



MARION POLK FOOD SHARE

# COMMUNITY GARDENS

## How to Start a Community Garden

### A Beginners Guide

**Presented by Marion Polk Food Share  
and the Community Gardens of Marion & Polk  
Counties**

So you want to start a community garden. Wonderful! Welcome to the fruitful intersection of gardening and community building. Community gardening is a great way to meet your neighbors, get closer to nature and eat delicious, nutritious food. We also encourage you to donate a percentage of your community garden produce to your local food pantry or Marion Polk Food Share, where it will nourish families in need across Marion and Polk counties.

Creating a community garden is not difficult, but it takes some planning and patience. This guide is meant to walk you through the process. But inevitably, every situation is different, and problems may arise that are not covered here.

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## 1. What exactly is a community garden?

There is no “official” definition of a community garden. We like to think about it as a garden where both food and community are grown side by side. The typical set up of a community garden is an area of land divided into plots – one for each gardener or family. Tools, compost, and seating areas are shared by all members. Number and size of the plots vary depending on the size of the land available and the gardeners involved. We have seen community gardens with anywhere from 8 to 80 plots, and plot sizes from a standard 4’ x 6’ raised bed, to a large 20’ x 20’ field plot, to beautiful, permaculture-inspired assortments of shapes and sizes. Sometimes, community gardens have no demarcation or individual plots at all, and are communally run. This works especially well with a smaller garden, but can certainly be orchestrated on a larger scale. These gardens emphasize the community aspect even more so, as the entire garden is worked as “the commons.”

*School Gardens* also may be considered community gardens, but are generally cared for by students from a school or youth program. However, in some instances, community gardens (described above) flourish on school properties and serve as great ways to connect a school with its local community.

*Peace Gardens* are gardens with a particular social purpose behind them. In Salem, we have Northgate Forgiveness and Peace Garden, founded as a community healing project after the shooting of a

teen in a local public park. Other examples include gardens as symbolic protest and “Victory Gardens,” modeled after the World War II era phenomenon.

*Demonstration Gardens* can be community run, but the goals are different. The central goal of a demonstration garden is to educate and demonstrate particular techniques, design or plants. This requires more coordination and expertise, but can be a great way to reach out to your neighbors. A section of a community garden may be set aside as a demonstration site.

*Food Bank/Homeless Gardens* are gardens where all the produce goes to food pantries or to families in need. Gardeners may be volunteer church or community members, individuals who are homeless or in need of food, or employees of nonprofit organizations. Typically, the goal of these gardens is to grow food for those who need it most in our community, and re-enforce the notion that *all* people deserve healthy, locally grown food. Any community garden can contribute produce to your local pantry or to Marion Polk Food Share.

## **2. Needs assessment: Does your community need a garden?**

Before jumping headlong into your garden endeavors, we recommend thinking about the need for a garden in the first place. There is no point to starting a project if its chances of success are low. Also we should always listen to our communities

before we act. Understand, evaluate, then act. Here are some questions to consider:

1. Does the neighborhood already have community gardens? If so, were they full last season? Was there demand for more plots?
2. Would your time be better spent revitalizing and coordinating an existing garden as opposed to “reinventing the wheel?”
3. Is the neighborhood and local government friendly to such projects, or is it likely to face opposition? By no means should you give up if facing opposition, just prepare!
4. What is the gardening skill level and interest in your neighborhood? Are folks already gardening a lot? Do they have access to land (yards or no yards)? Do they come from agricultural backgrounds? If skill level is low, think about what resources you can provide to novice gardeners.
5. Do you and your neighbors share the same language? Cultural background? If not, collaborate with those of different backgrounds and work with a translator.
6. Is your neighborhood relatively food secure, or are a lot of people struggling to feed themselves? Consider sliding scale or free plots, and donating surplus to a local pantry.
7. Do most people in your neighborhood work full time? Are they retired? Do they have kids? This will affect the design and scale of your garden.

- 8. Have neighbors expressed interest in a community garden? When you run the idea by them, how do they react? Do they know what a community garden is?

All these questions will help you determine not only if your neighborhood needs a community garden, but also what this garden should look like and how it should operate. Now let's get to the details...

### 3. Selecting a Site

To get started, you first need to identify where the community garden will be. I recommend going about this in the following fashion: 1) Identify potential sites. 2) List pros and cons of each. 3) List your favorite to your last resort, and 4) Pursue each site down the list, until one works out.

**Public versus private land:** There are advantages and disadvantages to using different kinds of land. Consider the chart on the opposing page.

- *Identifying sites:* Walk around your neighborhood and observe the land. Where are the empty or abandoned lots? Does your local city park or school have a sunny, relatively empty space? Consider both public and private property: both are doable. The ideal site depends on your priorities for the garden and your neighborhood, but consider the following when looking at a piece of land:

- *Realistic Land Usage:* How hard will it be to gain access to the land? Is the landowner an avid gardener with no plans to develop their property, or are you eyeing the front of City Hall on Main Street? We certainly don't discourage courageous ideas like a City Hall Garden, but bear in mind you may be facing months or more of advocacy and wading through red tape for something like that.

