



Community garden manual

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Toronto
Community
Housing



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Introduction

Starting a community garden and helping it to thrive over the long term is a journey that calls for commitment, careful planning, and collaboration. The result can be a garden rich with delicious, fresh food, and a supportive, vibrant community. This manual is intended to provide anyone who wants to start a garden on a Toronto Community Housing (TCHC) property with some tools to make the journey easier and more productive.

In 2026, TCHC released an updated Community Gardens Policy that detailed the rules, roles, and responsibilities for tenants wishing to participate in existing gardens or create new gardens. The Policy and Procedures document is the main source of information for any tenant wanting to know how TCHC community gardens run and how to get involved.

See torontohousing.ca/community-gardens for the policy.

This manual is a complement to the Community Gardens Policy. Part One offers a summary of what you need to know to start a community garden and keep it going well. Part Two gives you links to more information on everything from growing plants to group process to fundraising. There is also a list of sources for funding and donations.

Many community garden manuals from cities across North America informed this document, but we'd like to thank the most important source: TCHC tenant gardeners. We're offering some suggestions to make your community garden journey a successful one. We hope you will find many fellow travellers who will share their knowledge and passion for growing.

Toronto Urban Growers



What is a community garden?

Community gardens are shared green spaces where member gardeners grow vegetables, fruit, herbs, and flowers. Gardeners share knowledge and responsibility for the running of the garden. They promote sustainability, healthy living, social engagement, inclusion, and food security. They are critical assets in community building.

Not all gardens are the same. Community gardens can be large or small, in plots or in raised beds, in the ground or on rooftops, or a mix of all of these. They can be at schools, in parks, housing communities, places of worship, vacant lots, hydro corridors, and on private property.

People become involved with community gardens for many reasons. In some gardens people grow food to feed their families or for community members who are hungry. Gardens are used to teach adults or school children, and to grow things to sell for extra income. They are places where people grow food that is important to them that they may not be able to buy elsewhere, like food from their culture, family history, or organic produce.

All community gardens have one thing in common: they help people feed the community. This is because community gardens encourage people to work together, to cooperate, and to get to know their neighbours. There are five different types of community gardens:

Allotment garden:

This is a garden with individual plots assigned to tenant households for gardening activities by tenants or tenant-led groups.

Beautification garden:

A collective, non-food producing garden focused on ornamental or pollinator plants.



Collective garden:

A shared outdoor or indoor space designated for gardening activities by tenants or tenant-led groups. Collective gardens can include food production, beautification, pollinator gardens, and composting systems.

Rooftop garden:

A garden that operates like an outdoor garden; however, some rooftops have specific issues (access, safety barriers, and accessibility needs) that need to be addressed by TCHC before it can be available for use.

Indoor garden:

Garden using indoor common space, like windowsill planters, vertical gardens, or shelves and light systems.

There are also hybrid gardens that are made of at least two types of the above gardens. For instance, an allotment or collective garden can have space for ornamental or pollinator plants. An allotment garden may have a collectively tended space for particular plants or to give space for more people to join the garden.

Why are community gardens valuable?

When designed well, community gardens can offer a range of benefits. If you can explain these benefits well, it will help when you are applying for a TCHC garden space, when you reach out to the community, and when you're trying to find donations and volunteers.

Social and community benefits

People come first in community gardens. Gardeners work together for a common purpose and make decisions and solve problems together. It is a chance for them to demonstrate leadership or learn new organizing skills that can be applied other places in the community. People make new friends and feel less isolated. Newcomers and Indigenous people can grow plants that are important to their culture and they can restore their relationship to the land. Gardens can be a safe space for people of all ages to learn new skills, from planting tomatoes to working with people from different backgrounds. They can hear about resources in their community that can help them in times of crisis.

Whether gardeners help pull weeds, lead workshops, or sit on a committee, everyone has a chance to contribute to their community and feel part of something larger. This makes the whole community stronger and safer.

Health and wellness

Studies have shown that community gardeners eat more vegetables and fruit. It's a great way to get healthy, tasty food without having to go to expensive stores. Maintaining a garden means that you will get lots of low-impact exercise like digging, bending over, and weeding. Gardens can be adapted so that seniors and people who are not fully mobile can work safely and get the benefits of exercising outdoors. Connecting to nature is important for everyone's mental health. Being in the garden can improve your mood and improve your wellbeing. Gardens can also be a quiet place that offers a restorative escape from everyday issues we all face.

Supporting the environment

Urban gardens are good for the environment for many reasons. They help fight climate change, as they cool urban air temperatures by replacing concrete with living, breathing plants and creating shady areas. Garden plants can pull carbon from the atmosphere and fix carbon in the soil, reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Community gardens are among the most biodiverse areas of any city. Planting native species and pollinator plants attracts bees and beneficial insects that are needed for a healthy ecosystem. The soil slows down rainwater runoff, which helps to reduce flooding. Composting garden trimmings keeps waste out of landfills and feeds the gardens with nutrients.

Building the economy

Finally, community gardening is good for the economy. People can grow food that their families can afford, including vegetables they may not be able to get in local stores. Gardeners can share produce with friends, family and neighbours, and they can donate produce to community food programs. Community gardens are good places to learn work-related skills and build confidence. When permitted, gardeners can earn income from selling produce or value-added products.



Getting started

Nine basic steps for starting a community garden at Toronto Community Housing

Planning a community garden is a lot of hard work. But when the garden works, it is worth it. You need to be well organized, dedicated and ready to put in the time to complete each step. The following list gives you a summary of what you need to do to start a community garden at Toronto Community Housing. You can find more details in the sections on “Organizing the garden group” and “Setting up the garden” below.

1 Read the TCHC Community Garden Policy and Procedures

Become familiar with TCHC rules like who is eligible to garden, how to get approval for a garden, and what the roles and responsibilities are for gardeners and TCHC staff. You can get these documents on the [TCHC website](https://torontohousing.ca) (torontohousing.ca) or from your Community Services Coordinator (CSC).

