

# Starting a Community Garden in DC



Photo Credit: Bea Trickett



[www.neighborhoodfarminitiative.org](http://www.neighborhoodfarminitiative.org)

# Starting a Community Garden in Washington, DC: *A Resource Guide*

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# Introduction

## What is a community garden?

Community gardens can take many forms and serve many purposes. This guide is focused primarily on the creation of gardens used for personal food production, though many of the activities involved in garden formation will be similar regardless of the intended use of the garden. Throughout this guide, the term “community garden” is used rather generally, to refer to a plot of land tended by a group of people gardening together. These gardeners may work individual portions of a larger garden, or may tend a communal garden together. The distinction this guide draws between community gardens and “urban farms/ agriculture” is that this guide does not focus on drawing a revenue stream or earning a livelihood based on food production, but rather on gardening as a recreational or educational activity. Please note that there may be zoning or other legal restrictions against operating an agricultural business on certain types of land in DC, so recommendations made in this guide may not hold universally true for starting such a venture.

## What’s already happening in DC?

Washington DC is currently home to numerous community gardens and organizations dedicated to the expansion of urban gardening and farming throughout the city. Before trying to start a new garden, be sure to check out all the resources already available.

DC’s Field to Fork Network offers information on all sorts of food-related efforts in and around DC. See [www.fieldtoforknetwork.org](http://www.fieldtoforknetwork.org) for a look into the array of activities already underway. Of particular interest to aspiring gardeners will be Neighborhood Farm Initiative’s 2010 Community Garden Census Report, *A Report on the State of Community Gardening in DC*, available on the Field to Fork website. The census has collected and mapped information from all of DC’s community gardens, and data is updated annually.



Map of DC’s Community Gardens. Available at:  
<http://fieldtoforknetwork.org/community-gardens/>

## Part One: Getting Started

### *Things you'll need*

**An Identity.** Because community gardens can take so many different forms, you will need to have an identity for your garden, and a clear sense of purpose. This may be as simple as neighbors gathering to grow food in a common space, or it may be a more complex project that focuses on environmental education or wildlife habitat creation. Any type of garden has the potential to be a wonderful community asset, but it is important to note the needs and interests of local community members when determining a focus for your garden. Community support and interest in any gardening project can play a vital role in the project's success, longevity, and overall value.

**Organizational Structure.** It is important to identify a core team of individuals willing to commit to the gardening project. Interest in food production has grown significantly in recent years, and while this is wonderful and valuable, it means that it is more important than ever to identify a group of people who are willing to commit to long-term project management. Starting a new garden will take commitment and perseverance, especially in an urban environment with strong competition for land use. Once the garden is established, leadership and organization remains an essential part of community garden maintenance. You will need to be prepared for ups and downs in the processes of both establishing and maintaining a garden – and identifying a core leadership model from the beginning will be a key component of this preparation.

**Funding.** Securing funding for a gardening project is a necessary part of creating a new community garden. Options for funding include finding a garden sponsor or acquiring grants. Churches, private businesses, schools, citizen groups, and local parks are all potential sponsors for gardening projects<sup>1</sup>. Small-scale grants may be available for gardening and community development projects. It is common for funding for ongoing garden maintenance to be attained through charging gardeners annual plot fees.

Rebel Tomato, a project of the American Community Gardening Association, maintains a webpage dedicated to fundraising strategies and grant opportunities for gardening projects. <http://www.communitygarden.org/rebeltomato/roots/fundraising.php#urbanag>

**Land.** Last but certainly not least, land is an obvious necessity for any gardening project. Throughout Washington DC, there are several types of land that may be available for community gardens. The next section of this guide will offer a breakdown of different types of land and the various steps involved in accessing the land for food production. It is important to note the existence of the Food Production and Urban Gardens Program (Figure 1), which was written into DC Code in the 1980s and is intended to support urban farms and gardens:

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<sup>1</sup> American Community Gardening Association. *Starting a community garden*. Retrieved from [http://communitygarden.org/docs/starting\\_a\\_community\\_garden7-06.pdf](http://communitygarden.org/docs/starting_a_community_garden7-06.pdf)

Pursuant to § 419 of the District of Columbia Comprehensive Plan Act of 1984, the Mayor of the District of Columbia ("Mayor") shall establish a Food Production and Urban Gardens Program, which shall include, but not be limited to, the following elements:

**(1) Collection and maintenance of an up-to-date and comprehensive inventory of vacant lots, listed by categories, including, but not limited to:**

- (A) Specific location, by address and by advisory neighborhood commission designation;
- (B) Size; and
- (C) Dates of availability, by voluntary donation and through negotiated agreement, for use in the Food Production and Urban Gardens Program;

**(2) Public accessibility to the updated inventory of vacant lots described in paragraph (1) of this section by various means, including, but not limited to, publication of the inventory at least every 3 months in the District of Columbia Register; and**

