



Community Gardens

Community gardens are sources of fresh, local food which benefit more than gardeners. They are places of beauty, green oases that are peaceful and productive places for people to de-stress and connect with nature and each other.

Much like parks, community gardens can be used as near-by sanctuaries, places to hold classes, play board games and create art. If your land trust is interested in reaching out to and engaging a wider circle of people, a community garden might be an option for you to get started or to enhance existing programs. It would connect people to the land, to each other and to the mission of your organization.

How are community gardens supported?

There are three kinds of support to consider:

1. Basic, physiological needs such as land, water and sunlight for whatever crops you will be growing.
2. Community support to keep the gardens functioning throughout the growing season, including its relationship to your land trust's mission and goals
3. Financial support necessary for acquisition, infrastructure, maintenance, insurance and tools.

Creative approaches that don't follow a model

There are gardens organized by church groups that charge nothing to gardeners and supply tools and a watering can. There are gardens that charge fees for each plot and are supported by their membership. Other gardens are supported by municipalities who provide water, land and administrative help, supplemented by volunteers who garden and govern. Some gardens have endowments; many depend on grants for their operating expenses.

Even though community gardens may not be financially self-supporting, they are community assets that engage, build and strengthen the community in many ways. They are a source of fresh, local and healthy food, combating the growing issue of food deserts. They provide common ground for people to recreate, get to know their neighbors and share ideas; they beautify a neighborhood and increase property values. Community gardens also offer neighbors a place to exercise, learn about growing food and connect with nature and one another in a beautiful setting.

Community Gardens Affiliated with Land Trusts

Neighborhood Gardens Trust—PA

Located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Neighborhood Gardens Trust (NGT) is the city's largest land trust. It is dedicated to preserving and supporting community gardens and other shared open spaces in all neighborhoods.

NGT has preserved more than 45 community gardens, ranging from single house lots to a 3.7-acre site, from vegetable and flower gardens to sitting parks. It provides assistance to its gardens in the form of liability insurance, technical support and capital improvements (with support from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society). The gardeners themselves run the daily operations.

"In Philadelphia and across the county, neighbors have come together to transform vacant and neglected land, often in historically disinvested neighborhoods, into vibrant open spaces where they grow food, flowers and community," explains Jenny Greenberg, executive director of NGT. "It is essential that we protect these shared spaces as a key element of the fabric of healthy and equitable cities."

- Partners: Pennsylvania Horticultural Society
- ngtrust.org

Three Rivers Agricultural Land Initiative—PA

A joint venture between Grow Pittsburgh and Allegheny Land Trust* (Pennsylvania) to protect and preserve select urban agricultural lands in perpetuity.

It provides long-term security for existing community gardens and urban farms, and ensures that future urban agricultural expansion will be planned and conducted on protected land.

- Partners: Grow Pittsburgh, Allegheny Land Trust
- alleghenylandtrust.org, growpittsburgh.org

"It is essential that we protect these shared spaces as a key element of the fabric of healthy and equitable cities."

— Jenny Greenberg, Neighborhood Gardens Trust Executive Director



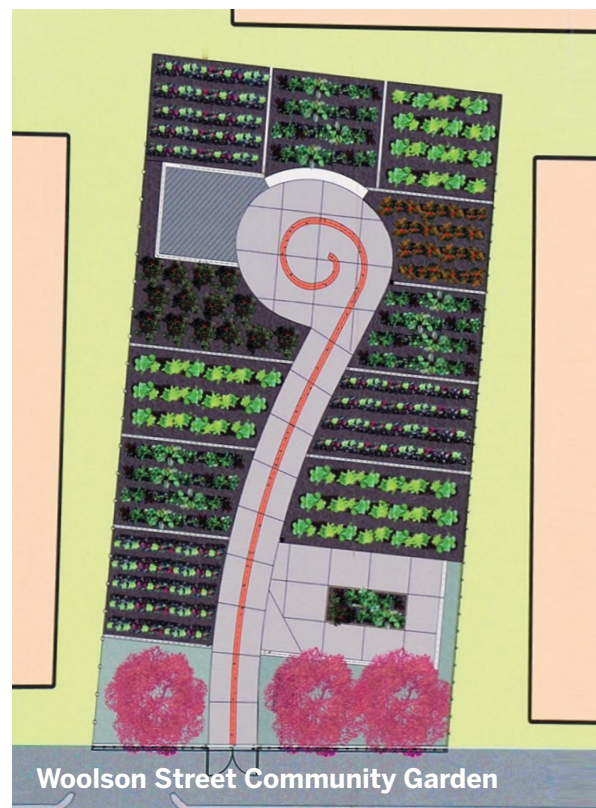
South End Lower Roxbury Open Space Land Trust — MA

According to The Trustees of Reservations (TTOR),^{*1} the South End's and Lower Roxbury's community gardens have a long history in Boston, where they've played a significant role in sowing community activism in addition to crops. Most trace their roots to the 1960s federal land-redevelopment program known as "Urban Renewal." As part of this effort to encourage new growth in major cities, many buildings were razed across the country. However, the funding developers needed to build on those urban properties didn't come as quickly as planned, and cities like Boston were left with an overwhelming number of vacant lots—especially in lower income neighborhoods.