Type of Land	Pros	Cons
<b>Private Owner</b>	Less bureaucracy, quicker to establish. Fewer rules (depending on owner).	Impermanence; owner may sell or develop. Owner may want gardeners to pay liability insurance.
<b>City or County</b>	May provide free resources (water, leaves, etc.). Permanence, especially if on park land.	More bureaucratic process, longer wait for approval. May impose strict guidelines.
<b>School or University</b>	Labor source readily available. Permanence, especially if supported by course or club.	Lack of support in summer. Supportive staff might leave school.

- *Visibility:* Can people see the garden? Is it a high car, bike or pedestrian traffic area? If the garden is highly visible, you will probably have better luck filling it with

gardeners. But you may have more issues with garden vandalism.

- *Neighbors:* Who would be your garden's neighbors, and how might they interact with the garden? Is the area residential, commercial, industrial or rural? Apartments or single family homes? Is there a community center with youth programs next door, or a noisy auto body shop? Are their particular neighbors who might *not* like the garden, or potential partners? We recommend knocking on some doors and running the idea by folks to gauge enthusiasm or disdain for the idea. Naysayers may only need a few free tomatoes to be convinced.
- *Sunlight:* Does the site get ample sun? If large buildings or fences lie to the south of the site, you will want to design the garden accordingly. If the garden site gets little or no sun, it may not be the best site. Full sun is good, but much can still be done with partial shade.
- *Water:* Especially in Oregon, think about flooding. Observe the site after one of our lovely 3-day rains. If the drainage is bad, you will need to incorporate that challenge in to your plan. Using raised beds, building berms or swales, building a rain garden, or constructing a drainage ditch may be potential solutions. Or, maybe this simply isn't the best site. Also consider access to water for watering during our dry season. Is there easy access to ground water? A well? Could you collect rainwater off a nearby roof? See Resources, Section 14.
- *Soil:* What's the ground like? Most likely, it's not ideal vegetable growing soil at this point. It may be rocky, full of clay, cluttered with debris, or maybe even an old

concrete foundation. All these are still workable. But you'll want to prepare for either using raised beds and imported soil or improving your soil with added organic matter. See Resources, Section 14.

- *Existing plants:* If you're lucky, your site might have a fruit tree or two already there. If not, it may be overrun with noxious weeds and Himalayan Blackberry. The more weeds, the more work it'll be to clear room for your bountiful garden.

#### 4. Red tape: Navigating bureaucracies

- *Private Landowners:* When working with private landowners, things are simpler, but more tenuous. It's wonderful that a landowner wants to allow their land to be used for a community building and food-producing project, so be sure to thank them a lot. If they don't garden or participate much in the project, make sure they see the benefits – bring them produce and show them pictures. Sit down with them and come up with guidelines for the garden: how will you select gardeners, how will the garden function, etc. Also be sure to ask about the owners' plans for the land: do they want to sell or develop soon, or do they plan on waiting until retirement, 15 years down the road. The danger of a garden on private land is it *will* end at some point. Ultimately, the purchase of that land was an investment for the owner, and unless they're extremely giving and love gardens, they will want to cash in on it eventually.

*A special note on churches:* While church property also is private, these gardens typically don't face the same challenges as land owned by a private individual. Churches typically see gardens as a great outreach and community service project. They're also easy to start – with minimal bureaucracy, and typically in residential, easy to access neighborhoods.

- *City or County Owned Land:* From our experience, gardens on publicly owned land are the most sustainable. The challenge is getting the final “ok” to break ground (and figuring out *who* can actually give that ok!). Typically, the County Assessor is the place to start to figure out who owns a piece of land. Once you have this information, we recommend two things: 1) Test the waters, and 2) Build community buy-in. Test the waters by having conversations with some government officials. Find out if your city or county already supports community gardens on their land and what the process was for establishing those. Chances are, they've been asked before. They will definitely want to see community buy-in – that is, support from a broad range of businesses, organizations and families. They're thinking, if you move away or burn out, will they have a messy looking

ex-garden to take care of. They don't want that. So you need to show that: a) the community wants this, and b) the community will take care of it. See chart on this page for more info.

- *Schools & Colleges:* Starting a garden at a school or college is similar to starting one on city or county land. All the same concerns exist. The most important aspect, though, is getting support from administration. This will make or break your project. In K-12 schools, this is typically a principal; in colleges, a dean. Secondly, facilities have to be on board. These are the folks who mow the grass, maintain the buildings, etc. They will be key in identifying the best place for the garden. Their primary concern will be labor – they don't want the garden to be an extra responsibility for them,

so have a plan in place regarding how the garden will be managed and sustained. Which leads us to: teacher buy-in.

