org
National Allotments Association UK www.nslag.org.uk (For support and local information.)
National Food Alliance Food Poverty Project www.sustainweb.org/poverty_index.asp
Permaculture Association UK www.permaculture.org.uk (For a comprehensive list of permaculture courses, online resources and links.)
Primalseeds www.primalseeds.org.uk (Network to protect biodiversity and create food security.)
Slow Food Movement www.slowmovement.com
Sustain www.sustainweb.org (Alliance for better food and farming.)
Union of Co-operative Enterprises www.cooperatives-uk.coop
Wwoof (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) www.wwoof.org (Database of organic farms: welcomes volunteers.)