

# Community Gardens in Alaska

Community gardens provide many opportunities for those involved in the project. They are places where friends and neighbors get together to grow food and where people can reconnect with nature and even get physical exercise. Community gardens also provide a number of educational opportunities for participants of all ages and help to build a stronger sense of community among neighbors.

Although community gardens are often associated with urban settings, they can be established in a wide variety of locations and potentially benefit any community. It doesn't matter if the community is in the city, the suburbs, a small town or even a small village; as long as there is a plot of land where plants can be grown and a group of people interested in engaging in the project, a community garden can be established.

There are currently numerous community gardens in Alaska. Fairbanks, Bethel, Juneau and Anchorage have fairly large community gardens. Many other communities share less extensive gardens.

## Benefits of a Community Garden

Community gardens can provide an exciting educational opportunity for youth and adults. Youth involved in a community garden can learn about the science related to gardening and use math skills when helping to plan the project. Additionally, there are a number of teaching resources available that provide lesson plans related to community gardening as a way

For more information on planning and operating a community garden please see *Community Garden Toolkit* by Bill McKelvey, University of Missouri Extension, Bulletin MP906, April 2009.



*Kelly Inghram with kale harvested from one of the community gardens in Anchorage.*

to help students meet intended educational goals. Community gardens also allow adults to learn more about garden science and use their math skills; more significantly, they can provide a medium for training in entrepreneurial endeavors. Often, community gardens are also market gardens and provide an opportunity for participants to learn organizational and management skills while earning money through local venues (such as farmer's markets).

Community gardens can also provide financial benefits to the community. Gardens run as market gardens sell produce to help cover garden costs and to pay those who work in the garden. Alternatively commu-

nity gardens can help residents in small communities, particularly those in Alaska, to save money. Instead of spending money on produce that must be brought in through expensive shipping methods, community members can eat the produce grown in the garden. Distributing the produce free, or even for a minimal cost, can help offset the high cost of food in rural locations and supplement local subsistence diets.

Finally, establishment and maintenance of a community garden can have a strong influence on the local sense of community. By working together in the garden, participants build a sense of closeness and togetherness through a positive activity that promotes cooperation and sharing. It can also be a great activity for local youth, who may find themselves with little to do in small communities during the summer.

### **Establishing a Community Garden**

The most important consideration when establishing a community garden is community involvement. It is important for a few individuals from the community to dedicate time and energy into making the project a reality and drumming up community support for the project. The second most important consideration is locating a plot of land on which to have the community garden. Once these two aspects are in place, the community garden project can proceed.

The levels of management and organization required for a community garden vary depending on the size of the garden, the purpose of the garden and the number of participants involved with the project. Community gardens in smaller communities, or those with a fairly small number of participants, tend to require less sophisticated methods of planning and executing the project, while gardens with a large number of participants and those in large communities may require more effort and a more detailed method of planning and management.

There are a number of additional considerations involved in establishing and maintaining a community garden, including keeping written records, locating necessary supplies, establishing a method of managing and maintaining the garden space, and knowing where and how to access any additional information.

### **Community Gardens for Everyone**

There are many types of community gardens with different purposes and possibilities:

- Youth-created gardens, often a school project, with a focus on providing educational opportunities to young people
- Gardens that produce food for elders and organizations that support seniors in the community
- Market gardens that provide entrepreneurial training for the participants
- Gardens used to grow food for local charities
- Gardens meant to provide a therapeutic outlet
- Crop-demonstration gardens
- A simple collection of plots maintained by different individuals in the community for personal use

Whatever the purpose or format of the garden, there are many benefits for members of the community.

### **Recordkeeping**

Recordkeeping should include tracking expenses, creating maps of the garden space and individual plots, and maintaining a current list of participants, their respective leadership roles and their contact information.

### **Supplies**

Supplies needed for the garden may include seeds or plant starts, a water source, irrigation equipment, compost and/or fertilizer, and garden tools.

### **Managing and maintaining the garden**

Leadership and communication are a vital part of managing and maintaining a community garden. A centralized method of leadership, such as a small working group, is necessary in the initial planning stages; however, once the garden is established it is important to distribute leadership roles among different individuals. A board or leadership group consisting of a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, maintenance coordinator, membership coordinator and events coordinator is very helpful so that the du-



*A gardener tends a community garden in Anchorage.*

ties can be spread out among the group. Participation by garden members in maintenance duties such as mowing, watering, composting and weeding as well as specific projects such as building a fence or shed can be encouraged by requiring a minimum number of service hours per member. If opportunities for service are provided at the beginning of the season, along with specific work party dates, then members can plan ahead to help with these vital tasks to help keep the garden running. In addition to work party dates, a schedule of events, such as celebrations (e.g., harvest festival), garden close-out dates and plot sign-up dates, will help people feel more connected and know what to expect. Communication among participants and garden supporters can be through formal meetings, informal meetings, phone calls, email or even a message board at the garden. Regardless of the method, it is very important that adequate communication takes place.

