

Community Garden Startup Toolkit for Affordable Housing Developments

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About this toolkit

New garden construction projects are appearing nationwide as demand for fresh, affordable local produce continues to rise. Community gardens play an especially important role in low-income neighborhoods with limited access to fresh food because they can help families introduce healthier food options into their diets. Such programs and activities are also great opportunities for residents to experience the benefits of biophilia, including stress reduction, socialization, and exercise. With these benefits in mind, Rowan University's [Community Planning & Visualization Lab](#) has designed this toolkit to help residents in affordable housing communities plan, design, build, and operate their own community gardens. This toolkit is the result of our team's extensive research and collaboration with experienced community partners in the urban gardening field, all of whom were instrumental in helping us determine the best course of action for residents looking to start a garden.

Our team has organized the gardening process into 13 steps, wherein each step contains a brief description illustrating the core theme behind the work residents need to perform, as well as suggested topics for further research. We have also compiled a list of additional resources at the end of the toolkit for planning and developing your garden.

This toolkit was designed to support new partnerships between affordable housing communities, its residents, and other key stakeholders interested in increasing healthy food access. The collaborators in this project believe there are a variety of resources available in the public-private housing sector that, if leveraged, will ensure greater success in community gardening activities.

Toolkit Steps

Preparation



1. Establishing a project team



2. Identifying the garden site



3. Forming a committee



4. Creating a preliminary site design



5. Gathering resident input



6. Identifying missing partners

Planning



7. Establishing a maintenance plan



8. Drafting a budget



9. Formalizing the project's organizational structure



10. Soliciting garden construction services

Implementation



11. Beginning the pre-construction phase



12. Entering the construction phases



13. Hosting a garden unveiling



1 Establishing a project team

The project lead should identify and meet with the local affordable housing developer, any affiliated social service providers, and Housing Authority to seek support for the garden project. Meeting with the housing developer is an ideal first step because they tend to be the easiest partners to access, and they will be familiar with the necessary contacts for ensuring the success of subsequent steps. The Housing Authority generally owns the land the developer builds on, and they can contribute a variety of federal, state, and local resources to the project, as well as potentially provide administrative support. Most affordable housing communities also offer social service programs that can assist with gauging residents' interest, connecting interested members with the project team for input, and sharing and collecting information from the community. Social workers often already have strong levels of trust with residents, which is important for the success of any new initiatives.

See Step 9 for details on formalizing the project team.

2 Identifying the garden site

Affordable housing developers can be good resources for selecting a gardening site because they have a deeper knowledge of location feasibility, general maintenance contacts and roles, access to utilities, and groundskeeping budgets. If certain conditions are missing, the developers may also offer resources for overcoming these obstacles. It is also important to consider the construction needs the developer may not be able to provide, such as the construction of growing beds, fences, light fixtures, paths, and sheds.

Key conditions to understand before selecting a successful garden location include:

- Level terrain (for proper drainage of water)
- Clean soil
- Adequate sunlight (preferably southern exposure)
- Access to running, potable water
- Adequate growing space

Ideally, the site should offer more space than is needed to allow room for expansion as the community's level of interest grows.

After identifying the preferred location, the team should test the soil to determine whether the grounds are safe for growing food or require importing clean soil and the construction of raised beds. Ideally, though, crops grow best directly in the ground as they require less watering than when they are grown in a raised bed.





3 Forming a committee

Engaging with an affordable housing developer's subcontractors is a great way to leverage existing resources to provide the garden project with the best chances for success. One important resource is access to community residents by way of the developer's social service provide, whose support in resident engagement will save the team time and energy in identifying families who may be interested in setting up a garden. The goal is to encourage approximately 5-10 members to help form a garden committee that will support project's recruitment, promotion, planning and decision-making needs. Ideally, members should be residents who are dedicated to and enthusiastic about community gardening, and while food growing experience is helpful, it is not required. The committee will also assist with establishing a garden policy (see Step 9), recruitment, budgeting, and organizing meetings.

4 Creating a preliminary site design

Before soliciting resident input, it is necessary to draft a preliminary site plan of the garden that includes photo collages illustrating different themes. The site plan should clearly indicate the location, size, and physical layout of the garden features, such as plots, paths, and growing beds.

2-4 photo collages featuring different themes for the garden should be included as part of the final deliverable. Each theme should represent a specific type of programmatic use residents might like to see (e.g., a garden for gathering and learning with additional seating).

We highly recommend consulting a landscape architect or garden construction expert for this step, in addition to reaching out to local non-profit organizations who may have previous experience with constructing community gardens.





5 Gathering resident input

Conducting a resident survey not only allows the project team to understand which garden theme and activities residents prefer but also serves as a promotional tool for the organizing committee. For this step, the team and committee should again collaborate with their social service provider to develop and distribute the survey.

Service providers already have direct connections with the community and their established trust increases the likelihood of a higher number of survey responses. We recommend limiting the length of the design portion of the survey. The content should fit on one page and focus on informing the community about the project, its potential uses, or themes it can offer, as well as on gauging residents' attitudes towards gardening.

Example Survey Questions:

- *What features would you like to see in a garden?*
- *What types of produce would you like to grow?*
- *What gardening responsibilities would you be comfortable with?*
- *How often would you be able to access the garden?*
- *Based on the following photo collages, what is your preferred theme?*

By collecting an adequate number of survey responses (a minimum of 10% of the families living in the development), the organizing committee will understand the level of enthusiasm for the project and how the garden will function. This feedback may also support future fundraising needs like grant applications.