If you're starting a garden at an educational institution, we're assuming you want it to be educational. So we need kids in the garden! In K-12, we recommend working with an afterschool program to start a garden club or a science teacher to incorporate gardening into the curriculum. At colleges, we recommend partnering with or starting a student group or collaborating with an academic program or institute interested in the environment,

Group	Potential Type of Support
City Councilor	Political.
Food pantry	Donation of harvests.
Local Businesses	Sponsorship, supply donations.
Local Churches	Sponsorship, gardeners, land.
Neighborhood Association	Political, fundraising.
Neighbors – door to door	Gardeners, volunteers
Nonprofit organizations, such as MPFS, HandsOn	Organizational support, supplies, volunteers.
Rotary, other community development groups	Political, fundraising.
Salem Harvest	Donation of harvests.
Schools	Gardeners, volunteers, partnership.
Youth groups, such as Boy Scouts, YMCA, Boys & Girls Club	Volunteers, labor for garden construction.

horticulture or sustainability. A couple challenges particular to school-based projects:

1) The Summer. It's a sad site when a bountiful school garden rots in the summer months. Think about ways to continue programming into the summer, and allow kids and parents structured, regular access to the garden. Identify which families are invested and not going away for the break, and assign summer garden duties. Or, diversify management of the garden and turn it over to neighborhood community gardeners for the summer.

2) Safety. If your garden combines school children and general members of the community, remember to have adults take background checks and register as volunteers with your local school district. Also make sure you provide adequate supervision from trusted adults while kids are gardening. Be sure the school is aware and on board with how you manage the garden!

## 5. Insurance for Community Gardens

For some gardens, insurance is never an issue. Gardeners assume they "garden at their own risk" and landowners consider gardening activities in the same way they consider activities already taking place on their land – no additional coverage required. Sometimes, however, insurance is a primary concern for landowners and a major roadblock for community gardens. But it is by no means insurmountable. Basically, this comes down to how much risk a garden landowner is comfortable with. We've seen many different

insurance set-ups for gardens. See below for the most common:

### 1. No additional coverage, waivers

Many gardens have no additional coverage. The garden is simply covered by whatever existing policy is in place on that piece of land. If a garden is on city property, it's covered the same way a public park is. Church gardens would be covered only by existing church policies, school gardens by school policies, etc. Gardens may elect to have gardeners sign a waiver, essentially saying "garden at your own risk" and "I agree not to sue the landowner if I'm injured in the garden." Ultimately, a waiver is not complete legal protection if a gardener believes the landowner was negligent. In our time working with community gardens, this has never happened, and we've never heard of it happening. Gardeners generally assume community gardening is "at your own risk" and take responsibility for their actions.

### 2. Additional private policy, forming a nonprofit

This would mean having an insurance policy for only the community garden, or a group of community gardens. In order to take out an insurance policy, the garden would have to form a nonprofit corporation, registered with the State of Oregon. The process is simpler than registering as a 501(c)3, but is still time consuming and has some associated fees. The garden also must form a board and hold regular board meetings with official positions and minutes. Gardens have utilized Huggins Insurance in Salem for private

policies. Yearly fees hover around \$300. Community Sun Gardens, the only gardens in Salem to have a private policy, split this fee among their 115 gardeners. Options for covering this cost include garden plot rental fees and/or sponsorship or donation from a local business, foundation or other organization.

### **3. Additional coverage from landowners**

Another option is for the landowner to take out an additional policy on behalf of the community garden. Costs for the additional policy could be subsidized by the gardeners themselves (via rental fees) or covered by a sponsor or donor in the community. This would be less expensive than option 2 above, less paperwork, and faster to accomplish.

### **4. Joining Community Sun Gardens**

Dina and Ray Devoe have been managing Community Sun Gardens for more than 10 years. The nonprofit corporation runs two community gardens, but used to run several more. They may be open to having additional gardens in the area join. Someone from any joining garden would have to attend their monthly board meetings in Salem. As part of joining, gardens would be included on their insurance policy. Their current insurance costs (approx. \$300/year) would not increase with additional gardens covered, and this cost could be split among gardeners. Marion Polk Food Share is a partner, but not formally tied to Community Sun Gardens. They can be reached at (503) 378-1847.

### **5. Coverage from a local nonprofit or other organization**

Another option is to have a third party include your garden(s) on their existing policy. This could be a local nonprofit, church or other organization. A contract agreement would have to be drafted explaining that the landowner is not legally responsible for activities on the garden site and that a third-party organization is assuming that responsibility. I have sample contracts for such an arrangement.

### **6. Access to Water**

Primary to starting a community garden is providing water access for that garden. When selecting a site, find out if it already has city water or well access onsite. If not, you may want to move on to the next potential site. Piping in water or well digging can be very expensive. We've seen one garden start up and function *without* existing water access (gardeners filled up large barrels and transported in water), but it's hard to find new gardeners willing to take this on.

