



STORY BY
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growing together

creating a community garden

When you live in a densely populated city, green spaces are precious. While urban dwellers may take advantage of small balconies or fire escapes, outdoor spaces like backyards and home vegetable patches are usually just the stuff of dreams. Finding a community garden in the city is like discovering an oasis, where neighbours come together, side by side, to sink their hands into the earth and grow their own food and flowers. Community gardens are also spaces of rest, solidarity and resilience, nestled in the middle of the clamorous concrete sprawl. Sarah McCollum Williams of Green Guerillas speaks of the radical optimism that exists within a community garden. “Green spaces can be not only created, but fostered across time and generations.”

Many cities have existing gardens which one can join, but perhaps there is an empty lot that you and like-minded neighbours envision as a community garden. As your group gets organized and shares dreams for the space, here are some guiding steps and thoughts to consider.

Research the Property's History

When creating a new community garden, one of the first steps is identifying and speaking with the owner of the land. It should be noted that matters of land ownership and use, even of seemingly abandoned lots, can be quite complex. There are different processes for establishing a community garden on city-owned versus privately owned land, and nonprofits like Green Guerillas (New York City) and SPROUT NOLA (New Orleans) can help with site visits and to connect gardeners to local resources. Sarah of Green Guerillas also recommends the simple yet powerful act of hanging a mailbox on the fence, to establish the group's presence on the property.

Research might also include discussions with neighbours, city officials and librarians. In Toronto, for example, people can request that the site be searched in the city's databases related to historical land use, lead reduction zones and environmental site assessments. In other cities, a local librarian can assist with researching property records.

Test the Soil

When researching a property's history, it is crucial to identify the previous uses of the land, to determine the potential risk of soil contamination. If the land was previously residential, parkland or used as a school, the level of concern is likely low. Red flags, however, include land previously used as a gas station, dry cleaner, auto body shop or rail yard, or if there are signs of illegal dumping or burning. "There's not one design solution to soil contamination," says Marguerite Green of SPROUT. "We encourage folks to reach out and let us do a site visit to help them figure it out."

Soil is typically tested through soil extension service laboratories or environmental analytical laboratories, to identify lead, arsenic and other contaminants. Depending on the results of the tests, it may be advisable to add clean soil, compost and other organic matter to the existing soil. In other cases, it may be best to build raised garden beds or grow food in containers, rather than planting directly in the ground. In general, urban gardeners should follow best practices of washing their hands after gardening and washing all produce prior to eating.





Design an Accessible and Inclusive Garden

Sarah of Green Guerillas explains that the design of a garden will often come together organically, depending on the layout of the lot and the needs of the community. “Some gardens don’t have a very large growing area, maybe because they’re shaded by trees, but maybe they have a larger space for community gatherings and areas for people to sit and rest. Or maybe they have a little area where there’s a stage for open mics or poetry readings. It really depends on the needs of the group.”

When designing a community garden, it is also essential to consider matters related to accessibility and inclusivity. Community Garden Builders (Vancouver, British Columbia) acknowledge that “community garden spaces are not inherently inclusive without intentional and purposeful actions.” Such actions can include limited physical barriers to entry (other than a simple door), the construction of raised beds of different heights, installation of simple lever water systems and the creation of wide, unobstructed pathways to allow people of all sizes and mobilities to navigate the garden. Firm path materials with minimal slope and grade changes are also ideal. Marguerite of SPROUT encourages clear signage that represents all of the languages spoken in the neighbourhood, as well as consistent open garden hours and restroom access. A group may want to consider picnic tables and areas for children as well.

Learn about Native Plants and Pollinators

When it comes to the growing season and planting, much is dependent on your region. Research what plants are native to your area and will thrive. It is also important to include perennials (plants that persist for many growing seasons) and herbs that attract bees, butterflies and other hardworking pollinator insects to your garden. Look into native varieties of milkweed, goldenrod, aster and more. Organizations like the North American Native Plant Society and the Xerces Society have extensive directories on their websites, where you can obtain resources on native plant societies in your region as well as local seed vendors and information about pollinator conservation.

NATIVE LAND DIGITAL

Do you know on which Indigenous territory your community garden sits? You can identify the original stewards of the land by exploring Native Land Digital’s ever-evolving interactive online map. Search results include links to the tribe or nation’s website, as well as historical maps and sources. Native Land Digital also has a Territory Acknowledgement guide and other pages “where non-Indigenous people can be invited and challenged to learn more about the lands they inhabit, the history of those lands, and how to actively be part of a better future going forward together.”

native-land.ca
@nativelandnet

Engage the Community

Sarah of Green Guerillas encourages groups to attend city council meetings, to introduce their project and invite others in the community to join, which will often foster new relationships and “unlock additional resources.” Within a pool of volunteers, there may be someone with the skills and power tools needed to build compost bins. There may be artists within your circle to create a mural or mosaic or hand-paint colourful signage. There may be experienced gardeners who can teach newcomers or folks who could offer cooking demos or distribute healthy recipes within the community.

In order to welcome gardeners from all walks of life, Community Garden Builders places importance on accessible membership fees (such as \$15 per year per bed, with the ability to reduce or waive fees if needed). Marguerite of SPROUT recommends offering free plants or seeds. “That’s a tough one for totally volunteer-run gardens,” she says, “but it can increase access. It’s sometimes just a tiny barrier to getting new gardeners.”

