

CHAPTER 2: FIND THE RIGHT SITE FOR YOUR GARDEN

Choosing the right site for your garden can ensure success by providing the best environment for new gardeners to succeed at growing nutritious vegetables, while enjoying each others' company, and thriving in a new community space.

Armed with ideas from the garden planning committee and neighborhood input, you are ready to evaluate your land options. We recommend choosing several sites in a neighborhood that may fit your needs. Consider any other possibilities brought forward at community and group meetings. Many factors are involved in securing a site, so having several viable options is important.

Be prepared for issues to arise at this point. Setbacks could include a property owner who does not approve of the project, contaminated soil which poses too great a risk for growing food, an unwilling neighbor, lack of a water source, or the prohibitive cost of installing a water meter. If any of these situations occur, don't be discouraged. Chances are that other, likely better, land options exist for your garden.

Like any collaborative project, a successful community garden depends on people having good experiences from the beginning. Choosing the right site for your

garden can ensure success by providing the best environment for new gardeners to succeed at growing nutritious vegetables, while enjoying each others' company, and thriving in a new community space.

EVALUATE YOUR LAND

A good garden is one that balances several factors: ecological and financial viability, timeliness, and the capacity of the planning committee to do the necessary work. You should come up with a checklist to evaluate land suggestions (see Appendix C for a sample evaluation) that arise and visit each potential site to observe the pros and cons of each. Factors to include in your evaluation:

Sunlight: You will need a location receiving at least 6 hours of sunlight a day.

Shade: If shade from structure or trees, from which direction?

Size: How many beds of what size could you build?

Topography: Is the land relatively flat?



Salad greens sprout in the ExplorationWorks children's educational garden.

MAUREEN SHAUGHNESSY, NATIVE DESIGN, HELENA, MT.

What could you do if it had a significant slope?

Visibility: How visible is the garden for others? Will this location make the garden an asset to the whole community and mixed uses?

Soil composition: Sand, silt, clay, organic matter, compacted.

Drainage: Is it adequate?

Depth of topsoil

Any underground pipes or lines?

pH level

Results of soil test: Nitrogen (N), Phosphorus (P)-Potassium (K), heavy metals, etc.

Proximity to target population: Can gardeners walk to the site?

Accessibility: Handicapped accessible entrances and paths? Parking available?

Pre-existing assets: Fence, shed, good soil, boulders or other landscaping material.

Water access: Where would your water come from?

Are there public restroom facilities nearby?

Is there electrical power? (You don't actually need electricity for your garden, but this is helpful to know when making construction plans.)

History of use: You may need to contact the owner for this information, but it is important to know if there has been industrial or other high-risk activity in the past that may cause the property to be a poor choice for a community garden.

TEST YOUR SOIL

A visual analysis can determine the quality of your soil in regards to its textural composition, drainage, and whether it is compacted or not. However, there are many sources of pollution that may hinder your ability to grow safe food, so to be

sure you know what you are dealing with before you make any development plans. Soil should be tested in the fall prior to planting.

A soil test is necessary to determine the safety and adequacy of your soil. To do this you will need to collect a sample from the land, and have it tested by a laboratory. You should test your pH, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium content (nutrients required to grow healthy plants). It is also vital to test for heavy metals or other toxins which may be present in your soil.

Call your local county extension office to find out where to send soil samples, costs involved and exact methods of collection and labeling. Your county extension office has a wealth of information about gardening and will be a good resource for any growing questions you may have in general.

When gathering soil for your test, you will need a clean spoon, zip-top bags labeled with the exact location the samples were taken, and a small trowel. Choose four representative locations on the property and label each of the four zip-top bags. For each of your four sample locations, collect a few tablespoons of soil from an inch below the surface. Scrape away the top inch of soil in your sample, as it does not accurately represent the composition of the soil below. Gather the soil for each zip-top bag in this way from three places within a few feet of each other so that each sample accurately represents the small area you are testing.

If you are unsure what to test for, speak to your county extension officer. However, be sure your test includes the basics: pH, N-P-K, oil, zinc, arsenic, cadmium, and lead. This basic test should be relatively affordable and is generally around \$60. Heavy metal testing will require additional digestion fees, but it is vital to do the test.



MAUREEN SHAUGHNESSY, NATIVE DESIGN, HELENA, MT.

A healthy harvest at the Waukesha Community Garden in Helena.

