



BRINGING
NEIGHBORHOOD
PROJECTS TO LIFE,
BLOCK BY BLOCK

A group of diverse people, including men and women of various ages and ethnicities, are standing outdoors in what appears to be a garden or community space. They are smiling and looking towards the camera. The background is slightly blurred, showing trees and foliage. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a large, stylized green shovel with a white outline. The shovel's head is a light green, and its handle is a darker green. The text "RECLAIM IT!" is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font on the shovel's head.

RECLAIM
IT!

A citizen's guide to
transforming vacant lots
into community gardens.

In the past decade, ioby has worked with thousands of engaged residents around the country who are leading the charge to turn vacant lots into active amenities like community gardens. Neighborhood greening is happening all around us, but it can be difficult to know where to start. That's why we've compiled this quick guide with tips, lessons, and ideas from around our community.

Happy greening!



A note:

The first step in this endeavor is usually to find out who owns the land you're eyeing, which can take some digging. If you aren't sure how to find the owner, check out our post *Whose land is this? How to find out who owns vacant lots in your neighborhood* at ioby.org/blog.



What is a Community Garden?

Just so we're all starting on the same page, let's spell out what a community garden is. According to the University of California Cooperative Extension's Marin Master Gardeners: "A community garden is any piece of land gardened by a group of people, utilizing either individual or shared plots on private or public land. The land may produce fruit, vegetables, and/or ornamentals. Community gardens may be found in neighborhoods, schools, connected to institutions such as hospitals, and on residential housing grounds."

There are an estimated 18,000 community gardens throughout the U.S. and Canada, and it's easy to see why. Community gardens are known to...

- Provide aesthetic benefits and fresh, healthy produce to neighbors
- Make neighborhoods safer
- Support food security and financial savings for individuals, especially the unemployed and those with low incomes
- Improve soil, water, and air quality and increase biodiversity
- Help cities save money through storm water retention and purification
- Help keep food and yard waste out of landfills (when they compost)
- Support neighborhood economic development by increasing property values
- Provide educational opportunities for kids, adults, and seniors
- Act as a beacon of permanence for traditionally transient communities
- Promote individual health by offering physical activity, stress relief, and a connection to nature
- Promote public health by giving people a space to congregate and define themselves as a community

What's not to love about all that? Read on to get the real dirt.

A note:

While the steps in this guide represent a basic plan for getting a community garden started, they're very much an overview: every situation is unique, and you'll get into plenty more details along the way! You might also find it makes more sense for you to proceed in a different order than the one outlined below, and you might omit some steps and add others. Only one way to find out!





How to Turn a Vacant Lot into a Community Garden

1. Make sure the site is suitable

An urban land parcel with no buildings on it is a great start for a community garden, but there are other characteristics that make a vacant lot good or not-so-good for growing greens. Does the lot you're eyeing get a good amount of sun—six to eight hours per day? Is it relatively flat? Is it within walking distance of nearby homes? Does it have any debris in it that couldn't easily be moved by volunteers, like giant hunks of concrete or a rusted-out car? (If there is giant-size debris, you don't need to write off the lot yet; just note that you'll have to enlist some additional muscle to move it, and might have to make special arrangements to dispose of it.)



2. Get permission from the owner

San Diegoan Avital Aboody tuned into her neighbors' wants and needs and rallied them to turn an underutilized parcel of land into a bright and beautiful community space for play, leisure, and gardening: The H.A.C.E.R. (Helping Achieve Community Empowerment and Revitalization) Project Gilliam Family Community Gathering Place. Her advice:

"Once you have a handle on [who the land belongs to], reach out to the owner, explain your idea, and ask for permission to use their land for this community benefit." Read about how Avital connected with the owner of the land the H.A.C.E.R. Project garden is now on.

3. Check zoning laws & water availability

In most cases, the former won't be a problem, since the lot you want to garden on is likely in a residential or mixed-use area, and since local governments are increasingly aware of the benefits community gardening brings. But especially if there's any doubt, it doesn't hurt to look up the lot's address on your town's zoning map (many are now online) to make sure that the district in question allows community gardens—or at least does not expressly prohibit them. (Some cities, like Raleigh, North Carolina,



specifically mention community gardens in their zoning language, but many cities do not.) For a heftier introduction to zoning concerns, see this [Modern Farmer](#) article.

