



BEYOND BELIEF NETWORK

Beyond Belief Network Guides: Starting a community garden

Community gardens are an excellent project for service-minded groups and can easily involve children. Although they need at least weekly maintenance, they are a great source of healthy food for members, [conserve energy and fossil fuels](#), and can supply local food banks as well. March is a good time to find a plot and plan the garden.

Making a plan

Before doing anything, discuss with your team. You will want to find out how much and what types of produce your team will be interested in, how much you might donate, and how many people will be available to help maintain the garden. That will give you a sense of how big/how many plots you will need (or if you'd be okay with a bed in someone's yard).

Finding a garden site

Many communities already have [community gardens](#). Some are free, and others require a small amount of rent for a plot. If your group has a physical location, check to see if you can have a garden there. You might need to ask the management company or owner of the location. If there's any chance that the soil may be contaminated with heavy metals, you will need to test it the fall before planning. This is a great opportunity to reach out to a community center or other community organization.

Establishing the garden

Your local extension office, a local garden club, or greenhouse can give you information about when you can safely plant seeds and seedlings. They can also offer gardening tips and suggest which plants are right for your area and plot. You can purchase seeds or seedlings to plant. If you're willing to donate some or all of your produce to a local food bank, you can apply for a community gardening kit from former FBB beneficiary [Nourishing USA](#).

You can plant a large plot with a dozen volunteers in a few hours. Existing community garden organizations will often prepare the soil for planting, but not all of them do. You'll want to till or loosen the soil to get ready for planting.

You'll also need volunteers to stop by the plot at least once a week to water, weed, and harvest. During very hot weather, it's a good idea to stop by every other day. In the harvest season, you might also need to check every other day for ripe fruits and vegetables. Mulching can cut back on watering and weeding, but will be an additional cost. You can also extend the gardening season (if your garden allows it) by

planting cold hardy crops (e.g., greens, broccoli and other cruciferous vegetables, root vegetables) in the late summer.

You can have a cleanup day at the end of the season and get the garden ready for the winter. Your garden might have rules about what constitutes a cleanup, but you'll probably need to cut down the plants and perhaps mulch. You can use the vegetables you harvested for a celebratory meal after the cleanup day (remember to have extra help to prepare and serve the food to the volunteers).

Gardens are very child-friendly and educational. Kids love getting muddy, helping plant seeds, watering (themselves and the plants), and picking fruits and vegetables. They can even help pull weeds provided that the weeds are small and don't have thorns. They can learn about life cycles of plants, the food system, and how to prepare the produce they've grown.

Resources

1. [American Community Gardening Association](#) has [educational resources](#), [gardening tips](#), an extremely detailed [guide](#) to starting a community garden, and a [searchable database](#) of community gardens.
2. [Nourishing USA, Q3 2013 Poverty and Health beneficiary](#), offers [gardening kits](#) with seeds and a list of local food banks that will accept donations of fresh produce.
3. [350.org, Q1 2014 Natural World beneficiary](#), is a grassroots organizing network with the goal of educating people about climate change and reducing fossil fuel use. They suggest [community gardens](#) as a way to reduce fossil fuel consumption and offer plans and resources.
4. Contact your local extension office, a gardening club, or a greenhouse for gardening tips and instructions.