- *City Public Works Waived Water Fees:* As of the Summer of 2012, the City of Salem offers waived water fees to qualifying community gardens. This policy may have changed by the time you read this, but here's how it currently works: In order to receive waived water fees, your garden must meet certain standards set by Marion Polk Food Share and the City of Salem Public Works Department. The primary rule is that the garden cannot participate in for-profit activities (no sale of harvests,



no fundraising on garden grounds) and they must have an existing water meter that measures only garden water usage. A Food Share representative and the landowner of the garden site sign a contract outlining this, and turn it in to the City of Salem Public Works Department. Then, the city sends out a staff person to inspect water lines on the premises. If the city determines there is proper access and a meter, they may elect to waive fees from that meter. If proper infrastructure is not there, they may donate some labor and equipment, but typically require the garden to buy permits and pay for any contracted construction. Only gardens within the limits of the City of Salem qualify. Some other water districts waive fees for gardens on a case by case basis, so it's certainly worth checking.

- *Paying for Water:* If you're outside the City of Salem, or don't qualify for waived fees, or don't have a well, you may have to pay for water. There are a couple ways you can approach this: 1) Charge your gardeners. Some gardens charge plot rental fees, averaging around \$25/season. This fee can be used to pay water bills. 2) Find a donor. A sponsoring church, neighborhood association, business or nonprofit may choose to help pay your water bills. Put together a proposal outlining your request, and be sure to explain that they will be listed as a garden sponsor on signage and any other outreach materials.
- *Rainwater Harvesting, Active and Passive:* Another, much more environmentally friendly option is to not use ground water at all! This is very possible in our rainy

climate, with the proper equipment and preparation. Active rainwater harvesting is the utilization of rain barrels, tanks or cisterns to store water collected from rooftops. Passive rainwater harvesting is designing your garden in such a way that you maximize usage of the water that falls and flows on your land. *Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands and Beyond*, by Brad Lancaster, is a great starting place for those interested in exploring this option.

- *Water Conservation:* When you start your garden, it's important to consider water conservation. Water quickly can become a contentious issue of not dealt with up front. If gardeners are splitting the cost evenly, and some use much more than others, conflict can arise. Or, organizations covering the water may discontinue their gift if water use is exorbitant. Encouragement of rainwater harvesting and/or drip irrigation is the best way to conserve water. Overhead sprinklers are the most wasteful, and end up watering weeds as much as your plants. You may want to disallow overhead watering and encourage drip.

## 7. Who Will Garden the Garden? Finding Your Community

Once your garden is established and ready, you need find the gardeners. Some gardens fill up instantly, and even have long waiting lists. Others struggle to keep plots full throughout the season. The key is simply getting the word out, and making the “joining” process easy and welcoming. Good places to recruit include: your neighbors (go door-to-door or leave flyers), nurseries and other gardening shops, churches, schools, community centers and other community gardens that are full. It’s important to have large, readable signage at the garden, as people may not know plots are available to the public. Use sign-up sheets or rental contracts so folks feel it’s official, and create an email list or phone tree to get the word out about garden happenings.

## 8. Breaking Ground, Building Soil

- *Garden Design:* Before you build your garden, you need to develop a design. The design really depends on: a) the nature of the land; b) the people, or community, who will be using the garden. I recommend a process known as “Sector Analysis” to guide your design. Toby Hemenway’s book, *Gaia’s Garden*, provides a nice guide to the process. Basically, a Sector Analysis is mapping of phenomena on your site. Based on careful observation, make note of sunlight, rain fall and water flow, wind, animals, traffic, pollution, noise, human interaction (litter, walking path, etc.), and any other

factors. Then you’ll want to consider the future human community of the garden. Do you want a grid of rectangular beds to suit individual plot renters, or a winding, dynamic layout that emphasizes beauty and encourages meandering?

<i>Method</i>	<i>Pro</i>	<i>Con</i>
<b>Raised beds, imported soil</b>	Instant garden. No tilling. Good drainage. High soil quality.	Can be expensive.
<b>Lasagna/sheet mulch</b>	Mostly free, recycled materials. Produces fertile soil with minimal inputs.	Will take significant time to be ready for planting.
<b>Tilling</b>	Quickly prep a large area.	Causes soil damage and poor drainage. Requires access to equipment. Requires fuel.

- *Raised Beds, Tilling, Sheet Mulching:* You have a few basic options for prepping soil for planting, and you can certainly combine all these to adapt to your garden’s circumstances. The quickest and most expensive approach is raised bed gardening with imported soil. If you’re in a hilly area and your soil is mostly red clay, you may want to consider this option. You’ll need funds, donations, or lucky finds, but you can build raised boxes with lumber and fill them with a pre-made soil/compost mix from your local landscape supply

company. Some options in the Salem area include Highway Fuel, Terra Gardens and Bark Boys.

Another option is to use “sheet mulch” or “lasagna” methods. This no till method involves suppressing weeds or grass with cardboard, and then layering large amounts of organic materials on top, such as compost, leaves, food scraps, bark dust, newspapers, aged manure, etc. Over a few months, this will break down and create a fertile growing environment. This method is cheapest (most of the materials are free), but requires a little more patience and forethought. See a text, such as *Gaia’s Garden*, or do a quick web search for “sheet mulching” or “lasagna gardening.”

