

# BASIC STEPS TO STARTING A COMMUNITY GARDEN IN CHICAGO

## Welcome to the special world of Community Gardening!

A community garden provides many wonderful opportunities to enrich the quality of our lives. In our city where open space is often severely limited, there is a need for more green space and, in many communities, options to find fresh, healthy food is a challenge. A community garden offers people the choice to grow fruits, vegetables, herbs, and even ornamentals to support and sustain native wildlife, and with a community garden there is a shared source right in the neighborhood. Growing food together can also keep people more involved and committed to the garden, as there is a useful product that comes out of it – Something to Eat!

People who start gardens find that a garden brings neighbors outdoors and closer together by building a stronger sense of community and enhancing their relationships. A garden is a place to grow.

Building the foundation for a successful community garden is long-term responsibility which requires community support and dedicated, ongoing commitment by all members of your gardening group. We hope that this guide will help you to bring people together to design and build, care for and love a community garden. We think you will be glad you did!

### Basic Outline of Steps to Starting a Community Garden

The following is based on the experience of many community garden projects. Following the order of the steps as listed here is recommended.

#### 1. ORGANIZE:

- ➔ The management and care of your garden remains with you and the members of your garden group. Designing, planting, and caring for a garden can yield rewarding results, but remember, your garden group is responsible for the total care of your garden, both financially and in garden practice.
- ➔ Maintenance and management of your garden. Unless you want to do this all by yourself, you will have to get others to sign on to work with you – not as ‘volunteers’ but as members. Start this way:
  - Create partnerships; sell your neighbors on the idea; convince them of all the good reasons to do this!
  - Invite them and other interested parties to be on a garden planning committee right from the start and ensure low income residents are not excluded.
  - Together fill in the **Project Assessment and Resources Worksheets** – and then share the tasks in starting the work to get the garden project going.
  - Establish the structure of the organization starting with the leadership team or steering committee so there is a path for decision making. Then, together and

with all members' support, establish working groups or full committees to target desirable garden outcomes.

- Communication
  - Activities, Events Tours and Food!
  - Garden oversight
  - Education
  - Newsletter
  - Fundraising
- Finally, agree on ground **rules**: Create guidelines or bylaws- Make it clear that with Rights, come Responsibilities – sharing the work and the costs of **the whole garden!**
- Provide the support and meet the needs of the newly formed garden organization:
  - Ensure that everyone has the information and knowledge they need to work in the garden and be an active member of the organization – COMMUNICATE & EDUCATE!
  - Share the work and develop leadership right from the start...and never stop
  - Establish good communication based in one-on-one conversations –email is no substitute; you may want to start a regular newsletter or garden gazette
  - Hold and run good meetings
  - Have clear goals and good follow through; agree on rules or guidelines that the members can follow to participate in the garden organization. As the group evolves you may want to use standard bylaws or create your own.
  - Provide for children, seniors and special needs with ADA compliant beds
  - Plan and hold events based on members' cultural backgrounds and need or desire to learn new gardening skills – not everyone comes knowing how to garden!
  - .... BUT everyone comes with some kind of talent to share – cooking, powerful muscles, good writing, leadership, music.... ask them what they know and can do and invite them to use it in the garden!

## **2. DEFINE THE GOALS OF THE GARDEN PROJECT TOGETHER:**

- Who is this garden intended to serve? Who will use it? Who will maintain it?
- How will it be used now and in the future?
- It's important to include as many members and potential members as possible right from the start in deciding the use and purpose of the garden. This is the best way to ensure that they feel connected – that everyone will feel that they “own” this community garden and are therefore RESPONSIBLE to use and maintain it forever!
- Include everyone's ideas and work for consensus – everyone's ideas are important and potentially valuable and workable – look for ways to agree.
- Using the Project Assessment Worksheet discuss and decide what your mutual reasons are to do this: Food, health, exercise, clean and healthy environment, strong united community, education, our children's future? Or - all of the above!
- Start an annual calendar and include all meetings, events and garden activities based on members input and needs – both for work and for fun!
- Are there goals beyond growing food that will bring others in on this project to guarantee that the garden will be sustainable for the long term?
- Consider ways of creating coalitions with neighboring organizations.

