

LESSON 6

How to be a Good Neighbor

Part of building a garden for long-term success is making sure that the garden's neighbors and community are happy with the garden. It is important to actively build a relationship with the community. The more the community values the garden, the more it will support and protect the garden, and help prevent problems from arising. Community gardens shine when they improve the quality of life for the larger local community, not just the garden members.

A great example of this larger community impact comes from the New Roots Community Farm in City Heights. This nearly-90-plot community garden started by the International Rescue Committee provides gardening space for a very diverse group of City Heights community members, but it has also attracted positive attention from First Lady Michelle Obama. To help promote her "Let's Move" campaign for healthier Americans, Ms. Obama visited New Roots in Spring 2010 and spoke with gardeners. Community members with and without garden plots were excited and proud of this attention from such a respected and influential person. The visit had a lasting, positive community-building effect.

Problems will undoubtedly arise in your community garden, but there is a lot you can do to prevent them and maintain a positive space for community members. Having spent time carefully pre-planning and organizing your community garden is the key to eliminating common problems. When an unexpected issue does occur, think of it as an opportunity to improve or refine your policies and organization and, as a result, make your garden even more successful.

Learning Objectives

1. Know several common considerations and strategies for being a good neighbor both in the garden and with the broader community.

The following list of strategies and solutions is adapted with permission from the LA Master Gardeners-Common Grounds "Community Gardens Start-up Guide." Also see "Keys to Community Garden Success" from the Toronto Community Garden Network for similar suggestions from another perspective.

Developing Partnerships

Involve as many like-minded groups and individuals in your project as possible. At the very beginning of the project, do a community resources inventory or mapping (practice this in Lesson 1). That's a way of listing all of the resources that already reside in your community. It's also a positive way of approaching the project—rather than thinking, "What's wrong with this neighborhood that can be fixed by a community garden?" you are looking at the positive resources that can contribute to the garden and that the garden can enhance.

Actively seek out local politicians and other community leaders, members of the media, health professionals, the landscape industry, anti-poverty activists, teachers, faith organizations, and anyone else that could help. It is not necessary to be a gardener in order to enjoy and participate in a community garden. Create a "Friends of the Garden" membership category for those people who want to help the project but aren't able, for whatever reason, to take a garden plot. The more people who feel a personal attachment to the project, the better.

You can also consider providing plots to local groups, schools, etc. For more on developing a joint use garden see Healthy Works-VGSD Gardening 301: How to Start and Sustain a School Gardening Program. For more on advocacy for the garden in your community see "Ten Tips on Local Advocacy" from the American Community Gardening Association.





Facilitating Communication

Clear and well-enforced garden rules and a competent and personable garden president can go a long way toward minimizing misunderstandings within the garden. Always print your garden rules and make sure every gardener has a copy, and post them in a common area of the garden. Nevertheless, communication problems may arise. It's the job of the core garden group, or a subset of the group, to resolve those issues. If it concerns something not clearly spelled out in the rules, the group can take a vote to add new rules and make modifications to existing rules. Language barriers are a very common source of misunderstandings. Garden leadership should make every effort to have an interpreter at garden meetings where participants speak different languages. Perhaps a family member of one of the garden members who speaks the language will offer to help.

Also maintain an open dialogue with community groups, even if they are not actively participating in the garden. Respond promptly and respectfully to any concerns that are brought to the garden leadership group. It's beneficial to identify a single person who can be easily contacted to act as the first responder to inquiries and complaints. This person's contact information should be clearly displayed at the garden.

Managing Gardener Dropout

There has been, and probably always will be, turnover in community gardens. People may sign up for plots and not follow through. Remember, gardening is hard work, especially in the heat of summer. Be sure to have a clause in your gardener agreement which states gardeners will forfeit their right to their plot if they don't plant it within one month, or if they don't maintain it.

While gardeners should be given every opportunity to follow through, if several reminders either by letter or phone yield no response, it is time for the organizers to reassign the plot. It will be necessary to have at least one member of the core group who is willing and able to remove neglectful gardeners from their plots despite possible dissent from the gardener. The purpose of a policy like this is not to be restrictive, but rather to ensure a well-maintained garden.

You might also consider having a clause in the rules that allows for plot-holders to keep their plot even when they cannot manage it for an extended period, for example due to illness or surgery. This might be especially wise if you expect to have many elderly gardeners. Perhaps waitlisted gardeners could have a chance to manage a plot in the plot-holder's stead.

It is also advisable that every year, the leadership conduct a renewed community outreach campaign by contacting churches and other groups in the neighborhood to let them know about the garden and that plots are available.

Facilitating Parking

Making sure parking at the garden doesn't inconvenience garden neighbors is important for maintaining a positive view of the garden. Always obey parking rules and be sensitive to neighborhood concerns. Give neighbors advance notice of special events that may impact parking. Designate special parking areas ahead of time to have minimal impact on the surrounding neighborhood.

Ensuring Security

Invite the community law enforcement officer from your local precinct to a garden meeting to get his or her suggestions on making the garden more secure. It's beneficial to build a relationship with your local police department to get their support for the garden. As discussed in Lesson 1, on Asset-Based Community Development, the local precinct can help promote safety at the garden, and maybe even donations, but the garden can also offer him or her benefits such as greater presence of community members outdoors, which can deter criminal activity.



Dealing with Vandalism

From time to time, you might notice that produce is taken from plots without permission. It's important to realize that this may happen, and not to let it deter you too much. In some ways this is a good thing, as it shows community interest and appetite for fresh and healthy food. There are several strategies for deterring this type of activity:

1. Garden groups can plant a bed specifically for public consumption outside the main garden area or the garden gate, if it has one, and label it with signage that lets people know they may help themselves to vegetables. Plot-holders can collectively manage this bed.
2. A sign could also be posted requesting that people do not take produce without permission.
3. Another good preventive measure is simply promoting a positive perception of the garden through continuous open communication and inclusivity.

If you experience more serious vandalism, it's important to repair/replant quickly and continue gardening, to show that the strong community group cannot easily be discouraged.

Dealing with Trash

It's important to get your compost system going right away and get some training for gardeners on how to maintain and use it. Uncomposted waste can build up, create an eyesore, and could hurt your relationships with neighbors and the property owner if it gets out of hand. Waste can also become a fire hazard. Make sure gardeners know how to sort trash properly; what to compost, and what to recycle. Teach them about what they can get from this process, (fertile compost to add to their beds!), in addition to maintaining a pleasant space. Trashcans placed in accessible areas are helpful to keep a neat and tidy garden.

Dealing with Weeds

Gardeners tend to visit their plots less during the wintertime, and lower participation, combined with rain, tends to create a weed problem in January, February, and March. Remember, part of your agreement with the landowner is that he or she will maintain the lot and keep weeds from taking over. In the late summer/early fall, provide gardeners with a workshop or printed material about what can be grown in a fall and winter garden. Also, schedule garden workdays for the spring in advance since you know you'll need them at the end of winter to clear weeds. If you anticipate that plots will be untended during the winter, apply a thick layer of mulch or hay to the beds and paths to reduce weed proliferation.

References

1. American Community Gardening Association. "Ten Tips on Local Advocacy."
2. Los Angeles Master Gardeners, UCCE, and Common Ground. 2001. "Community garden start-up guide."
3. Toronto Community Food Animators. "How to Start a Community Garden Handbook." 2008. Toronto Community Garden Network. Available www.tcgn.ca/wiki/wiki.php?n=DonationsTradesSharing.CommunityGardensHandbook