Lastly, you can utilize your native soil. To prep the soil, you can rototill, use a tractor with a tiller attachment, work the soil by hand, or incorporate a sheet mulch method on a large scale. Adding more compost is recommended with any of these options. The MPFS Gardens Program typically has rototillers, volunteers with tractors, and materials for sheet mulching available for community garden start up.

- *Organizing Your First Work Party:* To get your garden going, you’ll need a lot of hands. Boy Scout troops, church groups, groups from schools or after school programs, community service groups and a bunch of neighbors and friends are all viable options. The Food Share’s Community Gardens program has connections with many volunteer groups and may be able to help find one for your project. Another good volunteer

resource in our community is HandsOn Mid-Willamette Valley. They can be reached at 503-363-1651.

## 9. What Should Our Garden Grow?

Depending on the organizational style of your garden (see Section 11), you, or core group, may be directly involved in plantings. Or, if your garden is primarily focused on rental plots, you may only be setting some guidelines for what others can grow.

*Traditional Vegetables:* The typical community garden grows mainly annual vegetables. In Oregon we’re blessed with a mild spring and fall, and have a quite a long season for many vegetables, including greens, broccoli, cabbage, kale, carrots, beets, peas, potatoes and onions. Our hot season, however, is relatively short. Squash, tomatoes, peppers and their brethren come on late, but still produce in abundance in the late summer. We recommend encouraging your gardeners to consider climate appropriate crops that can grow in cooler months. You can even over winter many plants in the cabbage family in Western Oregon. Good vegetable gardening resources include the OSU Extension (they have a great garden calendar online), the *Maritime Northwest Garden Guide* and Steve Solomon’s *Vegetable Gardening West of the Cascades*.

*Staples:* The Willamette Valley has recently seen a resurgence of interest in staple crops — foods that comprise, or can comprise, the core of a person’s diet. In

the Willamette Valley, viable staple crops include dry beans, buckwheat, wheat berries, quinoa, millet, amaranth and wheat. If we are to truly feed ourselves locally, we need to look at staples as well as vegetables. We think it would be an interesting endeavor for community gardens to experiment with staple crops. The Willamette Valley Bean and Grain Project is a good resource for those interested.

*Edible Perennials:* In some community gardens, the coordinators discourage plot holders from growing perennial or biennial edibles, such as berries, artichokes, asparagus and the like. This is because they till the entire garden each year, or they don't guarantee the same plot to the same people each year. Edible perennials offer many benefits, though, including low maintenance and adding diversity and beauty to any garden. If you don't want plot holders to grow them, we recommend setting aside common areas or borders in your garden for perennials. They will add a nice dimension to the overall feel of the garden.

*Fruit Trees:* Like edible perennials, fruit trees will add to the diversity of foods and beauty of your garden. They also will create microclimates and shade in the summer that will enhance your gardening options. Carefully consider your tree variety and placement. Always look up the potential size of the tree, and imagine how that will affect the rest of the garden.

*Chickens:* According to current City of Salem law (2012), chickens are now legal in community gardens. If you're interested in having chickens, contact Chickens in the Yard (CITY), [www.salemchickens.com](http://www.salemchickens.com), for more info. If your

project is within another municipality, check local laws. The benefits of chickens in the garden are huge: eggs, fertilizer, pest control to name a few. Organizing how to care for chickens in a community garden may be a challenge, but certainly doable.

*Bees:* Currently, there are no regulations regarding bees. You can house honeybees in a community garden. Just post a warning sign for those with allergies and do not sell the honey for profit. Bees are great pollinators, and, of course, they provide honey! See the Willamette Valley Beekeepers Association:

<http://www.orsba.org/htdocs/wvbabbranch.php>

## 10. Atmosphere, Aesthetics, and Sharing Space

The “non-plant” areas of the community garden are just as important as the vegetables. After all, a community garden isn't just for growing food; it's for growing community too. When planning the garden, we recommend thinking about the following:

- *Signage and Seating:* A big sign welcoming everyone to the garden is essential. You also may want to consider educational signage about the founding or purpose of the garden or small signs explaining different plant varieties. Posting contact info for the garden is essential in gaining gardeners and volunteers.

Seating areas are also key. To encourage conversation, a welcoming atmosphere and sharing, we highly recommend some common areas with benches or picnic tables. Ideally, you can eventually provide a covered area for our long rainy season (and collect rainwater off it!).

- *Fences and Arbors:* Many gardens have fences or arbors to add interest to the landscape and serve functional purposes. If traffic, pollution, unsightly views or theft might be issues in the garden, a fence might be the solution. We'd recommend inviting fencing, with ample gates, low height and borders of shrubs or vines.
- *Public Versus Private, the Commons:* It's important to remember that a community garden is public space. Encourage (or even require!) your gardeners to clean up after themselves and not "leave a mess for someone else." The last thing a coordinator wants is for your garden to gain a reputation as an eyesore. Be clear about expectations, and clear about who maintains public areas and private plots in gardens.

