



COMMUNITY GARDENS: GROWING MORE THAN VEGETABLES

Community gardens started during the First and Second World Wars. At that time, growing food in “victory gardens” was a patriotic duty.

Community gardens have since become beautiful spaces where neighbours care for vegetables and flowers. People who live in apartments, or who don't have space at their own homes, can use these gardens to grow their own fresh food.

What are community gardens?

Every community garden is different. They can be large or small and come in many shapes and sizes. These gardens are usually close to home. Sometimes gardeners have their own plots in the community garden. In other gardens, everyone shares the work and harvest. The gardeners themselves decide how to run the garden.

You can find community gardens under railway tracks or power lines, and on rooftops. City dwellers generally use these gardens to grow fresh produce. City parks departments and health or other community organizations may run community gardens.

How does gardening fit into physical activity?

Gardening is Canada's second most popular physical activity after walking¹. Gardening is much more than just taking the time to smell the roses and can be an excellent physical activity to keep you healthy. Just ask any gardener.

Canada's Physical Activity Guide suggests adding up to 60 minutes of activity a day (in periods of at least 10 minutes each). If you enjoy gardening, you can keep your body healthy using all three types of recommended activities—endurance, flexibility, and strength activities. Heavy yard-work (e.g., digging and raking) includes both endurance and strengthening activities. Bending and reaching in the garden can also help you become more flexible.

Regular physical activity has many health benefits. You can reduce your risk of early death, heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, adult-onset diabetes, osteoporosis, stroke, depression, and colon cancer.

Before starting your garden this spring, here are some tips from the Canadian Physiotherapy Association to prevent stiffness, soreness, and injury: [Gardening tips and techniques](#).

Gardening as a stress-buster!

Being out in the fresh air also produces psychological benefits. Just looking at trees and plants reduces stress, lowers blood pressure, and helps muscle tension.

Tired travelers

Did you know that a basic North American meal could travel 2,400 km (about 1,500 miles) to get to your dinner table?

- *Transporting food causes greenhouse gases that lead to global climate change.*
- *Foods grown locally help conserve farmlands and wildlife habitats.*
- *Local food also reduces the environmental costs of food transportation.*
- *Local food is also more likely to be fresh than food shipped long distances.*

Source: David Suzuki Foundation

Even a small garden can relieve stress. Gardening provides a form of emotional expression and release that helps people heal both mentally and physically.

Horticultural therapists also find that gardening stimulates the senses, especially for older adults. The interesting sights, sounds, textures, and scents inspire memories and connections to the past. Gardeners also tend to be more optimistic and find life more satisfying than non-gardeners.

How to start a community garden

1. *Form a planning committee:*
 - *organize a meeting of interested people;*
 - *choose a well-organized garden coordinator;*
 - *form committees to accomplish tasks.*
2. *Choose a site:*
 - *to grow vegetables, make sure the site gets at least six full hours of sunlight daily;*
 - *ensure that water is available;*
 - *consider past uses of the land (is there any contamination?).*
3. *Prepare and develop the site:*
 - *organize volunteer work crews to clean and lay out the site;*
 - *decide on plot sizes and mark plots clearly with gardeners' names;*
 - *include plans for a storage area for tools and other equipment, as well as a compost area.*
4. *Organize the garden:*
 - *determine whether the group will do certain things cooperatively (such as turning the soil in the spring, planting cover crops, or composting);*
 - *will there be a set of written rules that gardeners are expected to uphold?*
 - *will there be a children's plot?*
5. *Troubleshooting:*
 - *make a sign for the garden to let people know the garden is a neighbourhood project;*
 - *invite everyone in the neighbourhood to participate from the very beginning;*
 - *children who are included in the garden can be the garden's best protectors;*
 - *a well-organized garden with a strong leadership and committed members can overcome almost any obstacle.*

Sources: American Community Gardening Association

Other benefits of community gardening

Community gardens help people from different cultures and socio-economic groups to interact in the shared common goal of growing vegetables, fruit, and flowers. Not only do the gardeners share a common goal of growing vegetables, but the gardens themselves help people interact. People from diverse backgrounds feel comfortable talking to each other because of the garden. The garden opens up and creates opportunities to talk about seeds, methods of gardening, and how to prepare various dishes (Source: The Carlington Summit).

2 The opportunity to garden is particularly welcomed by people who have moved to Canada who may not be able to own a house and have their own backyard garden. Many new Canadians have a history of agriculture in their

homelands and find that a tie to the land is one aspect of life missing in their new urban surroundings (Source: City of Edmonton).

Gardens built and tended by community residents have unique social and economic benefits. Community gardeners both share and gain knowledge and experience in gardening, business practices, life skills, nutrition, and ecological practices. Community gardeners can produce affordable food for their families, including vegetables they may not be able to get in supermarkets.

Community gardening can also improve people's health by varying diet and increasing food safety. People are now more aware of food safety concerns. Many people want to know more about where their food comes from and how it was produced.

Community gardens encourage communities to feel secure about their food. Many people also share their food with friends and family (or give the bounty from the fall harvest to the local food bank).

Producing healthy human communities

Community gardens play an important role in the development of healthy human communities. The gardens create a more liveable environment by managing noise, pollution, and temperature. Community gardens help people rediscover the rewards of being part of a group brought together to be active and to return to outdoor green spaces.

Community gardeners get to know their neighbours, make new friends, and develop a feeling of belonging. Community gardens can break down the barriers of isolation and create a sense of neighbourhood among residents. A friendlier, more united community can result from sharing information about pest control or boasting about the size of the first tomato.

Community gardens also establish a positive community image. The presence of community gardeners discourages criminals and vandalism. A green and groomed community garden shows that residents care about the property and each other. Greenery helps people to relax and renew, reducing aggression. The greener the surroundings, the fewer the crimes against people and property (Kuo and Sullivan, 2001).

Helping the planet

A garden is one place where you can easily help the planet's health. Get rid of greenhouse gases by using people power instead! Your body and the environment will both benefit.

Community gardens address personal health, economic, environmental, and cultural issues. These gardens are also a safe haven for the human spirit. Urban people can gather, preserve part of their culture through native seeds and foods, and teach their children about food and the earth.

Resource:

- [Gardening for people with disabilities](#) (FoodShare) – provides information about how to make your community garden more accessible to people with a physical disability.

References:

- Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (web site). 2001 Physical Activity Monitor.

Composting: nature's recycler

Did you know that over 25% of residential waste is compostable?

- *Composting is nature's way of recycling.*
- *Composting reduces the waste going to landfills and produces organic humus. (Humus improves both soil texture and fertility.)*
- *Community gardeners also create a healthier environment by composting fruit and vegetable scraps, leaves, and other organic materials.*

Source: The Composting Council of Canada

Other references:

- The City of Edmonton, Community Garden Network.
- Kuo, F. E., and Sullivan, W. C. (2001). Environment and crime in the inner city: Does vegetation reduce crime? *Environment and Behavior*, 33 (3), 343-367.
- The Composting Council of Canada
- The City of Toronto, Community Garden Program, Frequently Asked Question: What is a community garden?
- Openlands Project, Chicago Illinois, Tools for Starting a Garden.

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