Important management considerations for any garden are the disposal of waste material and composting. Garden rules or guidelines should clearly state policies regarding personal trash and potentially useful items (extra pots, etc.) to determine what can or cannot stay at the garden. Composting is a touchy subject because of the varied methods and the opinions of the gardeners. The easiest way to avoid introduced plant diseases and pests is to include only garden plot waste (no home-generated wastes) in the pile. Disease can be spread within the Solanaceae family (including

potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants) if any parts of those plants are added to a pile, so the best practice is to have gardeners dispose of them somewhere other than the shared compost pile. The same goes for any diseased plants or weeds that have gone to seed. One disease of note is clubroot, which heavily impacts the crucifer family (broccoli, cauliflower, kale, kohlrabi, turnip, radish) and will spread throughout the garden if added to a compost pile or otherwise managed improperly. See *Composting in Alaska* (HGA-01027) and *Growing Great Brassicas in Alaska* (HGA-0048) for more details.

### **Information**

Finally, it is important to have access to information about gardening for inexperienced participants, and it can be extremely useful to have at least one individual involved in the project who has gardening experience.

### **Resources**

Whether the community garden being planned is small or large, it is useful to have some resources to help with planning. Your local Extension office can provide a wealth of resources concerning horticulture, composting, food safety and food preservation. Examples of different types of community gardens in Alaska are available on YouTube (search “Juneau community gardens”). There are also a number of helpful publications available through the UAF Extension website. For more information, go to [www.uaf.edu/ces](http://www.uaf.edu/ces) or call 1-877-520-5211.

If you wish to visit some of the community gardens in your area, contact your local Extension office for locations of known gardens.

### **Seed and gardening catalogues that contain supplemental information:**

- Denali Seed Company: [www.denaliseed.com](http://www.denaliseed.com) (Alaska-proven seed)
- Dripworks: [www.dripworks.com](http://www.dripworks.com) (all about drip irrigation)
- Ed Hume Seeds: [www.humeseeds.com](http://www.humeseeds.com)
- Felco: <http://felcostore.com> – (pruning tools)
- Gardener’s Supply: [www.gardeners.com](http://www.gardeners.com)
- Johnny’s Selected Seed: [www.johnnyseeds.com/](http://www.johnnyseeds.com/)

- Kinsman Company: [www.kinsmangarden.com](http://www.kinsmangarden.com)
- Lee Valley Company: [www.leevalley.com](http://www.leevalley.com)
- Lilypons Water Gardens: [www.lilypons.com](http://www.lilypons.com) (water garden equipment)
- Peaceful Valley: [www.groworganic.com](http://www.groworganic.com)
- Rittenhouse: [www.mkrittenhouse.com](http://www.mkrittenhouse.com) (Canadian garden, farm and nursery supplier with warehouses in the U.S.)
- Territorial Seed Company: [www.territorialseed.com](http://www.territorialseed.com)

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service ATTRA website has many informational publications that can help with numerous gardening problems: <http://attra.ncat.org>.

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This document is based on the *Community Garden Toolkit*, University of Missouri Extension, Bulletin MP906, April 2009, by Bill McKelvey. It has been modified for Alaska conditions with permission.

### Sample questions to address during planning:

- What type of community garden should be established, and what benefits will it provide?
- Where will the garden be located and how much land is available?
- How much gardening experience is there among the group?
- Where will planting materials such as seeds, gardening equipment and soil amendments be obtained?
- What leadership structure is needed for the garden? Will there be formalized roles such as president, vice president, secretary and treasurer as well as functional roles, such as coordinators for garden membership, maintenance and events? Is there commitment from members to fill these roles for at least the first season?
- How will labor be distributed among participants?
- Will the garden apply for non-profit status through the state or federal government? Will there be a garden bank account? Who are the signatories? Will there be an auditing process?
- How much sunlight does the garden location get throughout the day, and is there access to water?
- What is the best way to access the garden site?
- Are there any community gardens close by that can provide examples to learn from?

*To simplify information, trade names of products have been used. No endorsement of named products by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products that are not mentioned.*

**[www.uaf.edu/ces](http://www.uaf.edu/ces) or 1-877-520-5211**

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