Note: If the location is owned by, or is near a railroad, you can call the railroad company and ask them to test the soil for you. They may conduct testing for you regardless of whether or not the company owns the land.

CHOOSE YOUR SITE

Once you have settled on one or two viable locations, you are ready to seek permission to use the land from the owner(s).

Determine who owns the land:

To get land-use permission, you will have to know for certain who owns the land and how to get in contact with them. Your county tax assessor's office will have this information. If you don't have an actual address for the site, gather the surrounding addresses and describe the site to the best of your ability, as the assessor's office often has photos and maps of each parcel of land in the county. They can tell you based on the county's tax information who does in fact own the land, and can give you the contact information for that person or business. This is public information, and the assessor's office should be helpful to you in your search.

Sometimes there are discrepancies or holes in property lines, making it difficult to determine who actually owns the land you are hoping to use, so even if you think you know whose property it is, you should take the time to check with the county tax assessor's office before you begin building.

It is also important to learn how the land is zoned and whether community gardening is a permitted use. In most cases, it is.

COMMUNICATE WITH THE LAND OWNER:

Once you find out who owns the property, contact them for permission to use their land. You may write a letter, call, or visit with them in person. You may want to write them even if you already have a verbal agreement, so that the initial inquiry is documented. The support of City Commissioners, the City Parks Department, or other organizations can be very helpful at this point. A courteous, well-organized letter outlining a logical plan and specific proposal for leasing the land will go a long way toward persuading an owner to allow the use of their vacant land. Describe the benefits of community gardens to the neighborhood, your community, and to them as property owners. Describe the support the project already has and emphasize that you have a core group of dedicated people organizing the project.

LEASE AGREEMENTS AND USE AGREEMENTS

Once you have permission to use property, formal arrangements will need to be made. There are several ways that land can be acquired to build a community garden. Most commonly, land is rented or leased from a private property owner, a non-profit organization (such as a church or social service organization), or from

the city or county. The city or county may request to enter into a use-agreement, where the garden organization is not actually leasing the land, but rather is simply agreeing to the terms of its use.

Building a garden on private property is often a faster process than when using public land, but it can be harder to access public funds or sponsorship if the land is not publicly accessible.

Whichever land you choose, you will want to be sure you can obtain permission to lease or use it for at least three years. It is difficult to justify building garden beds and other infrastructure for less time. If possible, try to include in your lease agreement a clause stating that if your agreement should need to be terminated, your garden will remain in use until the end of the growing season. This will mitigate the potential for gardeners' loss.

Also, include in your lease agreement a hold-harmless clause for the benefit of the property owner. A hold-harmless clause limits their liability for injury or damage at the garden. An example of a hold harmless clause follows:

“We the undersigned members of the (name) garden group hereby agree to hold harmless (owner) from and against any damage, loss, liability, claim, demand, suit, cost and expense directly or indirectly resulting from, arising out of or in connection with the use of the (name) garden by the garden group, its successors, assigns, employees, agents and invites.”

DONATED LAND

You may also be in a position to buy or accept a donation of land to your garden. Think about whether your group can really afford this opportunity, as it will require you to pay taxes or to incorporate and file for 501(c)3 status soon thereafter.

PUBLIC LAND

Depending on whether you choose to use a garden site that is incorporated within a city, you will need to acquire permission from either the city commission or the county commission. Cities often have several kinds of open space within their boundaries, including designated (but undeveloped) parkland, subdivision dedications, or land already within a public park. Each of these levels of development are possible to convert to a community garden.

Be well-prepared before presenting a proposal to the city or county commission to use area within a park or undeveloped parkland to build a community garden. Have a written proposal of your plan, where you hope to build, your financial information (how the garden will be funded), and, if available, a landscape design for visual representation. Visuals of your community garden plans really illuminate ideas, and display their potential to create beautiful and rewarding space in your community.

Community gardens are a newly rediscovered use of land and your careful and courteous work with the authorities in your town will pave the way for future gardens. It may well be your plan to have the commission (the tax funds) pay for all or part of the garden. Be sure the commission, or specific commissioners, are well aware of this before you make your general proposal so they aren't surprised. The city endeavors to build public recreational structures and open space every time they build parks, baseball, football and soccer fields, tennis courts, and swimming pools, so requesting public funding is reasonable. A common concern is that community gardens are often restricted for use by people who have rented plots and paid dues. This is true for many other regulated