2 Find out who is interested in organizing a community garden

Have conversations with your neighbours or hold an informal community meeting to find out if there are enough people who support the idea. Don't forget to reach out to a diverse group of people, including youth, elderly people, and people with limited vision or mobility. Listen to any concerns that are raised so that you can respond to them. Once you have a group of people willing to work on the garden, set up a planning team.

3 Decide on the goals for your garden

The planning team should meet to talk about what kind of garden it should be—individual plots, collectively gardened, or both plots and shared spaces. Will you be growing vegetables, flowers, or both? Talk about what vision you have for the garden.



4

Choose a site

What is the right place for your garden? Find out how much sunshine the site gets, because most vegetables need at least six hours a day. Does the ground drain well? Find out if there is access to water close to the site. Find out how the site is being used now. Complete the Site Assessment in Appendix A.

5

Apply to TCHC

Once gardeners have formed a group and know the goals of the garden, it's time to submit a Garden Proposal Form to the CSC. The CSC will work with the tenant garden group on the application and assist the group in outreach to other potential gardeners. If the first site is not possible, staff may propose an alternative site. If the garden is approved, it's time for the next step.

6

Write rules and roles for your garden

Community gardens work best when there is a clear set of rules that everyone agrees to. TCHC has common rules for community gardens on TCHC property, but individual gardens may want to have additional guidelines. You should also decide who is responsible for what tasks before you start gardening.

7**Think about what you have and what you need**

Make a list of the resources you will need. Which things on your list are already available? Which things exist in the community? What can you get from outside the community?

8**Design the garden**

Gardeners will work with their CSC and site staff to design and develop the community garden. Important considerations will be the number of plots and size, a path network, site for compost, a tool shed, and any rest or shade areas. You should know if there are people who wish to garden who may need adapted spaces, like raised beds or accessible pathways. Be sure to refer to the TCHC Community Garden Policy as you make your design.

9**Make sure members stay in touch with each other**

Start a telephone tree, email list, Google group, or WhatsApp group. Be sure to talk about any privacy or security concerns. Talk to TCHC staff about putting up notices in the garden or in a building close to the garden. Hold regular events for members of the garden. Make sure everyone is clear on who to contact for specific issues. Start gardening and have fun!

What kind of support can TCHC provide?

While TCHC has significant green space available, all potential sites must meet the criteria outlined in the Community Garden Policy. Once a tenant or tenant group identifies a site, they should contact their CSC. The CSC will connect with appropriate staff members to evaluate the location based on:

- Safety and health: Soil testing and sunlight exposure.
- Logistics: Water access and general accessibility.
- Operational impact: Ensuring no interference with maintenance or ongoing construction

See the policy for the full list of criteria.

To lower barriers to participation, TCHC aims to provide basic infrastructure wherever possible, including:

- Reliable access to water
- Fencing
- Raising beds and other accessibility features

TCHC will provide orientation materials for gardeners, as well as appropriate training for staff. Whenever possible, TCHC partners with local organizations to provide expert resources and community activities.

The TCHC Community Garden Policy clearly describes the role of CSCs. In the case of breach of rules, the policy identifies three types of breaches (minor, major and severe). Gardeners, Volunteer Garden Coordinators, and Community Garden Committees are expected to address minor breaches. Major and severe breaches should be handled by CSCs and other TCHC staff.

The CSC supports tenants in forming gardening committees and conducting outreach to build a diverse gardening community. In alignment with the Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), TCHC makes sure gardens are accessible to everyone. TCHC also actively works with external partners to expand gardening opportunities and leadership roles specifically for Black and Indigenous groups.

Organizing the garden group

Forming a garden group

It may seem easy to start a garden with one person or a small group. Your garden will last longer and better reflect your community if you try to involve more people in the planning from the beginning.

Start by reaching out in your community to find people who are interested in starting a community garden. You can put up posters, hold a community meeting, or speak to existing groups. Your CSC can help you connect with others who may be interested. Be ready to answer questions about why a garden is needed and respond to concerns.

Equity and fairness

Consider how you will make the garden inclusive and accessible to the widest range of people in your community. Think about what groups are not currently included and what you can do to welcome them. Try to involve people of diverse cultures, languages, ages, and types of ability from the very beginning so that garden planning reflects their needs. How will you make sure the garden is accessible to people who use wheelchairs or walkers, or who may not be strong enough to lift heavy objects? What about people with limited vision? How can you involve people who aren't fluent in English?



Make some key decisions

Once you have a group ready to start working, there are some important decisions to make.

What type of garden do you wish to start: individual plots, a collective garden, or both plots and shared spaces? Do you want food, flowers, pollinator plants, or a combination?

What is the main purpose of the garden? Are you planting the garden to make the neighbourhood more beautiful, to get people involved in the community or to help people to eat fresh food? Is there more than one goal? You may decide what to plant based on the needs and interests of your community. The space may also affect what is possible, like a space that is too small for individual plots or too shady for vegetables.

The next step is to submit a proposal for a new community garden space. Once submitted, your proposal will be reviewed by your CSC, and staff in Engagement, Facilities Management, and Legal. Please note that submitting a proposal is the first step, and does not guarantee that a garden will be approved or created. Gardens are approved based on factors such as space availability, feasibility, and available resources.

Good practices:

- Prioritize your goals. What is most important for your community and this garden?
- Start with small, attainable goals and add new ideas as the group has time and resources
- Research what others are doing, either by talking with them or seeing what's online.
- Include a communal gardening space so that people who are on the wait list for plots can be involved. This is a good way to keep people involved in the garden even after their term ends.

How will the group make decisions?

The best way to make sure gardeners follow the rules is to involve them in decision-making from the beginning. While it may seem easier to have one or two people make decisions, it may be more work in the long run if others don't have an opportunity to give their opinion. All members should be involved in making decisions wherever possible. Decisions must be clearly communicated to all gardeners.

Three common ways to make decisions are:

- By consensus, where the group works towards getting agreement from everyone.
- Voting, where a majority of people make the decision.
- Authority rule, where a leader makes decisions for the group after discussion.

Consensus works best for complicated decisions where it's important for everyone to feel good about the decision. Voting and authority rule options are faster, but some people may feel left out and may not follow the decision.