6 Identifying missing partners

The team should leverage program partners and their resources to ensure they can meet programmatic needs. If there are activities and services prioritized in the survey that the existing project team cannot address, this stage is where the team should identify additional partners, including community residents with gardening knowledge

One effective approach is to release a request for proposals (RFP), which is a publicly posted announcement to solicit proposals that can fill any remaining service gaps in the project.





7

Establishing a maintenance plan

A maintenance plan is useful for mapping out who will be responsible for which aspects of the project, such as garden maintenance, access, and landscaping. To audit the operational needs of the garden, the project team should involve the property manager to identify and understand where gaps in services exist (e.g., watering and irrigation). The team should also develop a security plan, which should include elements like installing locks for tool storage, limiting access to the garden with fencing and gates, and installing lighting for nighttime use. This security plan also needs to determine which parties will have access to the garden at what times and who will be responsible for the locks.



8

Drafting a budget

After the team and committee have reviewed the survey results and understand all the necessary elements for the garden, they should prepare a budget proposal. There are three parts to the budget: (1) pre-construction costs, including a refined site plan design; (2) hard costs, including construction materials, labor, and gardening supplies; and (3) operating costs for programming, utilities, and maintenance. If the garden's development has any funding gaps, the project lead may want to reach out to the property's housing developer, Authority, and social service partners for potential resources to acquire additional funds. Any non-profit entities already involved in the community may provide fiscal sponsorship services, thereby enabling the project team to become eligible to apply for grants without having to create a separate 501-C3.





9 Formalizing the project's organizational structure

Once the team identifies the type of garden they will construct, they should then formalize its committee members' roles and responsibilities to ensure the sustainability and community benefits of the space.

These following documents are all necessary for building trust between the community and the project's partners, as well as ensuring the garden's operational responsibilities will be fulfilled. These documents include:

- **Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)**, which outline the parties that will be responsible for specific activities. If income generation is part of the project, a purchasing agreement may also be necessary.
- **Liability Insurance** to provide legal protection against injuries in the garden or property damage.
- **Leasing** for tools and other gardening materials, or even for the garden land itself.
- **Gardener Enrollment** to create a streamlined process for grower intake and the assignments of garden beds.
- **Gardening Guidelines** that clearly articulate the rules and expectations of each participant, including the terms and timelines of use.
- **Calendar of Events** to organize contacts among all partners and to ensure the equal and timely distribution of event and program information.

10 Soliciting garden construction services

The team should identify builders through referrals from the housing developer or by preparing an RFP to solicit construction bids. If the team prefers the latter approach, then they should first share the RFP within the community to capitalize on and support resident expertise.

Once the team solidifies its construction team, it can finalize the garden's site plan.





11 Beginning the pre-construction phase

This stage includes any necessary excavations, clearing the space for construction, and securing the site for safety purposes. Depending on the location, this step may also include fresh soil deliveries or grading to prevent erosion and to ensure the garden is level. The installation of utility access (i.e., water and electricity) would also occur at this stage.

The team should also identify suppliers for gardening materials (e.g., soil, fertilizer, seeds, and tools) and schedule deliveries.



12 Entering the construction phases

Depending on the size of the garden, the number of expected participants, and budget, the team should consider building the garden in phases to minimize the amount of unused or wasted resources and to prevent giving the garden a barren appearance while grower recruitment is ongoing. Additional construction phases should directly correlate with the community's level of interest.

Constructing in phases will also allow for gradual alterations as uses and needs evolve over time. For instance, the need to create space for hosting a farmer's market might arise after the first harvest takes place.





13 Hosting a garden unveiling

Upon completion of the garden, the team, committee, and residents are ready to start planting. This final stage is a great opportunity to turn a planting day into a formal event to unveil the new garden to public officials and the greater community. Unveiling events allow the project team to publicly recognize all the parties involved in the project, especially donors or funders.

When scheduling the event, it is important to choose a date that is convenient for key stakeholders, including the affordable housing developer, Housing Authority, social services providers, and program partners. In addition, the team should invite as many residents from the development, members of the local press, local healthcare providers, and municipal officials as possible.

Following the grand opening, your gardeners are ready to start growing!



The future of your garden

After completing the steps outlined above, the most important task is to ensure the garden stays healthy, which is a matter of dedication, care, and the efficacy of the maintenance and operations plan. It is equally important, though, to promote the garden as a site of entertainment and recreation by hosting periodic events like picnics, produce market days, or organized meets where everyone gathers to prepare the garden for the spring. These events help maintain gardener enthusiasm and may generate interest among additional community members.

Thank you for reading, and good luck! May the harvests be ever in your favor!

Additional growing resources:

- [Community Garden Toolkit: Starting a Community Garden — Fresno Metro Ministry, Fresno County, CA](#) (Nov, 2010)
- [Louisville Grows Community Garden Toolkit — Louisville Grows, Louisville, KY](#) (Mar, 2020)
- [Illinois Extension Community Garden Toolkit — Gift Garden, Bond County, IL](#) (Jan, 2019)
- [Green Thumb Community Gardening Program — NYC Parks Green Thumb, New York, NY](#) (Jun, 2020)
- [Community Garden Management Toolkit — Springfield Food Policy Council, Springfield, MA](#) (Mar, 2014)

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