"Eventually we came to the realization that relying solely on volunteers to maintain so many critical properties was just not sustainable," says Betsy Johnson, former president of the community gardens board.

The group decided that a merger or partnership was the right way to go, and Boston Natural Areas Network (BNAN) quickly emerged as its first choice. "As they already own 43 community gardens, they're very experienced in garden infrastructure, programming, and education issues," explains Johnson. BNAN was an affiliate of TTOR and then merged with the state-wide land trust. Johnson continues, "many of our properties have [cumbersome] deed restrictions related to their ancient history with urban renewal. BNAN was able to secure deeds from the city with the only restriction being that they remain community gardens forever. And its association with TTOR gives it the ability to fundraise for an endowment that will provide a dedicated staff person for our properties."

- Partners: Boston Natural Areas Network, The Trustees of Reservations



“Beautiful, shared growing and gathering spaces are transformative green oases for healthy and happy neighbors in cities and towns.”

— Rob Aldrich, Land Trust Alliance Director of Community Conservation

For more examples check out *Food and Hunger Spotlight*.

¹ www.thetrustees.org/what-we-care-about/community/a-new-leaf-cont.html

Madison Area Community Land Trust— WI

Madison Area Community Land Trust (MACLT) is a non-profit based in Madison, Wisconsin, that sells high-quality, energy-efficient homes at below market prices to low-to-moderate income households. MACLT homes are more affordable because homeowners purchase the home only, while the land remains part of the land trust. MACLT holds land in trust for the benefit of all, and connects people with affordable homes, nature and locally-grown food in community gardens.

Troy Gardens is the name of MACLT's award-winning, 31-acre project which combines community gardens, a working CSA farm, a restored prairie and a thirty home mixed-income co-housing community. MACLT began working on Troy Gardens in 1995 along with a wonderful group of collaborating organizations, completing the housing component in 2007.

Urban Open Space Foundation (UOSF) is a conservation land trust that was involved in the Troy Gardens Coalition from its earliest days. It works creatively with local governments, residents, businesses, private landowners and community organizations to acquire and conserve urban lands and their natural and open space values, and involve residents and area businesses in restoring natural, cultural and recreational features. UOSF holds a conservation easement on the 26 acres of agricultural and open space land that is managed by Friends of Troy Gardens (FTG).

The land trust is deeply involved in developing site plans and facilitating natural areas restoration activities on the land as an FTG partner organization.²

- Partners: Urban Open Space Foundation, Friends of Troy Gardens
- affordablehome.org

² From: Community and conservation land trusts as unlikely partners? The case of Troy Gardens, Madison, Wisconsin (2003) by Caton Campbella, Marcia, and Danielle A. Salus, Land Use Policy www.gregoryrosenberg.net/troygardens/articles/academic/index_assets/Land-Use-Policy-Article.pdf



Questions to ask yourself...

when considering a community garden

Land trusts are expanding their impact through community gardens as part of their work of connecting people to the land by relating their mission of land conservation to food, community building and hunger.

Recognizing that protecting land for community gardens can happen at a variety of scales and locations, some of the first questions to answer are:

- Why does your organization want to get involved in a community garden?
- What is the garden's purpose?
- How is this related to your land trust's mission and goals? Might you need to clarify your mission and goals, if this is now an important part of your work?
- How will you define your community?
- Who will you serve with the gardens?
- Who will be your community and partners in creating, using, supporting and maintaining this garden?



How does it fit with your strategic plan?

Your responses to the following questions are key to forming the structure of the garden and developing its relationship to your land trust's mission.

- How are you assessing the need for this garden? Are you talking to other community organizations? Individuals? Who might you partner with?
- Is the garden addressing a community need like hunger, isolation, or quality food shortages? If so, do you want to grow food for local food pantries?
- Will the garden be farmed by professionals (like a Community Supported Agriculture garden), by land trust interns/staff, or people from the community? It's possible to do any of these or a combination—it depends on your goals.
- Does your land trust want to elevate innovations in local or regional agriculture to inspire others in your community through the gardens?
- Will this garden help you live your organizational values of being welcoming and inclusive by serving the needs of non-traditional users (like people with disabilities, veterans, new Americans or youth organizations) by offering training opportunities, or educational programs on organic gardening?
- Are you going to serve those who want to learn how to farm, or those using the gardens as a place for people to grow market-based produce as an incubator farm?