Roles in a community garden

Starting and maintaining a community garden is too much work for one person! A healthy and long-lasting community garden will have many people filling different, clear roles. Building leadership capacity in the garden group will avoid the risk of overworking one person or one person taking over the garden. These roles can be decided upon as a group and filled by individuals or a small committee.

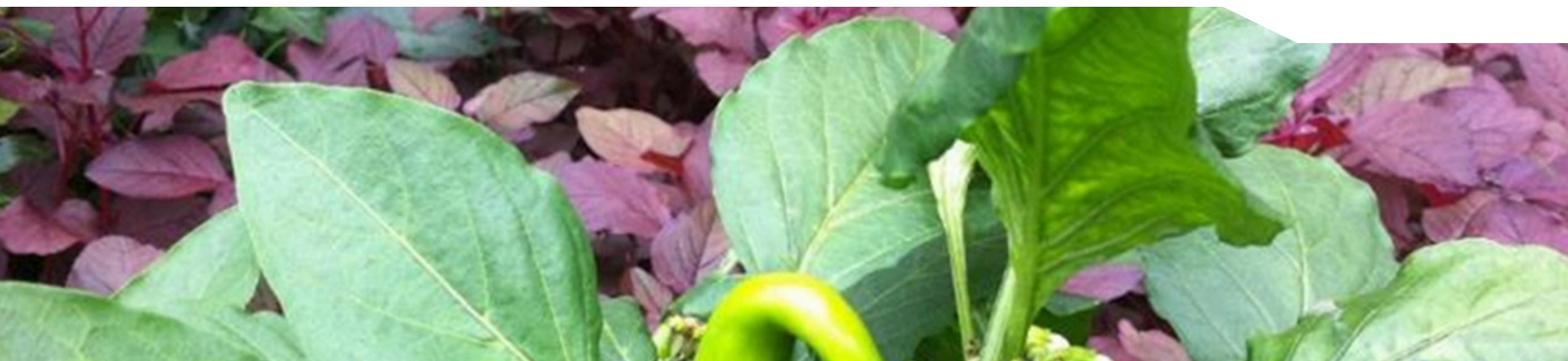
Good practices:

- Ask what skills people bring to the garden.
- Share the work of running the garden.
- Create clear roles and put the division of tasks in writing.
- Make sure all members of the garden know who is responsible for each task.

Remember to change roles occasionally.

Role of the Volunteer Garden Coordinator

The Volunteer Garden Coordinator is the person most closely involved with the day-to-day activities of the garden. A well-organized, dynamic coordinator can be an important factor in the success of the garden. They should be skilled and knowledgeable about growing plants and working well with people. At the same time, the garden should be structured so that it continues in the coordinator's absence if necessary.



Depending on the size of the garden, the Coordinator may be responsible for the following tasks or may share them with other garden members.

- Respond to questions and concerns of gardeners and other volunteers.
- Make sure that the garden rules and TCHC policies are followed. Contact the CSC when breaches are major or severe.
- Mediate in disputes between gardeners, alone or with support.
- Coordinate garden group communications, including maintaining a contact list and working with TCHC.
- Provide horticultural information, with help from local experts, if necessary.
- Recruit and supervise volunteers for special projects.
- Assist in planning and supervising planting, maintenance and clean up of the site.
- Form relationships and networks with other organizations that can offer support to the garden.

The garden group should keep in mind that the Garden Coordinator is a volunteer position. When deciding on the specific tasks of your Coordinator, consider what is a fair investment of time for one person. Try to divide tasks among other garden members and prioritize which tasks are most important. If tasks are shared, the responsibilities of each person should be clear and put in writing.

What name will you give the garden?

A name can help tell other people about the purpose of the garden. It can recognize someone who has made important contributions to the community. Think about a name that will have a strong meaning for many years.



Garden rules

TCHC has common rules for community gardens on TCHC property. When you start the community garden, you'll sign a Community Garden Agreement that lists the TCHC garden rules. Each member of the garden must be aware of their rights and responsibilities according to the Community Gardening Agreement. If a community garden adopts other rules, these should be written out in a separate document, shared with all gardeners and be readily available.

Good practices:

- Make sure that each gardener has read the guidelines and agrees to them. Share the guidelines in different formats and languages (if relevant) and have an agreement to sign. Review the guidelines as a group when possible.
- Remind gardeners that what they do has an impact on the entire garden.
- Review guidelines every year or two and make changes if needed.
- Make sure gardeners have good information about growing healthy plants and remind them to follow good practices. This will keep pests and diseases from spreading through the entire garden.
- Ask a potential new gardener how much time they can commit to the garden. If they plan on being away during the gardening season, what is their plan to maintain the garden?
- Require members to do at least one shared task (like joining a clean up day or take on an organizing task).
- Include in your rules that gardeners need to respect boundaries. They should never touch other plots without permission from the gardener. They must keep their plants from growing over into pathways or other people's plots.

Communication

Gardeners may communicate in different ways. They may learn and understand better if they see information in different formats (physical and online documents, simple signs, pictures, audio/video recordings or one-on-one conversations). Learn which ways work best and try to use those methods. It will be less work than dealing with broken rules and conflicts in the future! At least one representative from the garden should communicate with TCHC site staff and contractors. You want to be sure that anyone working near the garden knows how to avoid damaging plants.

Keep good records of all decisions, action items, and who has filled roles at the garden (with dates). If one person keeps that information and they leave the garden, that knowledge leaves with them.

Have a garden log (a book or digital form) so that gardeners can stay informed about issues. A log is also helpful when planning for the next year. If you have a log book in the garden shed, someone should take pictures of the pages on a regular basis in case the log is lost or damaged.

Communication is also about sharing the good news about your garden beyond the garden group. Consider who else should hear about your successes, including funders, local politicians, community organizations, neighbours, and TCHC.





Setting up your garden

Site selection

You may already have a site in mind, or your group may need to identify a place to start a garden. Either way, there are some basic requirements that you need to think about as you choose a site.

