

POWER^{UP} YOUR PANTRY

Go Local! Series *Community Gardening*



Community gardens find their roots in unique ways. Some gardens begin with the goal of volunteers growing produce for a food pantry. Other gardens adopt a more interactive approach by letting people grow their own produce and giving gardeners control of what they plant, how they take care of their plot, and when they harvest.

Still others focus on demonstration and education with the aim of helping people see what is possible, learn gardening skills, and build the confidence to try gardening on their own.

Ultimately, there is no right or wrong way to organize a community garden. In fact, many gardens promote a variety of goals to attract a wide range of participants and meet their individual needs.

Food pantries that want to start a community garden have a range of options to choose from. In this guide, we'll share best practices and options for creating a successful and sustainable garden.

Getting started

Community gardens work best when a variety of people can get their hands dirty in the planning stages. A plentiful group of partners provides a broad, well-rounded perspective for the garden from the beginning. We recommend starting with a core group of five to seven people who are willing to plan the garden- and organize and recruit early gardeners. Be sure to ask local businesses, civic and youth organizations, and related agencies about getting involved. Try to be inclusive of people from different backgrounds.

The core group's first task is to have a conversation about the goals of the garden. Here are a few guiding questions:

- What do you want to accomplish?
- What type of garden do you envision?
- Who will be involved?
- Who will do the work?
- Are your goals compatible with the desires of the broader community?
- **Most importantly, do your goals allow food pantry clients to contribute in a meaningful way?**



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This series is intended for food pantries and other hunger relief groups looking for ways to enhance their current operations and better meet the needs of people who use their services.

The information provided is based on survey and other research conducted by the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at the University of Missouri.

Knowing how pantry clients will contribute is crucial. Food pantry clients will undoubtedly express their gratitude for simply receiving produce from the garden. But why not invite and welcome them into the garden to participate as active members? You can't force them to be involved, but depending on how your garden is organized, clients can participate in group work days and classes, or you can provide space for them to grow their own produce. A garden whose only goal is for volunteers to grow and donate food may be missing opportunities to include food pantry clients in an important community building activity.

Planning

After some initial conversations and goal setting, it's time to start doing some serious planning. Below are a few themes and questions to consider:

Outreach. What is your outreach plan? How will you get others involved?

Leadership. Who will be in charge? At the very least, someone needs to be the point person. It's even better to assign two people as co-leaders to handle ongoing organizing and administrative tasks.

Guidelines. Will your garden have rules? If your garden intends to assign plots to people, consider drafting a few guidelines outlining shared expectations and responsibilities. These don't need to be complicated. For ideas, see the Gardening Guidelines (found at bit.ly/gardeningguidelines) used by the Community Garden Coalition.

Resources. What resources do you need to make it happen? Who can you ask for help? At a minimum, you'll need hoses, hand tools, seeds, transplants, compost and mulch. But don't forget that gardening expertise may be your most valuable resource. Can someone help answer gardening questions and troubleshoot pest and disease issues?

Accessibility. How will you make the garden open and available to all in the community? More people will use the garden and take better care of it if it is visible and accessible. Avoid putting it in a far off, secluded spot. Also consider building a few accessible raised beds (found at bit.ly/accessibleraisedbeds) to accommodate people of all abilities. Additional information about raised beds from MU Extension can be found at bit.ly/muext_raisedbeds.



Land. What is the condition of your garden site? Is it a good spot for growing vegetables? As you evaluate your space, keep these ideas in mind:

- Most vegetables require at least six hours of direct sunlight per day to be productive.
- Gardens in Missouri will most likely need access to water. Is there a faucet or hydrant nearby or can you get one installed?
- Wildlife can be a challenge. Will you need a fence? Learn more about your options at bit.ly/preventgardenpests.
- Doing a soil test for nutrients and heavy metals is always a good idea. MU soil testing can be found at bit.ly/musoiltesting.