Community agreements are also key for SPROUT, to “make the garden a shared space, not just a place where a bunch of strangers happen to grow vegetables together,” says Marguerite. “We have community agreements we sign. That way, we actually have a standard for how we treat each other and our neighbours. If people can’t agree to a base level of kindness and community spirit, they can’t join the garden as a member. For us, it’s really come in handy with sharing values. We designed [the agreements] together and will keep changing them as needed.”

Truly, that community spirit is what powers these unique green spaces. “The work that I’ve done in community gardens has been the most joyful work that I’ve ever done in my life,” says Sarah of Green Guerillas. “The lead stewards of community gardens are the most community-minded folks who I’ve ever shared time with, and the ways they think about serving the community are really diverse and beautiful.” She also points to the wonderful confluence of community work, food growing, design and environmental resistance that are present in a community garden. “The garden itself is like an artwork,” she says.



GREEN GUERRILLAS

Green Guerillas “believe in the power of community gardening as a radical act in the fight for food and environmental justice.” In the 1970s, Liz Christy and other guerilla gardeners in New York City took to the streets, throwing “green-aids” packed with wildflower seeds into abandoned lots, planting flowers along busy streets and even constructing planter boxes in the then decrepit Times Square. “They started to imagine spaces where people could rest, learn about plants and grow food,” says executive director Sarah McCollum Williams. In 1973, Green Guerillas cleared a lot on the corner of Bowery and Houston, creating one of the first community gardens in New York City, which exists to this day. Over the years, the organization has evolved into a nonprofit resource centre, supporting community gardens in historically marginalized neighbourhoods that were heavily impacted by redlining. The Green Guerillas also teach and mentor young people through their Youth Empowerment Pipeline, a three-year program that “creates a viable pathway to employment and leadership within the food justice movement.”

greenguerillas.org
[@greenguerillas](https://www.instagram.com/greenguerillas)

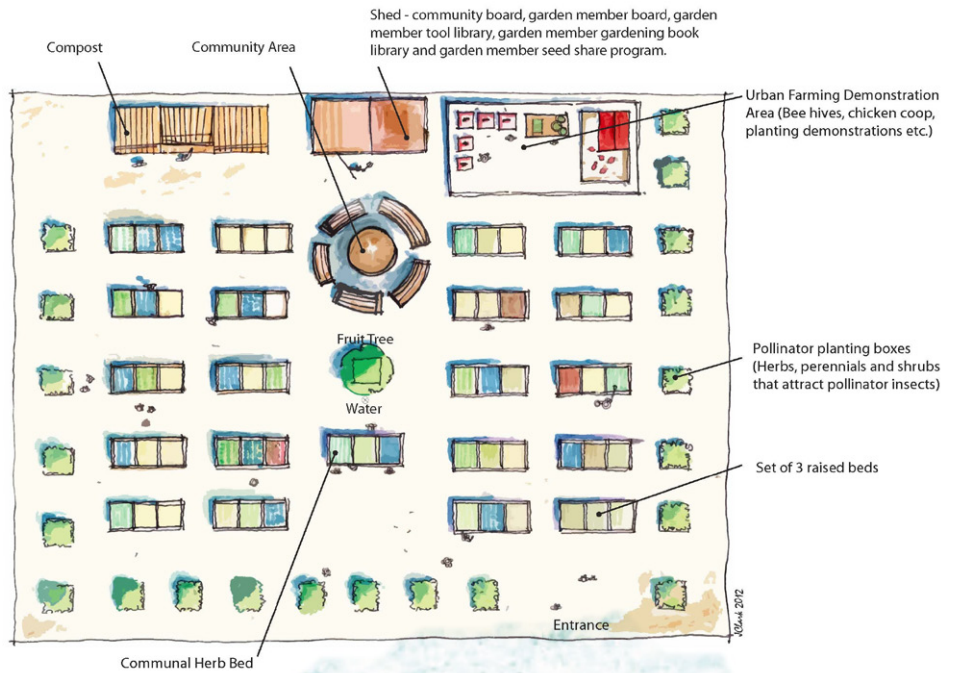




COMMUNITY GARDEN BUILDERS

Community Garden Builders is a nonprofit turned social enterprise based in Vancouver, British Columbia, that collaborates with private landowners to build and manage temporary community gardens in urban lots. Their projects “represent a unique partnership between landowners and community members, providing much-needed garden space for the community as well as interim property management for landowners.” There is a significant tax break for developers and landowners who create interim community gardens on their vacant lots, which in turn provides funds for the projects. Founder Chris Reid shares that gardens are typically built within five days, using mobile garden beds on shipping pallets. Beds are allotted to individual community members or local organizations. The average lifespan of a temporary community garden is between one to five years, serving as a “stop-gap until hopefully one day when the tides will turn.”

communitygardenbuilders.com





SPROUT NOLA

SPROUT began as a market garden and community garden in New Orleans, Louisiana, and has grown into a nonprofit organization with initiatives related to food sovereignty work, training and technical assistance for farmers and gardeners and for equitable policy change. SPROUT was “born out of the recognition that until everyone is afforded the right to locally produced, community-grown, culturally relevant food, none of us have real food sovereignty. We work for community control of food; therefore, we are an organization with a focus on Black Liberation.” To read more about how to immediately support Black gardeners and farmers, visit the Black Lives Matter page of SPROUT’s website.

sproutnolaform.org
[@sproutnola](https://twitter.com/sproutnola)

RESOURCES

FROM THE GROUND UP: GUIDE FOR SOIL TESTING IN URBAN GARDENS:
toronto.ca

NORTH AMERICAN NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY:
nanps.org

XERCES SOCIETY:
xerces.org