How does the space fit with the kind of gardening you want to do? If you want to have individual plots, you will need a larger space. Native plants, pollinator gardens and shared gardens are great for spaces that are too small for individual plots. If you want to use raised beds, the soil condition will not be an issue.

Access to water. A garden will be challenging if there is no place to connect a hose.

Sunlight and shade. Most vegetables require at least six hours per day of sunlight. Some native and pollinator plants do well in partial or full shade.

Slope. Flat surfaces are best for gardening to avoid erosion and water runoff. It's also safer for gardeners.

Current usage. If the space is currently used by other people, they may become angry if you limit their access. This is a good recipe for vandalism and conflict!

For a full list of considerations, see Appendix A - Site assessment.



Garden design

Gardeners will work with the CSC and site staff to design the community garden. Be sure to refer to the TCHC Community Gardens Policy and Procedures as you work on your design

- How big will each plot be? How will the plots be laid out?
- Will the garden include special plots, like a dedicated space for children, accessible plots, pollinator plants, or a donation plot? Do you want to allocate space for taller plants like pole beans or sunflowers?
- What else is needed beside garden beds? Think about where you will store tools, access water, and place a garden sign. Are there spaces for composting, gathering as a group, and shade?
- How will you make the garden accessible for all users?
- Think about sight lines. Can you see into the garden or are there too many tall, dense plants? Clear sight lines help to make a space feel safe and let more sunlight into the garden.

Choosing plants

If your garden only has individual plots, each gardener will choose their own plants. If you have shared garden spaces, your group will need to decide what to grow. Be sure to check the TCHC Community Gardens Policy for restrictions on plants.

When choosing plants to fit into your garden design, you need to think about how the plants fit into the space and what they need.

- Some plants are tall or tend to take up a lot of space, including corn, sunflowers, squash and zucchini. Some gardens place restrictions on growing plants that are too tall or limit them to certain areas of the garden.
- Perennials are plants that grow back year after year, like asparagus, berries, and native plants. Do you want to give space in your garden over the long term to these plants? Some gardens don't allow perennials in plots with a limited term.
- Consider if you want to plant fruit trees or shrubs. They may take more than one season to bear fruit, take up space, and cast shade. This is a group decision— gardeners should not plant trees or shrubs in their plots!
- Watch out for plants that spread rapidly, like mint, sunchokes, and berry canes. These should be planted in containers so they don't spread to other spaces. Some plants are best started by seed, others are better planted as seedlings. Seeds are less expensive, but depending on the type of crop, you may need a space to start them indoors.

Site preparation

When the ground is no longer frozen or wet, you can begin to prepare the site for planting.

- Remove unwanted grass and other ground cover.
- Level the ground if needed.
- Bring in soil, compost, and other amendments as needed.
- Install fences.
- Install water connections.

If you have access to the garden space in the fall, a good way to clear the ground and leave your garden beds with good soil is lasagna gardening. This is a method of layering cardboard, compost, and leaves to break down any weeds or grass over the winter.

Getting garden supplies

Create a list of all the things you will need to garden and how you will get them (including what may be provided by TCHC). You may get donations from neighbours or garden centres, find items in re-use groups, or buy them at low cost at lawn sales or second-hand shops. Some tools can be rented from a Tool Library.

Basic gardening tools and supplies

Here are some items to consider when you are putting together your list of what is needed. You may not need all of them.

- Bulletin board:** For posting notices and schedules.
- Containers:** Different sized containers, like buckets, garbage cans, nursery flats or tubs, can be used to move items around in the garden.
- Fencing:** This will likely be installed when the garden is first constructed.
- Fork:** Use a hand fork to cultivate in beds that are full of plants. A hand fork also lets you chop up clumps of soil. Use a large fork for bigger jobs.
- Garbage and recycling collection:** Make it easy for gardeners to keep the space clean. Make sure garbage and recycling are disposed of properly.
- Gardening gloves:** Use leather gloves if you want them to last a long.
- Hoe:** A hoe helps you easily get weeds out of the garden.
- Rain barrel:** Most gardens don't have a roof for gathering rainwater, but a rain barrel can be filled with water if access to a hose and tap isn't always available.
- Raised beds and containers:** These make gardens more accessible for people using wheelchairs or walkers. Containers are also good for plants that will spread too rapidly, like mint or sunchokes.
- Rakes:** Flexible rakes are good for cleaning up leaves and debris from pathways. Fixed rakes are good for evening out soil, spreading compost and shaping beds.

Secateurs (hand pruners):	A good set of pruners will let you do lots of trimming. Use them to cut back perennials and flowers, and to trim dead stalks and branches.
Shed:	Usually a shed in the garden is the best place to keep tools close at hand if there is space. Some gardens may store their tools in a building nearby.
Shovel:	Gardeners use shovels to move large amounts of dirt and plants, to dig borders and to get rid of plants with woody roots and stems.
Sign:	A sign tells visitors the purpose of the garden, so that people are more likely to protect it.
Spade:	Garden spades have round, pointed blades. Use them to dig holes, move soil and plant larger perennials, shrubs and trees.
Stakes:	Put stakes in the soil to help support plants. You can get these at most hardware stores or garden centres.
Trellis:	Vining plants may need more support than stakes can provide. You can buy a trellis or make one out of wood.
Trowel:	A trowel can weed, dig, cultivate, divide plants, pry out small rocks, and help you put plants into the ground.
Watering can, hose, sprinklers:	Watering cans and soaker hoses let you water the roots of plants instead of the soil where nothing is growing. Sprinklers are less effective because they spray water where it isn't needed. Hoses must be able to reach all the plots and beds in the garden.
Wheelbarrow:	A wheelbarrow is useful for moving soil, compost, plants, mulch, and tools. You could also use a garden cart for some of these jobs.



Keeping your garden healthy

Eco-friendly practices

TCHC does not allow gardeners to use chemical pesticides or fertilizers in community gardens.

The best way to keep plants healthy is to give them what they need to thrive: the right amount of sunlight and moisture. They also need healthy soil to grow in. Healthy plants are better able to resist pests and disease. Different plants have different needs, so it's important to learn what your plants need. Watch for early signs of problems so that you can respond before the problem gets too severe.

