

Starting a community garden: Tips from Common Ground at Emmanuel

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Developing a community garden is rewarding and joyful but also challenging. To help other groups develop such a garden, we at Common Ground at Emmanuel Community Garden decided to create this guide. May it help you achieve your community garden dream as efficiently as possible—and avoid some of the pitfalls we experienced.

Our church chose **community service** as a key goal for our garden: Six of our 21 beds are accessible (double height), and most accessible ones are rented by people with disabilities who are supported by Community Living Algoma. We also have some beds rented to Embers/Sparks groups and people growing food for food banks/soup kitchens. The rest are rented by individuals, couples, or families. Most are not congregation members. We've never had trouble filling all our beds. In fact, we've always had a waiting list.

Strike a team

To get started, **you will need a core group of 4-6 people** to research and develop a plan/budget and get your garden built. This team may or may not be the right people to run the community garden. It's best if the latter has at least a couple of people who can commit to running the garden for several years. Continuity helps prevent issues. Excellent organizational and people skills and gardening expertise are also helpful.

Develop a plan

Researching and planning your journey is a critical first step. Here's what you need to collect information on:

- What is our garden's **goal**? Grow for people in need? For our organization? Give individuals (anyone? special groups like people with disabilities? both?) a chance to garden? Something else?
- **Whom do we want involved** in the build, administration, gardening, and operations/maintenance?
- **How much land** do we have access to that gets several hours of sun per day, and how many beds will that land hold? Whose insurance will cover the garden?
- **How many beds** do we want to build and what size? (Bed height is usually 12" for a regular bed and 24" for an accessible bed; length will vary depending on the dimensions of the available land and the number of beds; distance across should be 4' max.)
- **How wide should the paths** between and around beds be? (Check current accessibility standards for wheelchairs.)
- How **secure** is our location?
 - How likely is our garden to experience **theft**?
 - Is there a lot of **foot traffic** through the space?
 - Is it **visible** from the street?
 - Is it in a place where **snow** gets dumped in winter?

- Should we install a fence and/or motion-sensor **lights**?
- Do we want a **shed** and if so, how large? **Picnic tables**?
- Is there a nearby **water source**? Will we have water barrels, and if so, how many, where will they go, should we put them on a concrete block base, and how will we keep them filled?
- Will we **compost** on site? (Composting can attract rodents/other critters so we take material to a local composting facility at least once a week rather than compost on site.)
- Should we have a **pollinator bed** filled with native plants to attract native pollinators?
- **Who will do the maintenance**—water barrel filling, mowing, weed control, repairs, etc.?
- What should the annual **rental fee** for beds be?
- What **terms and conditions** should we ask gardeners to agree to?
- What kind of **signage** should our garden have? (We recommend at least one large main sign explaining who the garden is for, asking people not to touch other beds without permission, and referring people in need to food banks.)
- What are the potential **pitfalls** of running a community garden? How can we minimize them?

Determine costs

The cost of developing a community garden can vary depending on how much labour and supplies the organizing committee can get donated. We did not pay for any labour to get our community garden up and running, and some of our supplies were donated as well. That may be challenging for other organizations to achieve.

When buying building supplies, **ask for contractor pricing**. And search out **green grants**. For example in Sault Ste. Marie, both the City and the Public Utilities Commission have green grant programs.

Other cost considerations:

- When calculating the cost of each **bed**, choose cedar or hemlock (no treated lumber), and remember that accessible (double-height) beds will cost twice as much.
- **Soil** is another major expense. Overestimate how much soil you need as it compacts a lot after beds are filled; we calculated at least 24 yards of soil for a 4 foot by 10 foot single-height bed. Soil may need to be topped up by up to 50% every 5+ years.
- Consider whether you need/want items such as a **fence** (costly but an excellent theft deterrent), **shed**, **picnic tables**, or other structures etc. and if so, budget for them.
- Also budget for items like **water barrels**, **watering cans**, **wheelbarrows**, **composters**, **shovels**, **rakes**, **hand tools**, **motion-sensor lights**, etc.
- Build in **labour costs** if you are unable to source volunteers to build beds, fence, sheds, picnic tables, etc., and fill beds with soil.
- Don't forget **ongoing operating costs**—for example, depending on your circumstances and garden location/design, you may need to pay for water, electricity, and repairs of items like the beds, fence, and water barrels. And again, beds may need more soil every 5+ years.