### **3. ASSESS AND MAP THE SITE:**

- ➔ Grab a piece of paper and pencil and go out to the site with all the members. Walk around it and draw in the following:
  - Look at Sun and Shade Patterns – circle the sunniest area – you will need 6-8 hours of sun to grow vegetables; note wind direction – it affects plant growth and moisture.
  - Draw in where the water source is (faucet, hydrant, downspout for a rain barrel, other)
  - Note existing plant material, possible usable building materials (bricks) and structures
  - Consider access and approach to site; adjacent structures and land use
  - Research site history and context to determine possible contamination and existence of building foundations, underground storage tanks, basements, etc. **See Appendix**
  - Determine if there is anything else planned for the site, for the block, or to the adjacent buildings? Is there a community wide planning process underway – like the construction of a shopping center?! How will this affect your access to the land....and what would be the impact on a garden? **See Appendix**
- ➔ Determine land use and ownership:
  - If this is one or more vacant lots, determine the address(es) by noting the addresses of existing adjacent buildings. Then measure off the distance from the buildings to the perimeter of the vacant land you have selected. (The average lot size in Chicago is about 25 feet by 125 feet) Then contact your local government office to help you determine who owns the site and/or go to this link.  
<http://cookviewer.cookcountyil.gov/mapviewer/index.html>
  - If you are still in need of information, visit the Cook County Recorder of Deeds, Tract Department in the County Clerk's Office located in the County Building at 118 N. Clark Street, Room 120 Chicago, IL 60602, Phone: (312) 603-5050. There you will need to first ask staff for guidance on finding out the PIN of the site. Once you have the PIN staff can assist you in locating ownership information, so you can arrange a purchase or a long-term lease.

### **4. RESEARCH AND GATHER THE RESOURCES:**

- Create a budget and prioritize what the garden needs now for the ‘hardscape’ as well as plants, supplies and tools – start small and aim to grow!
- Identify sources of support for donations of these physical goods and for possible funding
- Survey your neighbors/members for talents and skills as well as material resources
- List local organizations, businesses, etc. and what they can help you do
- List citywide or other organizations

### **5. DESIGN THE GARDEN:**

- ➔ Bring all the members of the garden together and:
  - Create a design that meets the goals for the use of the space and is appropriate for the community
  - Involve as many people as possible, especially the next-door neighbors!

- Be realistic and **KEEP IT SMALL AND SIMPLE** in the beginning! This way you will all gain the skills and knowledge you need from practical experience and will not feel defeated if something doesn't work out. A garden will just naturally grow and change every year!
- “Form Follows function” – be sure your plants and structures can exist in harmony together and “do” what you want them to do.

## **6. PLAN THE WORK – FOR NOW AND LATER:**

### ➡ NOW:

- Plan the site preparation:
  - to remove debris,
  - to install fencing,
  - to test and modify soil,
  - to remove weeds, weed trees saplings,
  - to hire somebody with special skills or for the heavy stuff if necessary
- Determine Construction and Installation Details
- TEST the soil for lead, especially if you are growing food or children will be gardening to determine “best practices” – (SEE: information about soil in the Appendix) This is necessary if you are not growing in raised containers.
- Select Appropriate materials
- Determine step by step installation starting with the hardscape and ending with the plants - e.g.: first the fence, then the lighting, then the raised beds soil, paths, benches, arbors, trees, shrubs and plants.
- Make up a garden tasks calendar, make sure everybody has one and post it in a public place

### ➡ NOW FOR LATER:

- It's never too soon to plan for continued activities to maintain the garden and the garden organization – start on day one, and hold a regular retreat to plan every year in advance!