Avoid using sprinklers to water plants. They waste water and make the entire plant wet. Water only at the base of the plant if you can to prevent leaves from developing mildew. Watering early in the morning is the best time. Try not to water in the heat of the day.

Using mulch in the garden saves water and keeps weeds from growing. Mulch is anything you put on the soil to act as a barrier, like straw, cocoa hulls, landscape fabric, wood chips, or newspaper. It should only be applied to plants, not seeds planted directly in the ground. Make sure the mulch doesn't touch the plant stems.

Try to make sure that all gardeners are using good gardening practices to keep pests and diseases from getting out of control.



Healthy soil

Before any new garden is installed, TCHC will test the soil to make sure it is not contaminated from past uses. If you are bringing new soil to the garden, try to get organic soil without chemicals or wetting agents (humectants).

Healthy plants always start with good soil. Well-maintained soil can help build strong root systems for plants and allows for good water flow. Healthy soil traps carbon in the ground, which helps fight climate change. Healthy soil can also result in plants that are more disease resilient and yield more nutritious food.

Healthy soil is full of microbial life that helps plants get food, air and water. Anything you add to the soil should encourage that life, not kill it. Compost is a great way to build the structure of soil and grow the microbes your plants need.

Try to stay on paths and don't step on the garden beds. Walking on soil compresses it and makes it hard. Roots don't grow well in hard soil.

At the end of the garden season when you are clearing your plot out, there are two practices that will help your soil and beneficial insects. Do not pull plants out of the ground. Trim them down to soil level or leave some stems sticking out (8 to 24 inches or 20 to 60 centimetres).

Leave the roots so that they break down in the soil and leave nutrients for plants the following year. Insects spend the winter in sticks and stems, so always leave some stems. If you haven't planted a cover crop, lay the plant stems on top of the soil to provide cover for the ground. This provides a good environment for the beneficial organisms in the soil.



Composting

The TCHC Community Gardens Policy supports a diversity of garden models and green practices, including composting. A composting system refers to the process of recycling organic garden waste for later use in the garden. Compost creates good soil structure and moisture, so it leads to healthier plants. The environment benefits as food scraps and garden waste are kept out of landfills. It's also good for community building and environmental education, as tenant gardeners work together to make sure the composting works well for everyone.

There are many types of compost systems, from three-bin to tumblers to indoor vermicomposting with worms. You can purchase a system that is already built or build your own. Each garden needs to decide which will work best in the space they have and what they can afford.

Compost systems need to be managed properly to avoid problems. Here are a few tips:

- Have one space in the garden for collecting garden waste before putting it into the compost
- Have good education materials (including pictures) so that gardeners learn what does and does not go in the compost.
- Have compost champions who are responsible for adding the correct items to the compost system and maintaining it.
- Only garden waste and some food scraps should go in the compost. Don't put the following in a compost system:
 - Oils, meats, fish or dairy products
 - Pet waste
 - Plastic, metal or wood (even "compostable" plastic)

- Keep the compost damp but not soggy to control odours.
- Cover fresh food scraps with finished compost or dirt to prevent odours.
- Don't put diseased plants or plants with seeds in the compost. If you have access to the Green Bin program, put them there.

Controlling pests and disease

TCHC prohibits the use of chemical pesticides in growing areas. However, there are a variety of organic methods that can be used to control pests in the garden. Look for signs of pests regularly and deal with them as soon as you can so they don't spread quickly.

Good practices

- Low fencing (1 to 2 feet. or 0.5 metres.) can keep out dogs and rabbits.
- For groundhogs, bury fencing at least 12 inches or 30 centimetres underground.
- Cages made of chicken wire can keep rabbits, squirrels, deer, and raccoons away from plants.
- Hanging reflective surfaces can discourage birds.
- Row covers keep insects away from leafy greens. Remove them from plants that need to be pollinated (like tomatoes, peppers, squash, and gourds) when flowers appear.
- Clean up food scraps, particularly proteins like meat, fish, and dairy.
- Keep compost bins closed, tidy, and in good repair.
- Remove weeds before they have a chance to grow seeds.
- Be careful about spraying organic pesticides like pepper spray. Too much can kill the beneficial insects that keep pests under control.
- Considering encouraging beneficial organisms or buying them (see resources section)
- Learn how to describe what you see (yellow leaves, holes, dry brown patches) so that you can ask other gardeners for help or search online. Photos also help.
- Give your plants enough space. Crowded plants are more likely to have mildew and will have low yields.
- Try not to bring soil, plants with soil on their roots, or pieces of wood from offsite. This prevents pests and disease from moving from one garden to another.
- Accept that there will be bugs in the garden and your produce may not look perfect. It's a sign that you won't be eating or breathing harmful chemicals!

Native plants and pollinator gardening

A garden can focus entirely on native and pollinator plants, or gardeners can include a space for native and pollinator plants in a food garden. Many community gardens plant native and pollinator plants around the edge of the garden to make it more attractive and to create habitat for butterflies, bees, and other insects.

Native plants grow well in Toronto because they are adapted to local conditions. They also have deeper root systems that keep carbon in the soil and reduce flooding. Pollinator plants are good for food gardens because they feed the insects that many food plants need to produce fruit.



Taking care of your tools

Keeping garden tools clean and properly stored is a good practice. It helps prevent plant diseases, the tools will last longer and prevent injuries. Here are some tips:

- Clean the dirt off tools each time you use them. If the soil has dried on the tool, use a wire brush or a knife to scrape it off.
- Tools that are damp will rust. After you use a tool, wipe the metal parts with a rag. This is very important for pruners, shears and trowels.
- If the wooden handle on a tool is damp, put the tool in the sun to dry before you put it away. At the end of the gardening season, rub linseed oil or tung oil into the wood.
- Keep your garden tools sharp. Remember to sharpen any tool you use to cut anything. Keep the blades of your shovels and spades sharp, too. Sharpen your tools all through the garden season.
- Do not leave tools lying on the ground or in pathways for any length of time. This is a hazard and can cause serious injuries.