Water is the lifeblood of any garden, so check into this! Try to find out if a water source is available on the site you're interested in. If you can't find evidence of one and the owner isn't sure, contact your local water utility to ask if the property has a water meter. If they aren't sure, you can ask if they'll conduct a site investigation to find out. If your site has had water service in the past, it should be relatively inexpensive to get a new water meter installed (if you need one). If the site has never had water service, installing a line that connects to the street main could cost much more. Your water utility should be able to give you more info.

In general, while community garden arrangements are often made between a land owner and a group of gardeners, it's not a bad idea to touch base with your local government about your plans, too. Some cities have specific agencies that handle community garden affairs: Green Thumb in New York City and the Committee on Community Gardens in Madison, Wisconsin are two examples. At the very least, they will appreciate knowing about your efforts, and they may well be able to help you with advice or connections.

4. Crowdfsource & formalize your efforts

A community garden is—you guessed it—all about community. It's also a lot of work! So you'll want buy-in from at least a handful of your neighbors before you start. Ask other nearby residents to find out who might be interested in participating, and contact local organizations like block associations, houses of worship, gardening societies, and homeowners' and tenants' associations to see if they have any advice or would like to partner with you.

After you've roused some initial interest, form a group to take charge of the project. Invite the people who show the most interest and have the most time to invest to become your "steering committee." To make sure all your bases get covered and stay that way, make a list of the tasks you think will need doing—funding, publicity, partnerships, garden construction, plant selection, etc—and ask each person to sign up to be responsible for at least one. People can choose whatever best suits their skills and interests, and then everyone will know who to turn to when a question comes up. You should also consider asking each founding member to sign an agreement that states their rights and obligations. Make sure all members have each other's contact info.

You can treat your steering committee as a relatively informal group to start, but most successful community gardeners find it's helpful to eventually draw up at least a simple legal document that explains how your garden is organized and governed, and get everyone to sign it. You should also consider forming an association or garden club; eventually, you may wish to incorporate as a nonprofit. Getting organized in this way can help you do things like establish garden rules, open a bank account and handle money, run meetings, and keep track of membership.

5. Brainstorm your garden

With your team, discuss what kind of garden would best serve the needs of your community and also suit your space: Do you want to grow vegetables, flowers, or both? All organic, or are some pesticides okay? Will you have a single space that everyone manages together, or separate plots for individuals to tend? Will you be open to the public? If so, how often, and will a member need to supervise? You'll probably find it helpful to draw a map of your garden on paper and sketch some initial ideas about where plots and paths—as well as amenities like a tool shed, benches, and a community bulletin board—might go. Also, you'll need to answer this fun question: What will you name your garden?

As a part of the brainstorming process, it's a good idea to have some soil from the lot tested for possible pollutants like heavy metals. Search for a private lab in your area that provides this service. If you do find the soil is polluted, you don't necessarily need to abandon the garden idea altogether, but you will want to consider growing only inedible plants or installing raised beds so you can grow your food in fresh, clean soil. Testing can also tell you about soil fertility and pH: information that will be useful to have when you start preparing the site and selecting your plants.









7. Budget & fundraise

Now that you have a basic handle on how big your garden will be, what you want to grow there, and who will be involved to start, you can start figuring out how much it will cost to get it going, and make a plan to pay for it.

Common costs include:

-  Seeds and/or seedlings
-  Tools: everything from spades and gloves to watering cans and hoses
-  Construction materials for beds, benches, bins, and more
-  Fertilizer and compost

According to The Community Garden Start-Up Guide produced by the University of California Cooperative Extension, starting a basic community garden typically costs between \$2,500 and \$5,000. Your mileage may vary!

The most common ways of funding a community garden include membership dues; cash or in-kind sponsorship from community organizations and/or your city's department of parks and recreation; applying for grants; and crowdfunding. As you may have guessed, we're huge fans of crowdfunding! Raising money this way helps neighborhood projects to build local buy-in and stay flexible as they grow, and you don't need to be a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation to do it.



8. Prep & build the site

You can absolutely start to prepare your lot for gardening before your planting plan is totally worked out and before you've raised all the money you need. In fact, getting people away from the planning table and into getting their hands dirty is a great way to boost morale when it's all starting to seem like too much! You can also gain some management practice by corralling your steering committee and potentially other volunteers to take care of tasks like removing any debris from the site, marking where your garden beds and paths will go, and putting up fencing (at least eight feet tall is best, to curb vandalism, and include a gate big enough for a truck to drive in).