Building

If your group is like most, at some point they will want to stop talking and start doing. This is a good thing. The actual work of building a garden keeps enthusiasm high and gives people something tangible to do.

During the building process, do your best to invite and involve others. It may require a bit more planning to make sure you have enough tools and materials on hand, but it can lead to more community buy-in. In turn, this will help with finding resources for the garden, recruiting new gardeners, and sustaining your garden over the long term.

Celebrate your success

Don't forget to take a step back and recognize the progress you've made. Hold a garden party and invite neighbors, local businesses, and agencies. Show off the work you've done and talk about your plans for the future. This is a great way to gain additional community support.





MEXICO COMMUNITY GARDEN AUDRAIN COUNTY, MISSOURI



Garden manager Janice Kendall with husband Ron in community garden

With the spark of an idea and the willingness to involve others, former Help Center director Gary Jones put plans for the Mexico Community Garden in motion in the fall of 2013. By the spring of 2014, with a host of partners including the City of Mexico Parks and Recreation Department, Audrain County University of Missouri Extension Master Gardeners, Mexico Garden Club, MU's Grow Well Missouri program, Central Missouri Community Action, and Mexico Housing Authority, ground was broken at Martin Luther King Jr. Park. From the beginning, plots were made available to individuals in the community, including local agencies. Plot sizes ranged from 10 feet by 10 feet to 10 feet by 60 feet. Excess produce was funneled to the Help Center Food Pantry.

The garden's success and eventual expansion to a second site at the Help Center is due in large part to team work and the unselfish attitude of the partners. In addition, support from local foundations have allowed the Help Center to hire a part-time garden manager for the past three years. Those involved were honored with a Missouri Municipal League Innovation award in 2015. In 2017, with support from a United States Department of Agriculture grant, they erected a high tunnel to extend the growing season.

In 2017, garden manager Janice Kendall and her husband Ron helped get the garden started for the year, assign plots, and make sure gardeners had what they needed to succeed. Janice reports that in addition to individual and family plots, groups such as the Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Community Action, and others have tended plots. Goals for the next growing season include hosting more workdays where people can come out to help one another and setting up a spot for people to grow sweet corn and vining groups such as pumpkins and watermelon.



Raised beds in Mexico Community Garden



KENNETT COMMUNITY GARDEN DUNKLIN COUNTY, MISSOURI



Volunteers working in Kennett Community Garden

Started in 2012 by the Dunklin County Caring Council and a host of partners, the Kennett Community Garden in Southeast Missouri is one of the larger community gardens in the state. At seven and a half planted acres, it provides a number of opportunities for community involvement while also producing tons of produce each year. Organized by a garden committee and staffed mostly with volunteers, the garden is a source of fresh, local produce for many in the community. Most donations go to the senior nutrition center, children's home, sheltered workshop, nursing home, and food pantry.

The garden provides access to produce in other ways, too. Produce is made available for sale at an on-site produce cart. People can come into the garden and "pick on halves" – meaning that they are free to take what they can use as long as they also harvest the same portion and leave it on site for donation at a later time. People can also grow their own within a one acre section of the garden.

Partners have been key to making the garden a success. Local farmers have contributed time and know-how. Local seed suppliers have contributed seeds and seed potatoes. The local Walmart contributed plants. The local Community Supervision Center has enabled those finishing their probation or parole to receive credit for working in the garden. A host of other groups have partnered as well, including Lincoln University Extension, University of Missouri Extension, the high school Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America classes and club, and others.

Most recently the garden applied for and received a grant from USDA to install a high tunnel. This will allow them to start gardening earlier in the spring and go later in the fall. For more information, check out their facebook page at bit.ly/kennettcommunitygarden.

You don't have to do it alone

For many food pantries, the idea of starting and leading a garden seems overwhelming. Keep in mind that individuals and agencies in your community may be willing to help or even lead the effort. Reach out to others for support and find ways to make it a community-wide project.



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For more information:
foodsecurity.missouri.edu