Protecting the garden

There is no one thing that will stop all vandalism, but most community garden groups can do things to control it.

If a garden is vandalized, most people react by putting up a large fence. Sometimes this can work, but no matter what kind of fence you have, a person who wants to get in will find a way.

Fences can be useful in other ways. You may need a fence to keep dogs out of the garden. A fence can also show that the garden is separate from the space around it. When you want a fence to show where the garden begins, think about letting vines grow on the fence or come up with another creative way to mark the edges of your garden.

Here are some things you can do to discourage crime and keep the garden a safe place.

- Put the garden in a place where there are lots of people or neighbours who will keep an eye on the space.
- Ask everyone in the community to participate, including children. They will protect it if they feel part of it.
- Create a sign that tells the community whose garden it is. Say that the garden is a neighbourhood project. Let people know if food is grown to donate.
- Some gardens reduce theft by having a sharing plot that visitors can harvest or offer a regular time to give away produce to people who aren't garden members. Post information about this in a public place in the garden.
- Have public events like workshops, garden tours, and festivals so that everyone in the neighbourhood feels this is their space to enjoy. Create spaces that non-gardeners can enjoy, like a bench to sit on or an attractive pollinator garden on the perimeter.
- Harvest fruits and vegetables every day. If you leave ripe food on plants, people may think the garden has been forgotten.
- Keep the garden neat. This shows that people care about the space.
- Fix any damage as soon as possible.
- Grow food like green tomatoes that don't look ripe or plants that people don't recognize.
- Avoid tall, wide, and dense plantings that block sight lines.
- Is vandalism just happening in the garden, or is it also happening in the wider community? There may be security problems beyond the garden that need to be addressed.

- Report serious concerns to your CSC or Community Safety Unit (CSU). Meet with a Community Safety Advisor to establish a relationship with the CSU.

Theft and damage can make gardeners angry and frustrated. They need to understand from the beginning that loss of harvest and damage to plants from vandalism, pests, disease, and weather conditions is an inevitable part of gardening. Acknowledge feelings of anger and sadness and then fix the damage. Don't despair—replace and repair!

A community garden calendar

Note that climate change affects garden calendars and the actual timing of garden tasks may be different than what you expect. It may warm up in the spring more quickly than you expect, but there may also be cold snaps, storms, or too much rain. If it is too hot for new seedlings, you can protect their roots with mulch.

The TCHC Community Garden Policy states that gardens will open on May 1. Some of the early season preparation may need to happen later as a result.

March and April

- Start seeds indoors for plants that need heat or a long growing season to mature.
- When the soil is no longer frozen or wet, add compost to the soil.
- Plant crops that like cool weather like peas, lettuce, onions and spinach.
- Pull out or trim weeds when they are small.
- Build garden structures.

May

- Prepare the garden beds after the soil has warmed up.
- After the risk of frost is all gone, you can move the plants you started indoors into the garden. If the nights are still cool, you will need to cover tomatoes and other plants that like warm weather until the nights are warmer.
- Once your seedlings are planted, lay down mulch. Make sure to water the plants first (unless the ground is already wet).

- Check plants regularly. Look for insects and signs of disease.
- Plant seeds outdoors.
- Hold a BBQ, picnic, potluck or other community event so that gardeners can get to know each other.

June

- Plant heat-loving seedlings (like tomatoes, peppers and okra). Don't forget to mulch!
- Begin to harvest early crops, such as peas, radishes, lettuce, and spinach.
- Stake up tomato plants. Build supports for beans and other plants that grow on vines. Remove dead leaves.
- It can start to get hot in June. You may need to start watering more.
- Celebrate the summer solstice June 20 or 21.

July and August

- Give the garden enough water. July and August are the hottest months. Water as often as needed to keep soil like a damp sponge. This is when you will thank yourself for laying down mulch.
- Mid-July is a good time to plant a second succession of crops.
- This is the hardest time of year to keep people engaged. It's a good time to have events and workshops to keep people active in the garden.
- If you are going to save seeds, start now.

September

- Order bulbs that you can plant at the end of September or early in October.
- Order seeds for a cover crop. These plants help keep the soil healthy and free of weeds.
- Enjoy the food! Hold an event to celebrate your harvest.

October and November

- Plant garlic. It will be ready to harvest the following July.
- After the harvest is finished, plan a day to clean up the site. Trim plants down to the soil level or leave some stems at varying heights. Lay stems down or put them into the compost. Any plants with seeds or disease should go into the Green Bin.
- Pull out any last weeds. Fewer will come back next spring!
- Plant a cover crop. This will help to put nutrients back into the soil, hold moisture, and keep away weeds.
- Clean and repair the tools and gardening equipment. Put them in storage for the winter.
- Take down any trellises or stakes and store them indoors.
- Repair any damaged fences, walls or buildings.
- Rake leaves. Add them to the compost or spread them over your plot.
- Prune trees, shrubs and vines.
- If you have a watering system or hose, flush it, drain it, and put it away for the winter.
- Remember to thank your volunteers, supporters, and funders.

Winter

- Hold a debrief session. What went well this year? What would we like to do differently next year?
- Hold elections or review the garden roles for the following year.
- Hold workshops and gatherings to keep gardeners engaged through the winter.
- Grow microgreens and sprouts indoors if you have the space.
- Start planning for the following year!



Maintaining the garden group

Like healthy plants, a healthy group starts with prevention.



- Provide garden safety information to all members. You don't want to lose garden members to injuries!
- Take the time to welcome new members.
 - Introduce them to everyone and pair them with an experienced member.
 - Find out what skills and knowledge they can offer to the group.
 - What do they want to contribute?
- Discuss expectations.
 - What is expected from members?
 - What do they expect from the garden?
 - Clear up misunderstandings at the beginning.
- Maintain fair and transparent processes.
- Keep time commitments reasonable.

Conflict resolution

Conflicts can arise for many reasons, from how the garden is managed to personality clashes. Having a plan on how to deal with conflict before it happens is essential for successful conflict resolution. It is important that all gardeners know there is a clear, trustworthy process they can follow to resolve conflicts and respond to people who don't follow the rules.