## **Possible Basic Community Garden Components:**

- **Consider sun and shade, water sources and wind direction**
- **A sign**
- **A gathering spot for comfort and beauty**
- **Native & Perennial beds to attract pollinators and ‘good bugs’ & add beauty and ornamental interest**
- **Raised vegetable beds with 6-8 hours of sun**
- **Compost bins and service area**
- **Paths? Fence? Art?**
- **Tool Storage?**

# PRELIMINARY PROJECT ASSESSMENT WORKSHEET

*Community needs assessment is an important process of gathering information about the community, which can help them learn about the assets, needs and interests of fellow community members and build support for the garden. Filling in the answers to the questions on this form should help you figure out how to get started on your garden project. It will help give you a realistic picture of what's involved. The first question is the most important one!*

Who is interested and are there potentially others? (list names where you can)

Would your neighbors want to help? \_\_\_\_\_

Who? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Other Nearby residents \_\_\_\_\_

Businesses \_\_\_\_\_

School or youth group \_\_\_\_\_

Any other community-based, health or service organizations \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Why we want to start a garden? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the purpose or use for this garden? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Who will use it? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Who will maintain it?

Are members willing to commit time to use and maintain the garden? [Depending on the size of each plot or raised bed, the common areas and number of members, a plot averages 1 ½ hours/week and common areas 2 hours/week for the entire space] \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Are members willing to commit time to managing and running the garden? [Also depending on the number of members, allow 2 hours a month for administrative tasks (meetings, planning, organizing events, etc.)] \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Where will this garden be? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you all have permission to use the site? Do you know how to do that? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the condition of the site now?

- Will it need to be cleaned up? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do things grow on it now? is there enough soil to allow plants to grow?
- Is the soil safe? \_\_\_\_\_ What was there before it was vacant?
- Do puddles of water sit for long periods of time anywhere on it?\_\_

Are there the basics necessary for growing things and having gardening activities later?

-Sun (6-8 hours for veggies)\_\_\_\_\_ -Water\_\_\_\_\_

Is the area secured with fencing or other ways (lighting) to prevent unauthorized access, theft or vandalism? \_\_\_\_\_

Is the area safe from cars or other dangers? \_\_\_\_\_

What are the things I/we don't know and need to know? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What things do we need and have to get?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Where will we get these things? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is the **first step** we have to take to get started? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Can we list the steps after that?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**NOTES:**

## Lead-Free Gardening in the City

As much as we would like to, we can't just pick a piece of land and start digging to create a garden. In the city, the soil often contains contaminants that could put people's health in danger. It's a good idea to find out what was on the land before. If it used to be a gas station, or even had a building built before 1978, for example, the land may be contaminated with lead and other dangerous chemicals. Also, before 1978, gasoline had lead in it and that lead came out of the exhaust and floated down – everywhere!

We recommend that all soil not known to be clean or purchased as organic soil be tested for lead if vegetables will be grown in or on it or if sensitive populations (children, elderly) will be around the garden. Lead can also be an “indicator” – if it's high we recommend testing for other contaminants.

### What you can do about contaminated soil...

- Install raised beds to grow vegetables, installing an impermeable landscape fabric in the bottom of the bed, stapled up to the sides of the bed.
- Plant 3 feet away from old, painted structures.
- Grow ornamental, especially native perennials and pollinator plants in affected areas.
- Add a protective layer of mulch, stone or grass that will limit dusting of soil (to prevent inhalation) in areas outside of raised beds.
- Clean hands, clothing and shoes on a regular basis to ensure that lead particles from the soil are not brought into ant building.
- Add compost or other organic material recommended by OMRI\* or look to see if the product meets he US Composting Council approval.
- Test for lead every three years to make sure there hasn't been a movement of the contaminants into the planting medium.
- Radical and costly options include capping the soil or removing it with safe and appropriate disposal.

\* **Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI)** <https://www.omri.org/>

**Taking a good soil sample:** See Appendix

### Sources for more information about soil testing and lead-free gardening

University of Illinois Extension Services  
Illinois Department of Public Health  
Center for Disease Control

## Appendix

**Researching the site:** Here is a list of potential risk sites, if they were previously on the land:

Waste burning site/plant  
Power Plants  
Sewage runoff site  
Waste dumping site  
Car or machine repair shops  
Furniture refinishing  
Fires  
Landfill or garbage dumps  
Factories  
Farm/agricultural use

Site of metal plating or re-finishing  
Gas station  
High traffic areas  
Buildings before 1978 - (risk of lead-based paint)  
Railroad

