

LESSON 5

Managing the Garden

In Lesson 1 on ABCD, you learned about building a core garden group who can do the ongoing management of the garden. The core group you establish for the garden will share the responsibility for:

- finding and acquiring a piece of land
- setting the rules and guidelines of the garden
- fundraising and budgeting
- recruiting gardeners
- building the garden structure
- dealing with any problems that arise.

In this lesson you will learn how to organize this core group and the types of roles they will have. The organizational techniques in this lesson could easily be applied to other projects, not just to community garden development.

Inclusive and careful organizing will increase sustainability of the garden by building a structure that does not rely on the manpower of a few people who may eventually leave. A garden that is built around the skills and abilities of its community and is organized to be inclusive will foster a positive environment that more people will want to join. In addition, a well-organized garden group and garden will be more attractive to funders and able to best deal with challenges as they arise.

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the roles that a core group or garden club will play.
2. Know the types of rules and policies that will create garden success.
3. Know how to plan and run an effective meeting.
4. Understand the basics of conflict management.
5. General management guidelines for success.

The Core Group

A solid core garden management group will offer you multiple benefits. Having a core group makes it easier to divide tasks, minimize the effort required by any single person, encourage interest and involvement in the garden over time, show potential funders that the garden is well-organized, and create an entity that can act impartially to resolve disputes.

It is important to have a good organizational team, rather than rely on a single person. If the garden management rests on one person, no matter how enthusiastic or dedicated, they may eventually move on, and management of the garden will struggle at that point. An organizational team that is involved in decision making from the beginning will feel ownership of the garden and will be less likely to leave when challenges arise. If they've committed time and energy to the garden, they'll want to keep it going.

If you can find the right person, an assigned garden coordinator within the organizational team can be a good idea. He or she should be dedicated, enthusiastic, inspiring, diplomatic, and knowledgeable in gardening. All potential candidates for this role should be made fully aware of the responsibilities and expectations, and as many garden members as possible should help choose this person. If you can't find a person to fill this position at first, that's okay; you can share those roles among the group.





Core Group Self-organization

Once you have a group of people who are willing to commit the time and effort to create a community garden together, you'll need to decide amongst yourselves how that group will operate. You should consider the following:

1. **Core group leadership:** A garden club most often has at minimum an elected president and treasurer.
2. **Delegation of roles:** Assign different team members to be in charge of fundraising, gardener recruitment, gardener agreements and fee collection, on-site management, etc.
3. **Decision-making procedures:** Establish a process for decision-making; it could be a "majority rules" or unanimity voting procedure, or a consensus method (no voting, just consensus of members).

Roles of the Core Group

The following is a list of the responsibilities of the core group. This list can help you plan and delegate.

1. **Working with the landowner and managing the lease:** (see "Lesson 2: Finding and Obtaining Land").
2. **Scheduling and running planning meetings:** This will be of particular importance when the garden is being designed and procedures are being developed. You'll want to include interested community members in the process. The core group should schedule regular meetings at accessible times and advertise the meetings well. A public agenda should be used to run the meetings efficiently.
3. **Establishing garden rules:** It is important that garden rules and procedures be made clear to anyone signing up for a garden plot, to minimize problems and disputes in the future. Rules should be laid out in a "Gardener Agreement" and also be posted prominently in a common space in the garden, such as a community bulletin board. See the following for sample contracts and rules: LA Master Gardeners-Common Grounds "Community Gardens Start-up Guide" pages 8-9, Wasatch Community Gardens "From Neglected Parcels to Community Gardens" pages 28-29, and "Ground Rules: A Legal Toolkit for Community Gardens" pages 22-33.
4. **Accepting and reviewing garden applications:** The core group will decide what the process will be for accepting gardeners, and then carry out that process. Most likely, interested gardeners will download an application online (see Appendix 7 for example: "Sample Form: Garden Plot Registration"), fill it out and submit it to the core group or a subset of the core group, who will review and inform applicants of their acceptance. This same subcommittee of the core group will need to maintain a waiting list, if there are more applications than garden plots.
5. **Making plot assignments:** The core group will determine plots sizes in collaboration with other planning meeting attendees, and thereafter assign particular gardeners to plots. Plot size determination is an important step in the garden planning process. For manageability, a garden with fewer than 100 plots is recommended. Not all plots need to be assigned at once. The garden can develop in phases with 15 plots or more to start and then adding more plots as interest and capacity increase.
6. **Collecting garden dues:** As part of the planning meetings, the group should decide whether gardeners will be charged a fee for using a plot, what the fee will be, and who will collect and manage the fees. This should be part of the budget discussion (see "Lesson 3: Budgeting and Fundraising"). Plot fees can help cover the lease, the group insurance plan, purchasing of supplies, paying for utilities and putting on garden events for fundraising, recruitment, celebration, etc.

