

## CHAPTER 3: DESIGN YOUR GARDEN

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### DESIGN YOUR GARDEN WITH COMMUNITY IN MIND

It is important to design your garden with the community who will use it in mind. Utilize the opportunities at your planning committee meetings and at the general informational meeting to ask the following questions: Are there elderly folks who may need vertical or raised beds? Are there small children? Are gardeners interested in large, family sized plots, smaller plots, or both? Community plots for Volunteer for Veggie programs? Fruit trees or shrubs? Herb beds? A flower garden? These are all good questions to ask early in the process. Use feedback from the general community meeting to meet the goals and needs of the community.

In general, your garden plan should include enough individual plots to maintain a vested interest for at least 10-15

individuals or families. This will generally mean 10-15 plots. This practice will serve to establish ownership of and responsibility for the garden. Beyond that, the more people who are involved in the garden, the better cared-for it will be. A local organization like the YMCA, homeless shelter, food pantry, Girl or Boy Scouts, or children's summer camp may want to have a garden bed or plot, inviting its membership to garden there. You might consider designing a few larger beds for this purpose.

When designing your garden, it is important to consider Montana's climate and ecology; particularly the issues of water and fencing. Considerable attention to water is essential to the success of a Montana garden. From rain-catch systems to drip irrigation, there are many options for providing water; just be sure to make a plan that will ensure the success and satisfaction of gardeners using the space. Fences are



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*Digging in the dirt at the children's ExplorationWorks! garden in Helena.*

often a priority for community gardens, as animals like deer and gophers can cause a lot of damage to gardens, especially later in the season as the landscape dries and veggies ripen and become more fragrant. Deer can generally jump fences up to six feet high, and gophers will dig one foot below a fence. Plan according to the ecology of your area, and ask nearby gardeners for tips on how they keep animals away.

## Accessibility

One of the most important assets needed for a community garden is the accessibility of your land. The term, “accessible” means a few different things, mainly geographical accessibility and access in your design. These factors include proximity to gardeners’ homes and the ability of people to get to the location by foot, bike, bus, or car. The design of a garden also determines its accessibility. Your design should include garden beds that elderly and disabled people can easily use. You must be sure the design fully fits the needs for limited mobility access, ensuring that the path from the parking area all the way to those disability garden beds also accessible. Also, is the material used to lay the path maneuverable in a wheelchair?

## Garden Beds

Consider designing some taller raised beds or shorter beds for gardeners with limited mobility: the elderly, people who use wheelchairs, disabled, and young children. Making the garden usable for the broadest population is vital to its success.

Besides their usefulness for gardeners with limited mobility, raised beds can be a solution to poor soil, or an answer to questionable levels of heavy metals on the property. Raised beds are built above ground, with materials such as wood or cinder blocks and filled with soil. Make sure your raised beds are at least 18 inches deep and filled partway with coarse



*People help build the garden beds in the Helena Food Share garden.*

COURTESY WEEL.

pebbles to allow drainage before filling with your soil.

## Pathways

You will want to plan paths with a minimum width of four feet. Paths to the wheelchair accessible areas of the garden should be planned to be built with concrete bricks, concrete, or clay brick set in sand that is well compacted. Other paths between plots may be laid with weed barrier underneath 3-4 inches of bark mulch or gravel. Avoid grass in your pathways as it will quickly creep into plant beds and cause problems for everyone.

## Irrigation

After finding a main source of water, there are a few irrigation options. You may choose to lay irrigation pipe through the garden to allow individual plot holders to water with drip irrigation. Drip and soaker-hose irrigation can be used for efficient watering and conservation in all areas of the garden for transplanted and established plants, as well as fruit trees and shrubs. If you settle on this method, we recommend a manual drip irrigation setup. You will want to encourage gardeners