Once you have clarified the garden's purpose as it relates to your organizational values and goals, and the community's goals, you need to think about specific sites for possible gardens.

Where should the possible garden be located so it can function well as a garden and as a gathering area?

Ask yourself the following questions about the physiological aspects of growing food in a community garden:

Sunlight

- Does the location get at least 6 hours of direct sun?

Water

- Water access is critical for every-day needs, especially with increasing periods of severe drought. What is the quality and quantity of that water? Do you have water access? What kind of access? Will you have to pay for it? Is there infrastructure needs? Legal requirements for use?
- What about excess water? Will your community garden function as green infrastructure that can help mitigate flooding and promote groundwater recharge?

Soil

- Is the land relatively level or could you create fairly level garden areas with raised beds or terraces?
- What is the past and current use of the land and the quality of the soil? Has there been dumping or airborne or waterborne contaminants? Are there heavy metals present, which can have negative impacts on health? Is there a way you can mitigate soil contamination issues through raised beds, excavation, or soil barriers and new soil?
- To ensure gardening success, you'll also want to test to know the soil's pH, nutrient levels and evidence of contamination.
- Vegetables need a fertile, well-drained soil with a pH between 6 and 7. Will you need to add compost or other organic matter to give the gardens a good start? How will you sustain that? How will you address on-site composting and dealing with vegetative debris/waste?



A sign at the CiudadVerde (CityGreen) Community Garden in Holyoke, Massachusetts, reads "Dedicated to all those who dedicate themselves to making a difference in the community."

Other

- Are there animals that might pose a problem such as deer, groundhogs, rabbits, chipmunks, squirrels or loose pets?
- Will you need a fence? If so, what kind of fence will be compatible for the garden and the community?
- Is there a location for toilet facilities?

Given that community gardens are also community-gathering areas, considering access is an important element:

- How accessible is the land and for whom? If you are in an area that has public transportation, is there—or could there be—public transportation to the property?
- Could people walk (or bike) there easily (not always an issue for rural or suburban gardens)?
- Is it located to allow for adequate parking for the number of gardeners and visitors/community members you want to serve? If you want school children to visit, could small or large buses park in the area?
- If you are going to host events and programs for the community, is access going to fit your goals?
- Will parking and other access needs be compatible with the neighborhood goals?
- How are you going to embrace the social and community-building aspects of a community garden—something that has been widely recognized as critical to their success and impact?

Community support

Once these more technical and organizational questions are satisfied, the next step is to reach into the community and find supporters to ground-truth possible locations and the overall vision. Create a simple strategy that starts with listening, brainstorming, imagining and adapting different scenarios. Develop an understanding as to how the garden will be embraced and used in the short- and longer-term.

This approach may vary depending on if you own the land or are going to be acquiring the land via donation or purchase.

As with many community-based efforts, talk to organizations and individuals who might have an interest in the project first, before you hold a public forum. Understand their goals, ideas and possible concerns. Be thoughtful and flexible.

To maximize your impact, it might be helpful to listen and respond to what your community desires and who is interested in being actively involved in the development of the project. Talk to any possible neighbors before you go public with a community forum related to a specific site.

If you are going to be hosting listening or brainstorming sessions, clarify if you are brainstorming about the concept in general or about specific locations for gardens (if you don't already own the site it is often helpful to talk conceptually first). Be as inclusive as possible. Spread the word far and wide and seek input from those whom the garden might impact.

During the process, invite local businesses, churches and community organizations to your meetings. Ask them what they see as needs and what they can contribute—and how this project will help meet their needs too. Create a simple outreach and engagement strategy that phases the outreach and participation of various people and organizations appropriately.



Partnerships

Creating partners in the community is a vital part of creating a garden space. Not everyone will give money. Some will provide you with priceless volunteer capacity that will get the garden project off the ground. Look into organizations that offer their time and expertise such as Habitat for Humanity, community volunteers (such as Rotary Clubs) or a construction company. You never know where a helping hand will be if you don't ask.

You may also need help with insurance or writing a contract, or for materials like garden tools or big-ticket items such as fencing, a shade covering for gardeners or well drilling. Think of donations in terms of who might be able to help in your neighborhood, city or town.

A garden is built slowly and steadily and should include as many people as it can. After all, it's not just people growing food together, it's also growing community.