Every garden is different, but most successful ones wind up containing some version of the following:

- 15 or more plots assigned to individual members, located in the sunniest part of the garden.
- Raised bed plots (if any) that are no more than 4 feet wide, and between 8 and 12 feet long.
- In-ground ground plots (if any) that measure between 10 by 10 feet up to 20 by 20 feet.
- Paths between beds that are no narrower than 3 feet—you want wheelchair accessibility!
- Soil that is amended with aged compost or manure.
- A simple irrigation system for every four plots. If no one in your group is very knowledgeable about irrigation, try asking a landscape contractor, plant nursery, or garden center pro to help you develop a basic layout and materials list.
- A tool shed or similar structure for storing your supplies. Recycled metal shipping containers make super storage sheds!
- A picnic table where gardeners can sit, relax, and have a snack.
- Locating this in the shade of trees is best, or you can build a simple arbor and plant it with vines.
- A composting area. (Wood pallets can often be sourced for free from local businesses, and make great DIY compost bins! Search online for simple construction plans.)
- A sign—of course! You want the whole neighborhood to know your garden's name. It's also wonderful to shout your sponsors out with signage, and to include an email address or other contact info for neighbors who have questions about what you're doing. Make sure this info is in multiple languages if your community is bilingual.

Once your basic infrastructure is in place, you can start planting seeds and/or seedlings, as your garden plan dictates. Kids love this part, so don't hesitate to recruit a few to help!



9. Celebrate—and keep celebrating!

Do not, we repeat, do not work so hard that you forget to have fun! Make a point of organizing an opening celebration for your garden—like a barbecue or potluck lunch—to thank everyone who’s put their time and effort into it so far, and to mark the milestone you’ve come to.

Then, keep it up! Regular programming does require extra effort, but even hosting just a few events a year will keep morale up, attract new members, and help maintain the “community” side of “community gardening.” Garden grow-and-tell tours, storytimes for kids, live music—there are as many good ideas for events as there are gardens. Keep your steering committee thinking about it and get creative!

Remember: Issues are inevitable

Not to end on a bum note, but nothing is perfect: most every community garden will experience at least occasional problems with vandalism, security, miscommunication, trash, weeds, and gardener drop-out. The Community Garden Start-Up Guide mentioned above gives some great tips on dealing with each of these problems. Whatever comes up, let your group know that you believe in your collective ability to handle it, do your best to address the situation, then keep on keeping on!

Additional Resources

- **Learn from a Leader:** How to turn a vacant lot into a multi-purpose community space: In addition to the “Awesome Project” blog post mentioned above, check out our Q & A with ioby Leader Avital about how she launched the H.A.C.E.R. Project in San Diego.
- **The American Community Gardening Association (ACGA)** seeks to build community by increasing and enhancing community gardening and greening across the US and Canada. For those just starting out, their articles [10 Steps to Starting a Community Garden](#) and this [FAQ](#) with information about making your garden wheelchair accessible are great starts.
- **The Community Garden Start-Up Guide produced by the University of California Cooperative Extension:** As noted above, this guide provides lots of great info about planning, building, and troubleshooting a community garden. It also offers a sample member contract.
- **UrbanAgLaw.org:** A project of the Sustainable Economies Law Center, this website is a collection of resources on laws and rules that regulate “who, how, and where” urban agriculture can occur —all to get more “urban ag” projects off the ground.
- **State and Provincial Master Gardener Programs:** This list, curated by the Cooperative Extension System, can help you find master gardeners in your area. Their websites and trainings can be great sources of info for community gardeners just starting out.
- **What Is a Community Garden – Benefits & How to Start Your Own:** Ecofrugal Living blogger Amy Livingston wrote this super-helpful how-to that also includes an interesting history of New York City’s Clinton Community Garden, which has been going strong for almost 40 years.
- **How Do I Start Up a Community Garden?** Modern Farmer enlisted the help of a zoning and land use attorney for this informative article. Be sure to note the additional resources they list at the bottom.



About ioby

ioby mobilizes neighbors who have good ideas to become powerful citizen leaders who plan, fund and make positive change in their own neighborhoods. We are creating a future in which our neighborhoods are shaped by the powerful good ideas of our own neighbors.

Read more at ioby.org



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