## 11. Rules and Regulations: Organizing the Garden

There are many ways to organize, or not organize, your community garden. The style depends on your goals and the folks involved.

- *Rental Plots:* Perhaps the most common form of community garden is a plot-rental system. Individuals or families rent a plot (could be free or fee-based) and grow whatever they like for home consumption in that plot. If the goal is simply to get families gardening, this is the way to go. Most people are familiar with this model: simply split up the garden into even parcels, and divvy out. In some cases, rental gardens serve as gathering places. In others, we've seen relatively little sharing, and folks pretty much tend their own plots and leave. Another downside is that sometimes gardens of this style do not pay much attention to differences in microclimate. A shady or rocky plot is designed and gardened no differently than a sunny loamy plot. But,

Garden Style	Positives	Negatives
<b>Rental Plots</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gardeners are generally committed</li> <li>• Easy to organize and find gardeners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less community atmosphere</li> <li>• Fees may be a barrier for some</li> <li>• Little attention to overall design, inefficient use of space</li> </ul>
<b>Communal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages teamwork, community building</li> <li>• More attention to design, efficient use of shade, sun, water, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficult to find committed members</li> <li>• Organization/volunteer turnout may be challenging</li> <li>• Food may go unused without harvesting schedule in place</li> </ul>
<b>Production</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grow a large amount of food for those in need. Directly supply a local pantry or meal site.</li> <li>• Simple to garden and organize.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less community building aspect</li> <li>• Not teaching self sufficiency/life skills</li> </ul>

the upside is gardener commitment. A garden of this kind does not rely on volunteer labor or a committee – the gardeners sign up, have ownership over their section, and this generally means they are in it for the season. In Salem, Sunnyside Community Garden and Redeemer Community Garden are examples of this model.

- *Communal Gardening:* This is a community garden that does not rent plots to individuals. The garden utilizes an overarching design, and is run by a dedicated group of neighbors or volunteers. Gardeners share food freely, without ownership over specific sections. Generally, passersby are encouraged to harvest. The goals center on neighborhood organizing and beatification, more so than production. The challenge is long-term involvement and coordination: without specific plots for each gardener, there needs to be a system for keeping track of who is responsible for what. Things like watering schedules and agreement over plantings need to be addressed. Without a guaranteed portion of harvests, you may have some difficulty recruiting gardeners. The Northgate Forgiveness and Peace Garden and the Southeast Salem Neighborhood Garden are examples of this style.
- *Production:* A few gardens in our area focus primarily on growing large amounts of produce for donation to Marion-Polk Food Share or partner agencies. These are great places to volunteer for gardeners who only have a couple hours a week to spare, and do not want to maintain their own garden. A minimal amount of coordination is required for these projects, but they typically rely on a core group who plans the garden

layout. The downside here is that we're not teaching families self-sufficiency skills. But there is still great value in adding nutritious, fresh food for families in need. The Marion County Work Center Garden and Grace Baptist Community Garden (Dallas) are examples of this style.

- *School Gardens:* See section IV, Schools and Colleges. Hammond Community Garden and Julie's Garden in Salem are hybrid school and community gardens.
- *Rental Contracts & Fees:* It's never a bad idea to have some kind of written agreement for gardens or volunteers participating in the garden. In a rental plot-based garden, a rental contract typically lists rules and expectations for use of the garden, and is a means for collecting contact info from gardeners. The Food Share has sample rental contracts you can tailor to your own needs. As we've mentioned, some gardens charge a fee, and others do not. The advantage to charging a fee for a rental plot is that it creates a sense of investment and commitment. Plus, the garden then has funds to pay for water, tools, compost, or other needed supplies. In our experience, gardens are more likely to experience mid-season drop outs when there is no fee in place. Yet, we certainly don't want to exclude people from gardening if the fee is a barrier. Another option is sliding scale (for example, charging \$5 to \$25 and renters decide how much they can afford), or have a "suggested donation" instead of a fee.
- *Garden Gatherings:* If the garden is not rental-based, it's essential to have regular meetings to organize and guide garden activities. Without this communication, we've seen gardeners unknowingly undo the work of

others, or do something completely counterintuitive to someone else's plans. In any garden situation, spring kick-offs, potlucks, and harvest parties are a great way to build a sense of togetherness in the garden.