- 7. Managing budget and finances:** One important role of the core group is establishing a system for accepting payments/donations and spending. This will likely mean opening a garden bank account. If the garden has an established sponsor, such as a nonprofit or a church, this can be done through the sponsor. If not, there will need to be a member of the core group who can act as the fiscal sponsor and have the account in his or her name. See Lesson 3 for more on budgeting and money management.
- 8. Resolving conflicts:** The core group will also need to manage any conflicts that arise. This is a reason to have at least one member of the core group who is NOT a plot-holder as well. Ideally this will be a person who visits the garden regularly and can impartially deal with any disputes between plot-holders as they occur. It will be important that gardeners have someone they can turn to in disputes who they trust to make decisions unimpeded by favoritism. See below for more conflict resolution tips.

Rules and Policies for Success

Clear garden rules and policies will help ensure that gardeners know what is expected of them in creating a wonderful community space. It will also make it easier to solve problems when they arise because the moderator can point to agreed-upon policies. Below you'll find some common topics addressed by community garden guidelines. The core garden group should discuss each topic and determine the rules and policies that will work best for the garden's success. Rules and policies should cover the following:

- 1. Fees:** How much is owed, how often, and at what time of the year? Is there a sliding scale for the fee?
- 2. Plot maintenance:** Rules for maintenance might include limited fallow periods, maintaining the plot free of pests/weeds/disease, keeping gardening contained to one's assigned space, efficient water use, approved chemical use.
- 3. Separating and disposal/placement of trash and waste:** Where should gardeners put organic waste (weeds, trimmings, etc.)? Where should they put other waste?
- 4. Compost pile:** Is there one communal compost pile or do plot owners have their own compost piles? If communal, who is in charge of managing the pile and how is the work delegated?
- 5. Use, care, and storage of common tools:** How should tools be used and stored so they last as long as possible?
- 6. Drugs and alcohol (using at the garden and/or growing):** Is any use of alcohol allowed at the garden? What are consequences if a gardener decides to grow an illicit plant?
- 7. Guest and children:** Are gardeners free to bring guests at any time or at specific times? What are the expectations for watching children in the garden?
- 8. Pets:** Are pets allowed? If yes, in what areas of the garden are they allowed?
- 9. Respect:** Should gardeners only touch another plot in the presence of that plot's owner? How should gardeners treat common spaces in the garden?
- 10. Common-space maintenance:** How often and how should gardeners tend to the paths, the resting space, etc.?
- 11. Volunteer hour requirements:** Most gardens have some sort of annual requirement for donating time to the running and upkeep of the garden.



12. **Attendance:** Are gardeners required to attend meetings? If yes, how often?

13. **Consequences of breaking rules and procedures:** Will plot-holders have a probationary period if they break the rules, including plot neglect, or will their plot be immediately reassigned? How long will they have to fix a problem before their plot is reassigned?

Effective Meetings

A responsibility of the core garden group is to run meetings. In the early stages, you will run meetings to organize yourselves, assess community needs, recruit active members, assign roles and duties, create communications and fundraising plans, and plan the garden. After the garden gets started, you will likely still have regular meetings to deal with ongoing maintenance and fundraising issues and recruit new members.



1. **Participants:** During the early recruitment phase, you'll want to encourage participation at meetings from people with a variety of assets. You want people with knowledge of various fields, people with influence in the community, people with wealth and connections to wealth for donations, people who can do the daily work to keep the garden functioning, and people who represent all stakeholder groups in the community.
2. **Timing/Place:** Plan meetings for times and places that are most accessible to the people whose help and input you want. Choose a time that works for the majority of the invited attendees, and ideally keep that same time each week or month to avoid having to renegotiate the time. Amenities like bathrooms, kitchen, and childcare should also be considered when selecting a location to ensure the meeting is easily accessible to a wide range of people. A comfortable space will go a long way in maintaining attendance and participation.
3. **Agenda:** Set a clear agenda beforehand, make it available, and do your best to follow it closely during the meeting. It should state goals of the meeting, items to discuss, whether each item will require a vote, start and end time, and time allowed for each agenda item.
4. **Running the meeting:** Respect your participants' time. People are busy and it is important that they feel their time is being used effectively. Good meeting practices include identifying and selecting a designated leader, timekeeper, and note taker.
 - a. The designated meeting leader should be someone who is comfortable guiding discussion. The leader will need to summarize discussion points and differences of opinion, ask for input from group members, and table the conversation when appropriate. You will undoubtedly run into difficulties such as discussion-domination by one or two people, arguments, or departure from the topic at hand. Therefore, it is important to select someone who is confident and can guide the meeting back by interrupting politely. It takes some practice to do these things well, so don't worry if you don't already have someone with a lot of meeting experience. Choose someone with confidence that can build these skills over time.
 - b. A timekeeper helps keep the group on track. He or she should feel comfortable politely interrupting to remind the group of time left for each agenda item, especially when the discussion may be running long.
 - c. A note taker will document all key points, ideas, and action items in a meeting. Additionally, he or she will keep record of the members in attendance and any official votes that take place during the meeting.