The TCHC Community Gardens Policy identifies three levels of breaches of policy and gives clear procedures for dealing with each one. Gardeners should deal with minor breaches themselves, or with the help of the garden committee. Sometimes there is a community organization or a respected person in the neighbourhood who can help. For more serious breaches, gardeners should contact the CSC to facilitate a resolution.

If there is damage or theft in the garden, gardeners may want to blame someone and make accusations without evidence. It is best to address this immediately and remind people that they can't assume guilt without proof. Focus on following the garden's guidelines for responding to vandalism or theft.

A challenge for many garden groups is unequal power relationships. Some people may have more influence in a community than others based on how long they have lived there, how much experience they have with gardening, personal popularity, or by having an official role in the community. Groups of friends can make it difficult for new tenants to feel comfortable joining in. People who have these kinds of advantages may not know how it affects others.

It's important for each individual and the garden group to be sensitive to the ways that having more power than others can create unfair situations and barriers to participating. Gardens can lose valuable people power if some members feel excluded or unvalued.

Some tips for reducing conflict:

- Have clear guidelines and enforce them consistently and fairly.
- Write clear guidelines to avoid some of the situations that cause conflict, like failure to clean up or interfering with another person's plot.
- Make sure that all gardeners understand the guidelines and commit to following them.
- Cultivate respect for each other and for different opinions.

- Deal with disagreements as soon as possible.
- Encourage listening and understanding the other person’s perspective. Conflicts can get worse when people misunderstand each other’s intentions. Try to keep in mind that there are often reasons for a person’s behaviour that you may not see.
- Avoid making assumptions. Respond with curiosity and ask for clarification instead.
- Learn and practice ways to avoid reacting in anger.
- Talk about the issue or the behaviour, not the person.
- Have workshops on conflict resolution and good process.
- Train garden members to de-escalate tense situations and respond to them safely.
- While you want to encourage people to resolve minor conflicts, sometimes it is safer to call for help.
- Learn how stereotypes and discrimination can exclude people and contribute to conflict. Listen to the experiences of people who are Black, Indigenous, LGBTQ2SA+, and people with disabilities so that you can respond to their concerns.

Keeping gardeners active

People get very excited about gardening in the spring, but in the heat of July and August some gardeners stop participating. Gardeners who keep doing the work may resent those who aren’t present. Keeping gardeners active takes some effort, but it leads to less stress and conflict in the end!

Some ideas for keeping gardeners engaged are:

- Create a newsletter.
- Arrange social events so that the gardeners can get to know each other.
- Find out what cultural celebrations gardeners want to share with each other. National Indigenous People’s Day (June 21) and Emancipation Day celebrating the end of slavery (Aug. 1) are two examples.
- Pairing new gardeners with more experienced gardeners can lessen stress and create social reasons to stay engaged.
- Try to make chores such as clearing paths into a social occasion.
- Host workshops and other opportunities to learn.



- Build gardeners’ skills. When gardeners grow food successfully, they are less likely to drop out of the garden due to disappointment or frustration.
- Do garden crafts.
- Ask gardeners for their best gardening tips to create learning resources.
- Make sure there is a shady space for taking breaks.
- Document and share your successes with the whole garden group. Take pictures!
- Help members feel they belong by recognizing them for their skills, knowledge and contributions—even in small ways.



Accessibility

There may be people in your neighbourhood who would like to garden but may need adaptations to join in. The best way to improve the accessibility of a garden is to ask what the person needs.

Some accessible features are good for most gardeners, such as level, wide and stable paths. Removing trip hazards like tools or hoses in the pathway is also safer for everyone. In the heat of the summer, everyone likes to cool off in the shade and drink water. For seniors and people with health conditions, shade and a place to rest are essential.

Remember that not all conditions that limit mobility or strength are visible. That’s why it’s important to ask people what they need.

If you have installed raised beds for people using wheelchairs or walkers, people who need those beds should be given priority for those spaces when plots are allocated.

Reaching out in the community to identify people who want to garden but may experience barriers is an ongoing process that should continue throughout the year.

Education for all ages

Some gardeners are beginners, others are very knowledgeable. Hosting workshops and inviting in garden experts is one way to help people learn more about growing. You can also encourage gardeners to share their knowledge with each other. Learning and sharing knowledge are two powerful ways to help gardeners feel positive about the garden and stay engaged with it.

Find out how garden members like to learn about gardening. Do they like to read books or do they look online for information? Do they like to visit other gardens? Do they prefer to ask someone questions? Would they like to share their favourite resources with other gardeners?

Gardens are also great places for teaching children and youth and helping them develop skills. If children feel they are part of the garden they will be less likely to damage it and will defend it!

- Supervision is important for both children and youth so that they can receive guidance and participate constructively and safely. Supportive adults can help children and youth develop skills, knowledge and confidence.
- Invite classes, camps, or other children's programs to come to the garden. Make sure program staff will supervise children.
- Creating a separate children's plot allows children to explore and experiment without damaging other plots. It also gives them a sense of ownership and stewardship.
- Youth can complete volunteer hours required for school by helping with garden tasks.



Being a good neighbour



If the garden is near residences or common areas, gardeners must be considerate of other people in the space. Too many complaints can put a garden at risk. It's good to talk with neighbours to find out if they have any concerns. That way you may be able to respond to them before they become a problem.

By cultivating good relationships with your neighbours, you will have more people protecting the space. You may also find your neighbours bringing things you need and coming to celebrate the garden with you!

- Try to minimize noise and disturbances. Don't use leaf blowers, electric trimmers or lawn mowers early in the morning. Don't play loud or amplified music.
- Keep the garden tidy and attractive. Make sure gardeners properly dispose of garbage and recycling. Planting native and pollinator plants around the perimeter beautifies the garden and provides opportunities to learn about nature.
- Make sure pests that may affect your neighbours (like rodents, stinging wasps, and hornets) stay under control.
- Listen to any concerns your neighbours may express. Keep them informed about any actions you are taking.