## 12. Common Challenges

- *Abandoned Plots:* Occasionally, we'll see a plot mid-August that looks like it hasn't been touched since May. Gardeners sometimes move away, lose interest or get frustrated, and we never hear from them again. This is especially frustrating at a full garden with a waiting list. As soon as you notice an untended plot, make a phone call. Does the gardener need some gardening advice? Some supplies or assistance? Do they understand the guidelines? If after these sort of questions they still don't start gardening again, or if you simply cannot get a hold of them, you may just want to give their plot to someone else. If you want to hang this consequence over gardeners' heads, be sure to include a section in the contract: "Untended plots will be given away if we are unable to reach you for two (2) weeks." Or something of that nature. In short: reach out, make an attempt to help, but if you don't get a response, give the plot to someone who needs it!
- *Clean up:* Another common community garden problem is the messy gardener. Keep in mind that there are many styles of gardening, and many agricultural backgrounds. One person's junk pile may be another's treasure trove. We've seen beautiful, bountiful gardens grown by Laotian refugees, that to some may look chaotic and untidy. If your garden needs to maintain a certain level of tidiness, make that crystal clear in

writing (and in the native language of *all* gardeners!) when gardeners sign up. Also make the consequences clear up front: How many warnings does a gardener get before you kick them out? Playing garden police officer is no fun, communication is key!

- *Seed Savers:* Seed saving in a community garden is not a problem, but can be a challenge for the seed saver. We advocate for seed saving and heirlooms and have seen it done in community gardens. Problems arise when other gardeners don't know someone is seed saving – they may see the seed saving bed as looking messy or out of control, and/or they may harvest or pull out crops still on their way to seed production. Signage and education are the solutions here. Additionally, all the different crops in a community garden may contaminate a seed saver's seed crop. The seed saver may need to incorporate some separation methods, like paper bag covering and paper clipping flowers.
- *Tillers and No-tillers:* In most community gardens, you'll find some gardeners who like to till and others who do not. Problems only arise if garden coordinators or volunteers want to till the entire garden with a tractor, and some gardeners want to keep their fluffy lasagna beds untrampled. If you're planning a garden that will be tilled each year, I recommend setting aside a section, ideally at the edge, for gardeners who want to grow perennials or use no-till methods. That way, a tractor can easily avoid those areas.
- *Compost Education:* Gardeners need to understand that compost pile does not equal junk pile. We've tried to remedy huge, unruly compost piles at community gardens, and found quite an array of non-compostable

items in them. Post very clear signage about where to dump, and where not to dump. Also make signs showing things like: no sticks, branches, plastic labels, rope, etc., and that larger chunks of biomass, like corn stalks and tomato plants, need to be shredded or chopped. Gardeners also need to know how to layer in carbon-based material if they're adding food scraps from home. A mandatory composting workshop is probably a good idea as well. Remember all this info needs to be in the native language of your gardeners.

- *Organics:* You may have some gardeners that want to use chemical fertilizers or herbicides in their garden plots, and others who are strictly organic gardeners. In some cases, an organic gardener will be concerned about contamination from a neighboring non-organic plot. We recommend deciding upfront if a garden will be “all organic” and not allow chemical use. If you do allow non-organic fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides, please do your research and understand the consequences of using particular products.

*Vandalism/theft:* Unfortunately, this is a common problem in community gardens. We split community garden vandalism in three categories: First, is simply kids destroying things. When you find smashed squash or torn up carrots, this is your problem. A few methods of diversion: install a fence, plant rows of berries between walkways and the garden to distract kids, or design the garden so that private plots are not along frequently used pedestrian paths. The second type of theft is from those who don't know you have private plots. Some people think “community garden” means the produce is available for anyone to take. To solve this

one, simply put up signage explaining that you have private plots.

### 13. Sustaining Your Garden Into the Future

It's a tragedy to see a garden flourish and fade away. Please consider the following to ensure the longevity of your project:

- *Landowner Relations:* Maintaining good communication and a good relationship with the owner of the garden property is incredibly important. Perhaps the primary cause of losing community gardens is a landowner deciding to do something else with the land. Understand why they allowed the garden to begin with, and make sure that reason is satisfied. Stay in touch and ask questions – so it's no surprise when and if an owner considers another land use.
- *Coordinator burnout or moving on:* Volunteering to run a community garden can be hard work. The second most common reason a garden ceases to function is the coordinator leaving for one reason or another. Someone, or a small group, have to ultimately take responsibility for the garden. To avoid burnout, spread ownership. Find likeminded people to join in the coordination responsibilities. Some gardens, like the Southeast Salem Neighborhood Garden, actually have a committee that runs the garden, not just one or two people. That way, duties are split up to lighten the load on any one person. If a coordinator simply moves away or can't be involved any more, let people know far



enough in advance to find a replacement. Marion Polk Food Share's Community Gardens program also can help with coordinator recruitment and training, and take on coordination at gardens during interims between leadership. Remember: a garden that rests on one person's shoulders will probably fail. Spread ownership, build partnerships and get the neighborhood invested.

- *Flow of Participants:* Usually, once a garden gets rolling, there's no shortage of participants. But every community is unique. If you see a drop in participation, ask people why they're leaving. To gain more participants, try events, get the garden press coverage, enter into new partnerships or simply get the word out through schools, community centers, churches and other outlets.