Running the garden, through the year

Here at Common Ground, we have no paid staff. We have a **team of 3-4 people** who do administrative work, with the heaviest workload being mid-February to early June.

Key positions are the garden lead and 1-2 people to provide administrative support—look after updating the handbook and registration form, updating the gardeners list (keeping this accurate/updated is important!), assigning beds (try to give people the same bed every year when possible), communicating with gardeners throughout the year, organizing events, creating invitations to events and sending them out, answering emails, addressing issues during the growing season, etc.

Gardeners are asked to donate at least 6 hours of time to the garden, especially for tasks like filling water barrels and the year-end garden cleanup. Filling water barrels can be a major daily time commitment during the hottest weeks, depending on how many beds/barrels you have.

Below is a list of **key dates during the year as well as key jobs** associated with those.

When	What	Who?
Mid-Feb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ask gardeners if they plan to return/reassign beds as needed ● Review/update garden handbook and registration form 	Garden team
Mid-Mar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Send handbook/registration form/welcome email to gardeners, highlighting key changes for coming year ● Take in forms/payments and update gardeners list ● Start organizing garden orientation (mid-May) and launch events (early June—our frost-free date), including booking speaker for former 	Garden team
Early Apr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Finalize bed assignments and confirm with gardeners 	Garden team
Mid-May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hold orientation meeting to give garden team/gardeners chance to meet/chat, hear key recommendations from garden team, and learn gardening tips from featured speaker, usually local gardening expert ● We try to have free seeds on hand as well as list of gardeners/garden team/volunteers (first names only) 	Garden team
Early Jun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Launch event (mostly a social gathering) held at garden usually first Saturday in June ● Gardeners may start cold crops before that 	Garden team
Jun-Aug	<p>Garden upkeep:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Monitor garden email, answer questions, and address issues: Done by garden team ● Water barrel filling: We strongly encourage gardeners to volunteer for this as they are at garden regularly, it directly benefits them, and it's a big job, taking ½ to 1 hour/day especially in mid-summer ● Mowing/weed whacking/repairs: About once a week by small team of volunteers 	Garden team/ gardeners/ other volunteers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing composters (removing material/transporting to a local composting facility): Done by small team Maintaining pollinator bed: Done by single volunteer 	
Late Sep-early Oct	<p>Garden cleanout event:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All remaining plant material removed from beds and taken to local composting facility Water barrels and picnic tables put away With garden team permission, cold crops allowed to remain as long as gardeners promise to clean their bed before winter 	Garden team/gardeners

Preventing issues

Five key ways to prevent issues with running a community garden:

- 1. Do your homework.** Building and running a community garden is a major long-term commitment. Make sure you have thoroughly researched what you want, how much it's going to cost, and how you are going to resource operations (people, equipment/supplies, and funding) year after year.
- 2. Ensure sustainable funding.** In some cases, it may be relatively easy to find the money to build your garden, especially if you get grants. However, be sure you can afford to maintain it over the long term, including adding soil to beds over time (they may need up to 50% re-filling within 5+ years), repairing beds, building new ones, etc.
- 3. Get the right people involved.** The gardeners will depend on your team to be cohesive, functional, and constructive. Make sure you have a team that includes people who are reliable and have good leadership, organization, and communication skills.
- 4. Establish, communicate, and maintain expectations of all involved,** including having a handbook that outlines guidelines and recommended practices. And enforce guidelines judiciously and diplomatically. If an issue persists, a kind phone call is often best.
- 5. Take measures to minimize theft.** Theft is the most common issue in many community gardens, and it's discouraging and upsetting for gardeners. A **fence** is an effective deterrent but is expensive. A **locking gate** may reduce thefts even more. **Other tactics:**
 - Advise gardeners that **high-value crops** like pumpkin and eggplant are more theft-prone and more painful to lose (a few missing cherry tomatoes is less upsetting)
 - Encourage gardeners to **get to know each other**
 - Install highly visible, easy-to-read **signs** that explain the garden's purpose and that produce belongs to bed renters
 - Install **motion-sensor lights**
 - Have garden team members drop by** the garden regularly
 - Consider drawing up a **list of local agencies** that dispense food to those in need and make it available in a small weatherproof kiosk at the front of the garden

The last word...

Our community garden journey has been a wonderful, meaningful, rewarding experience—for the Emmanuel congregation, the garden team and other volunteers, the gardeners, and the beneficiaries of our produce. We highly recommend creating a community garden to other churches and organizations.

Questions?

Email us at emmgarden@gmail.com, and we will try to help.