Engaging potential gardeners

Recognize at the beginning that keeping people communicating, inspired, valued and engaged is central to your gardens' success. If this is going to be a community garden where people from the community have individual plots or assist in the gardening, keep track of anyone who expresses interest in having a garden.

Talk to them about how they see the garden being organized. Ask about their level of experience and interest; clarify what level of support you as a land trust will be able to provide, and how you might work with partner organizations or other gardeners. Will you have experienced gardeners involved to identify pests and diseases and assist new gardeners? Perhaps the local Master Gardeners, a garden center employee or a garden club member will volunteer to help as needed. Will there be individual plots or will you grow food as a collective with everyone sharing in the produce harvested?

You will need to create an agreement and application for gardeners that include rules such as attendance at meetings, maintenance of the beds and methods of gardening. For example, will yours be an organic garden and limit the use of pesticides?

If your garden is going to involve community management, you'll need to clarify key roles. Some gardens are organized with a governing committee, a communications committee, a volunteer who keeps track of the memberships and dues if any, or another volunteer who walks the garden daily and looks for beds that aren't being cared for, insects that are causing damage or diseases that are present. Some gardens have staff who fill these roles and other gardens use a combination of staff and volunteers.

Regardless of whether your staff or key volunteers manage the overall function of the gardens, you will need to keep track of everyone who is involved to ensure open lines of communication, grow a sense of appreciation and support for your land trust and the garden, and meet overall goals and objectives. Often this information is entered into your organizational database (or, if there is no database, a simple spreadsheet) and includes donors who finance the garden projects, gardeners, volunteers, community members who use the garden area, and organizational partners.



Budgets and funding

Gardens affiliated with your land trust can often receive support from grants, schools, community organizations, churches and individuals. Consider from the beginning if you will be including membership fees and how that could impact those you plan on engaging and serving.

Initially, expenses will be related to acquisition (if you are purchasing the land, including basic due-diligence for legal access, contamination, water rights, etc.), soil testing related to soil health, compost/soil depending on the soil health and if you are building raised beds, water access/systems, tools and maybe fencing. Parking, signage, outreach, gardener agreements, community programming and liability insurance might also factor into your budget—and can be phased appropriately. Over time, you'll want to budget for annual maintenance, programming and phased capital improvements.

Staff time, if you have staff involved or envision hiring someone, is wise to include in your organizational budgeting. Whether covered through general membership contributions to your organization, a CSA membership, or general fundraising and grants for the garden, it's important to clarify your funding strategy over several years.

There may be grants available locally through groups such as the Rotary Club, faith-based organizations, donor-advised funds, foundations interested in health and community wellbeing, art councils and women's organizations as well as grants from the government, hospitals and large gardening equipment corporations. Research your funding options recognizing that you may be able to connect with non-traditional funders for your land trust if the goals of the garden go beyond a limited number of people having garden plots.

Depending on where you are in your organizational development as a land trust, clarify if/how you are open to starting an endowment and growing it over time, and if so, how that will relate to your land trust as a whole. Having a steady inflow from an endowment and membership fees, if you charge them, will enable your garden to grow with confidence.



Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy

© Chris Link

Other resources on community gardening

Please refer to the Land Trust Alliance's website for additional information about land trusts and community gardens, community conservation and engagement.

www.landtrustalliance.org/topics/community-conservation

You will find Community Conservation Spotlight's, including one on addressing food and hunger, case-studies on various land trusts working with their community (including agriculture and community gardens as a tool for change), and references related to *Land Trust Standards and Practices* for sound organizational and project management.

You may also want to visit...

American Community Gardening Association

The mission of the ACGA is to build community by increasing and enhancing community gardening and greening across the United States and Canada.

communitygarden.org

City Farmer News

For the past 40 years, City Farmer has encouraged urban dwellers to pull up a patch of lawn and plant some vegetables, kitchen herbs and fruit.

cityfarmer.info

Your local/state Master Gardener Program

Nearly all Master Gardener programs in the United States administer training through a state land-grant university and its Cooperative Extension Service.

<https://articles.extension.org/pages/9925/state-and-provincial-master-gardener-programs:-extension-and-affiliated-program-listings>

USDA National Agricultural Library's Alternative Farming Systems Information Center

This has a resources page with links to articles and other publications related to community gardens.

www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/community-gardening

If your land trust has a community garden story to share, contact communityconservation@lta.org



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Join the conversation

Community Conservation Learning Network forum on the Learning Center
<https://tlc.lta.org/CCLNforum>

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*Denotes accredited land trust. See landtrustaccreditation.org