#### **14. Share the Surplus, Grow-A-Row for the Hungry**

Marion Polk Food Share, along with our network of 97 member agencies, accepts donations of produce from home gardens and community gardens. Call us at 503-581-3855 to find an agency near you, or drop off your produce at our warehouse, 1660 Salem Industrial Drive NE, Salem, OR 97301, currently open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

#### **15. Marion Polk Food Share's Community Gardens Program: How We Can Help**

The Marion Polk Food Share Community Gardens Program is a great place to go for assistance and support starting your new garden. Ways we can help:

- Garden start-up assistance
- Supplies, such as seeds, plants starts and tools (as available)
- Compost and soil amendments (as available)
- Use of rototiller and other equipment
- Volunteer recruitment, training and coordination
- General consulting
- Advocacy for community gardens
- Fiscal agency (account for your garden funds)
- Grant applications
- Gardening education for community gardeners
- Networking with other gardens in our region

The resources available from the Food Share change annually. For more information, visit:

[www.marionpolkfoodshare.org/programs/community-gardens](http://www.marionpolkfoodshare.org/programs/community-gardens)

## 16. Resources for Marion & Polk County Community Gardeners

### Chickens in the Yard (CITY)

<http://www.salemchickens.com/>

Salem chicken-keeping resource and advocacy group.

### Marion Soil & Water Conservation District

<http://www.marionswcd.net/>

Facilitates a “manure exchange” where you can get free composted manure for your garden.

### Master Gardeners of Marion & Polk Counties

<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/marion/master-gardeners>

Offers Master Gardener courses and a wealth of gardening knowledge to the general public. Gardening Help Desk numbers: Marion County, 503-373-3770; Polk County, 503-623-8395.

### OSU Extension Service

<http://www.co.marion.or.us/OSU/>

Extensive resource for gardening and horticulture.

### Salem Harvest

<http://www.salemharvest.org/>

Have extra fruit or other edibles on your property? Salem Harvest will harvest and distribute it to families in need. Also use the website to sign up as a harvester and take home 50% of your harvest.

### Sustainable Salem

<http://www.friendsofsalemsaturdaymarket.org/>

Nonprofit dedicated to educating the community about sustainable agriculture and local foods.

### Pringle Creek Community

<http://www.pringlecreek.com/>

An intentional community that hosts various sustainable living projects and events.

### Urban Farmer Certification Program

[nicole@pringlecreek.com](mailto:nicole@pringlecreek.com)

Become a certified Urban Farmer in this course.

### Zena Farm, Willamette University

[http://www.willamette.edu/centers/csc/zena/zena\\_farm/](http://www.willamette.edu/centers/csc/zena/zena_farm/)

An experimental sustainable agriculture site run by Willamette’s Center for Sustainable Communities.

## 17. Recommended Reading:

Ashworth, S. (2002). *Seed to Seed: Seed Sowing and Growing Techniques for Vegetable Gardeners*. Seed Saver's Exchange: Decorah, IA.

Coleman, E. (1999). *Four Season Harvest: Organic Vegetables from Your Home Garden All Year Long*. Chelsea Green: White River Junction, VT.

Flores, H.C. (2006). *Food Not Lawns: How to Turn Your Yard Into A Garden and Your Neighborhood Into a Community*. Chelsea Green: White River Junction, VT.

Hemenway, T. (2009). *Gaia's Garden: A Guide to Homescale Permaculture*. Chelsea Green: White River Junction, VT.

Lancaster, B. (2008). *Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands and Beyond, Volumes I and II*. Rainsource Press: Tucson, AZ.

Peterson, R. & Elliott, C. (1998). *The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide*. Tilth: Seattle, WA.

Riotte, L. (1975). *Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of Companion Planting for Successful Gardening*. Garden Way: Charlotte, VT.

Solomon, S. (2007). *Vegetable Gardening West of the Cascades*. Sasquatch: Seattle, WA.

*About the Author:* Ian Dixon-McDonald is the Vice President of Programs with Marion Polk Food Share in Salem, Oregon. Originally from Monmouth, Oregon, Ian has lived and gardened in Eugene, Corvallis, and Flagstaff, Arizona. He holds an MA in Sustainable Communities from Northern Arizona University and Permaculture Design Certification. He has been involved in community gardening and garden programs for more than five years.

*About Marion Polk Food Share:* Established in 1987, Marion Polk Food Share is a nonprofit charity providing food for people at risk of hunger in Oregon's mid-Willamette Valley. Between July 1, 2010 to June 30, 2011, MPFS distributed 7.6 million pounds of food to assist hungry residents of Marion and Polk counties.

With that food, our network of over 97 direct-service member charities gave out nearly 89,000 emergency food boxes and prepared and served more than 671,000 on-site meals. These partner agencies include food pantries, meal sites, shelters, low-income day care centers and senior housing sites.

MPFS receives food from commercial growers, processors, grocery stores, USDA, the Oregon Food Bank, community food drives, and community gardens.