Conflict Resolution

Hopefully, you will not have to do much conflict resolution, but as a leader of a community garden, you will undoubtedly run into some conflicts that need attention. It's good to know some conflict resolution strategies so you can be calm and effective when conflicts arise. Here are a few basic tips:

1. **Seek first to understand the other party, then to be understood.** It can be easy to jump to quick conclusions, but the people involved in the conflict will only feel good about a resolution if they feel their perspective was heard and respected. As a moderator between people in a conflict, seek to hear both perspectives fully before acting.
2. **Try to summarize each others' interests in the conflict.** Each side of the conflict should understand the others' perspective enough to repeat it back, as should the moderator.
3. **Brainstorm solutions together.** As much as possible, encourage the parties in conflict to share ideas for solving the problem. This way, they feel they are part of the solution, rather than having a solution imposed upon them.
4. **Aim for a win-win solution, which will likely be more lasting.** Avoid solutions that have no benefit for one of the parties. Solutions that have some benefit for all parties will be more likely to last.

For more conflict resolution ideas, see the *Master Urban Gardener Manual* page 132-134.

Keys to Community Garden Success

This section is adapted with permission from The Toronto Community Food Animators' publication entitled: "How to Start a Community Garden Handbook."

Every community garden is as different as the gardeners that belong to them. But there are some common traits that the most successful gardens share, despite their differences. The following are suggestions to achieve those traits.

1. **Start small:** In the first year it is always better to have a small success than a big failure. Taking on too much at the start of any project can result in frustration or burn-out after only a short time. You can always expand in the years to come. Most people are very enthusiastic gardeners in the spring, when they're getting started. By mid-summer enthusiasm can wane considerably, as the less glamorous garden chores, like weeding and removing old flowers, are necessary. Don't get too discouraged if and when this happens. Instead, create some kind of special event or activity that will draw the gardeners back to the garden and help them to recall the excitement they felt in May.
2. **Establish good lines of communication among all participants:** Everyone likes to feel that their voice matters, that what they say and think is acknowledged on an equal basis with everyone else. Good communication is the key to ensuring this. There are often many major decisions to be made in the development of a community garden, especially at the outset. It may sometimes seem easier for one or two people to make decisions for the group. This strategy usually backfires, especially in the beginning before everyone has had time to get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses. A good garden coordinator will recognize this and give people the opportunity to express their opinions before decisions are made. It is better to welcome opinions and discussion than to preempt discussion for the sake of expediency. In addition to regular group meetings, a notice board in the garden is a good way to keep everyone informed about important issues, as is a regular newsletter, an email listserv, and possibly a telephone tree system.
3. **Provide educational opportunities for the gardeners:** Not all, or even most, of the participants will be knowledgeable gardeners when they join the garden. A first time gardener's enthusiasm is often linked to a successful harvest. That doesn't mean that the first year has to yield a record bumper crop, but it can be very demoralizing if nothing does well. Many novice gardeners will benefit from a bit of guidance from a more experienced gardener, either formally in a workshop, or informally, from a life-long gardener in a nearby plot. Actively encourage these opportunities, if necessary. You could bring in knowledgeable speakers on a regular basis to teach the garden plot owners about particular gardening topics.





4. **Keep the garden well maintained year round:** Vegetable gardens often have the reputation of being less than attractive. This is usually the result of haphazard maintenance by the people rather than an aesthetic shortcoming on the part of the plants. Don't give any would-be detractors ammunition against the garden. Let the gardeners know what is expected of them with a clearly defined, written set of garden by-laws. Keep the grass trimmed, common areas neat, the beds weeded (or better yet, mulched), pick up trash daily, locate the compost area out of sight as much as possible, plant flowers around the edges of the site as well as within the plots, and try to design the site with imagination; there's no rule that says a garden has to be laid out in perfect 10'x20' rectangular plots.
5. **Build a strong sense of community:** Most community garden projects don't start out with a strong sense of community already intact, unless the group has come together before for other projects. Quite often most of the gardeners have never met before, or perhaps are neighbors who say hello to each other but never really get beyond that. A community garden provides an excellent setting in which to get to know other people without many of the typical communication barriers that are easily created in other settings. When people are working together for a common cause, enjoying the fresh air, with their hands in the soil and the beauty of nature all around, things like how much money they make and where their grandmother was born don't seem to matter as much as they did before.

When we can come together to create something with other people, especially something that adds beauty to our lives and helps us to feel that we are contributing something positive, a very special bond can begin to grow. With careful nurturing, it can blossom into that essential ingredient to human happiness: connection, a sense of belonging, a feeling of community.

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