Funding for your garden

Even though community gardens don't need a lot of money, they do need some funds. This is especially true in the early stages. This section will help you get started on fundraising. You can also connect with your CSC for guidance and learn more about TCHC's [Local Initiative Funding for Tenants \(LIFT\)](#) program.

Tips for writing funding proposals

➔ Know your project

Make sure you are clear about the purpose, goals, and objectives of the garden. Talk about the positive changes the garden will make for gardeners and community members. Be as specific as you can.

➔ Know your neighbourhood

Make sure to get in touch with any organizations in your neighbourhood that are involved in gardening and food. Research what businesses in your neighbourhood might be able to lend a hand. Funders like to see partnerships and people working together. They also like to see that your garden is supported by others in the neighbourhood.

➔ Do careful research

Create a list of government funders, foundations, and private donors that are a good fit for your garden.

Instead of sending out the same letter to a lot of funders, carefully review all eligibility criteria and application guidelines before applying. Start with funders who best match your garden's goals.

See if the funder is open to answering questions. You may want to register for webinars and information sessions when available. Prepare questions or points to clarify in advance.

➔ **Know who to ask**

The City of Toronto has a variety of granting programs. You should also keep your city councillor informed about your garden. They can share news about your events and help find donations.

Depending on the purpose of your garden, you could be a good match for foundations or grant programs that support the environment, climate action, nature, health and wellness, or neighbourhood improvement. Some funders focus on specific groups of people, like children, youth, seniors, newcomers or people with disabilities.

Consider the size of the grant offered and the scale of your project. Some funders will only donate to organizations serving a large number of people. If the funder shows who they have funded before, you'll see the type of project they support.

➔ **Make a plan**

Have a clear plan of what you are asking for, how much, from whom, and why. Also have a transparent system in place that shows how funds will be handled.

➔ **Do what the funders ask**

Most funders have a format that you must follow. Remember to carefully read the instructions before you apply for any funding. Make sure you meet their criteria and explain clearly how you meet these conditions. Answer their questions but do not give more than they ask for. Many application forms have strict word limits.

➔ **Get feedback**

Before you submit your proposal to a funder, ask an experienced fundraiser to read and comment on it.

➔ **Persistence and patience**

Do not put all your hopes on one funder. Try to submit to at least a few different sources. Keep in mind that some granting agencies and foundations take a long time to make decisions.

➔ **Thank your donors!**

Once you are successful, show that you appreciate all of your donors, no matter how much they gave. Find different ways to thank them. For example, you can list them in brochures and newsletters, tell the local media, or talk about them at events. You can put their names on signs at the site or give them gifts from the garden.

In-kind donations

Sometimes, you don't need cash; you just need stuff. Check out local businesses that might be able to donate tools and supplies. For example, local arborists may have free woodchips that can be used for mulch. Garden centres may have a surplus of plants mid-season that they will donate or sell at a reduced price. They may also have pots or containers they're not using anymore.

Corporate sponsorship is another approach. Approach a business to “sponsor a plot” in your garden. Perhaps a plot that grows food to donate to others.

If you need labour, businesses will sometimes donate staff time for a clean-up day or a construction project as a team-building event for their staff. This can be a lot of work for a garden to organize, but it's one way to get lots of bodies working on a large task. Ask the business if they will donate cash or materials as well to cover the cost of organizing their event!

In-kind donations can show potential funders that your community supports your project.



Product-based fundraisers

If you get permission from TCHC, you may be able to sell some produce to benefit the garden.

If you have an idea for a community economic development project, contact your CSC. It's a good idea to have a one-page outline of what you would like to do. Describe your idea, how it will benefit your community, who supports the idea, and what resources you might need.

Fundraising events

Fundraising events can be everything from a workshop to a movie night to a garden tour. Events take time and resources to organize, but they can be ways to build relationships with sponsors and other community residents.

Partnering with community organizations

There are many reasons for partnering with community organizations, schools, community centres and faith groups.

- Community organizations usually know the neighbourhood well and can help you reach people who would be interested in your garden.
- Organizations may be particularly skilled at working with specific groups of people, like children, youth, or people with physical or mental health conditions.
- Charitable organizations and non-profits can partner with you or act as a trustee for grants.
- Garden and food organizations can offer workshops and training for your garden members.
- Organizations may have tools or supplies that they can share.
- They can help you organize community events at the garden.

Keep in mind that organizations will have policies and structures that may limit how they can work with you. They may take longer to make decisions or take actions than you expect. The benefits of partnership are usually worth the extra time and effort.

More resources

Part 2 of the TCHC Community Garden Manual has links to further resources and a list of funding sources.

You can also find more information at:

torontourbangrowers.org/resources

foodshare.net/programs/community-food-growing/community-gardens/

Appendix A - Site assessment

The more you consider each of these aspects, the better your proposal will be and you will face fewer problems with your garden. Try to draw a map of the site and show as much of the information below as you can.

Sunlight or exposure

Does the site receive at least six to eight hours of direct sunlight daily? Are there areas where trees or buildings casting shade? Is the site windy? What direction does the wind come from?

Water access

Can you see a place to hook up a hose?

Soil quality

Are there any visible signs of contamination (like run-off from a parking lot or roadway)? Do you know anything about past uses of the site that may have caused contamination? What is the texture of the soil? Is the soil hard or packed down?

Topography

Is the land relatively flat? Does the site have good drainage or are there places where water might pool?

Current state

What is on the site already (trees, shrubs, fire hydrants, steps, signs, light poles, sidewalks)? Does anything need to be removed from the site (rocks, cement, garbage)? Can you see any signs of underground pipes, wires or other digging hazards?

Accessibility

Is the site easily accessible by gardeners with mobility issues or elderly gardeners?

Current uses

- Is the garden in a visible location with lots of people?
- Will a garden interfere with how people currently use the space?
- Do people walk through the site, including informal paths?
- Do cars drive by or park nearby (pollution from exhaust or car fluids)?
- Is the garden adjacent to someone's residence?

Safety

Are there any safety concerns?

Additional questions and support

For questions about community gardens, contact the Tenant Engagement team by emailing TenantEngagement@torontohousing.ca.



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