- Wooden railroad ties
- Telephone poles
- Decks
- Playgrounds
- Lawn (risk of pesticides)
- Dry Cleaning
- Printer

### **Sources of information about previous sites:**

- Neighbors or previous owners (especially those who've lived in the community for a very long time)
- Your local alderman; Your Ward Superintendent
- Cook County Recorder of Deeds for names of previous owners
- FOIA request to the Department of Buildings requesting a history of building permits for the address

**Where to test your soil for lead:** See a full list at <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/soiltest> and also check out this lab: <http://www.umass.edu/soiltest/>



## ● Steps to Identifying and Acquiring Available Land For a Community Garden

1. Walk around the neighborhood – list possible locations for your project
  - ➔ The best choice is a city owned vacant lot that can become permanent open space for a garden.
  - ➔ Private property owners may cancel your permission at any time and restrict your ability to plant what you choose.
  - ➔ However, in dense neighborhoods, you may need to consider getting permission for vacant private property, parkways, parks, medians, schools, other institutions.
2. Talk to the alderperson (ald):
  - ➔ See what his/her organization may be doing or have in mind for the neighborhood. Is there a community wide planning process underway?
  - ➔ Ask what properties are available for your project.
  - ➔ Is there anything else planned for the area, for the adjacent buildings, for the block-Strip mall? Condos? A park?
3. Identify the land, locate the owner (private or city owned)
4. **Be sure to inform any and all neighbors of your possible intention – you will need them on board to be members, or at least to be in agreement with the installation of a community garden on their block!**
5. If the site you select is a vacant lot(s):
  - ➔ Determine the address(es) by noting the addresses of existing neighboring buildings.
  - ➔ The average lot size in Chicago is about 25 feet by 125 feet.
  - ➔ Measure off the distance from the buildings to the perimeter of the vacant land you have selected in increments of 25 feet.
    - ➔ Do the math for the address(es)
6. Property search options to determine ownership:
  - A. For a list of city owned land:  
[http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp\\_info/city-owned\\_land\\_inventory.html](http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/city-owned_land_inventory.html)
  - B. Call the Department of Real Estate and Development at 312/744- LAND (5263) with the address of the lot or go to  
<https://cookrecorder.com/>
    - (Recorder of Deeds) for owner of record & more info and follow instructions
    - Tax info may be there, too (that is, who paid the taxes, if any)
    - G. Google search for “Cook County Treasurer” and then go to “payment status” and type in the PIN. It will say who is paying the taxes or if it is exempt.
    - F. Contact your ward office which may have the most up-to-date property information.
7. If the lot is privately owned, contact the owner to see if they are willing to allow you to lease or buy.
8. If you still aren’t sure if the land is private or city owned, contact NeighborSpace - If the lot(s) is next door to a building you or a member of you garden organization owns, consider using the City of Chicago’s Adjacent Neighbor Land Acquisition Program.

Read more about that here:

[http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp\\_info/adjacent\\_neighborslandacquisitionprogramanlap.html](http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dcd/supp_info/adjacent_neighborslandacquisitionprogramanlap.html)

9. When you have access to the site:
  - ➔ TEST the soil for lead to determine “best practices”, especially if you are growing food or children will be gardening– (SEE: “Testing for Lead” fact sheet)
    - ➔ Research the prior uses of the site to determine the site history and context and to determine the potential for contamination, existence of building foundations and basements, etc. Ask neighbors, the alderman what they remember.
10. Ensure your continued use of the land if it is privately owned:
  - ➔ Ask the owner to agree to a Memorandum of Understanding (SEE: MOU template) or a Lease.
  - ➔ This will help to ensure that the work your group does is respected and will not be ‘bulldozed’ when the owner has a new use for the land.
11. Contact NeighborSpace <http://neighbor-space.org/main.htm> . They will be able to help you determine who owns the site, and:
  - A. If the city owns the land, you can apply to NeighborSpace to have them acquire the land. However, you will need to have started the garden organization and have ‘gardened’ for the garden/land to be considered for this benefit
  - B. There are many benefits to NS ownership that include liability coverage and access to the network of NS community gardens and other resources.
  - C. Or, just go to the NeighborSpace web site for more information and Inspiration!