**(3) Development, implementation, and promotion of policies that encourage the donation and cultivation of vacant lots for use in the Food Production and Urban Gardens Program, including, but not limited to:**

- (A) The development of standard agreement forms, to be made readily available for execution by citizens and the owners of vacant lots, which relieve owners of maintenance and insurance responsibilities in exchange for cultivation by citizens of urban gardens on vacant lots;
- (B) The inclusion of community gardening projects in the summer employment programs operated by the District of Columbia government;
- (C) The provision by the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of the District of Columbia of technical assistance and research in the form of educational materials and programs for citizen gardening and self-help food production efforts;
- (D) Coordination with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, both on the use of suitable portions of buildings and grounds for urban gardens, and on the development of instructional programs in science and gardening that prepare students for related career opportunities such as restaurant produce supply, landscaping, and floral design;
- (E) The encouragement of food buying clubs and produce markets throughout the District of Columbia to increase the supply of and demand for urban gardens; and
- (F) The development of incentives and community outreach efforts to promote the availability of vacant lots for participation in the Food Production and Urban Gardens Program.

## Part Two: Types of Available Land

### Public Land

#### Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR)

There are three ways to work with DC DPR on a gardening project.

1. Use an existing plot in a DPR community garden. Plots are limited to two per household, and each plot costs thirty dollars per season.
2. Partner with DPR to adopt and manage a DPR-owned community garden. In order to be eligible for this option, your organization must be District-registered, proof of which is required during the application process. DPR manages a demonstration garden at every recreation center in the District. Many of these gardens have the potential for expansion and are in need of neighborhood groups to adopt them and help them flourish.
3. Work with DPR to identify new community garden spaces on DPR land. Any garden established on DPR land will be subject to DPR regulations regarding land use and garden practices.

Each of these options requires the submission of a formal application, to be reviewed by DC DPR. For more information on the application process or to download the detailed instructions for submitting a community garden sponsorship proposal, see this website:

<http://dpr.dc.gov/DC/DPR/About+DPR/Partners+and+Volunteers/Community+Garden+Proposal>

On the DPR website, you can also find information on courses and activities that are of interest to gardeners – such as composting and beekeeping programs.

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*Pursuant to D.C. Official Code 10-304(a) and Title 10 Section 1105 of the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations, the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) may form partnerships with neighborhood, community and civic groups to permit private persons and organizations to improve and beautify parks, playgrounds, and recreation centers under DPR's jurisdiction, to accomplish a stated goal or mission.*

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As land tenure is a common problem associated with urban gardening, working with DPR to garden on land that has already been set aside for use by the general public is an excellent opportunity for individuals and established District organizations.

Twin Oaks Community Garden, DPR  
Photo Credit: Xi Wang

## National Park Service (NPS)

The National Park Service currently has jurisdiction over 10 community gardens in DC. Rock Creek Park oversees Blair Road, Fort Reno, Fort Stevens, Glover-Archbold, Mamie D. Lee, Melvin Hazen, Peabody, Rock Creek, and Whitehaven Community Gardens. Fort Dupont Community Garden is managed by Fort Dupont National Park. The March 2010 *Rock Creek Park Long-Range Interpretive Plan* includes community gardeners in their list of “Targeted Visitor Groups”<sup>2</sup>.

Similar to DPR land, one major advantage to gardening in a community garden on National Park Land is the relative land security. National Parks are not subject to the same pressure from development as vacant lots and other similar areas.

Unfortunately, community gardens are often considered a transient use for city lots, and success in community revitalization will attract the interest of developers with commercial interests in the land.

There are, however, limited (if any) opportunities for creation of new gardens within existing National Parks in DC, and it can take patience and perseverance to work within the federal bureaucracy.



Fort Dupont Community Garden, NPS  
Photo Credit: Eugene Kim

A great resource for locating park land (either under the jurisdiction of DPR or NPS) is [www.capitalspace.gov](http://www.capitalspace.gov). The CapitalSpace plan is a joint project of NPS, DPR, District of Columbia

Office of Planning, and National Capital Planning Commission, which maps public land and outlines initiatives for park improvement. Community gardening is mentioned as a potential activity for their plans to “Transform Small Parks,” (mostly under DPR jurisdiction). Sixty seven percent of DC parkland is smaller than one acre, and many of the parks have been identified as needing improvements.<sup>3</sup>

**To contact the National Park Service regarding community gardening within Rock Creek Park, call 202-895-6000 and ask to speak with the Permitting Officer. For information about community gardening within Fort Dupont National Park, call 202-426-7723.**

<sup>2</sup> Rock Creek Park. *Rock Creek Park Long-Range Interpretive Plan*. March 2010, pg 16. Retrieved from <http://hfc.nps.gov/pdf/ip/2010-05-07-RockCreekLRIP-FinalDocument.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> CapitalSpace Final Plan. *Ideas to Achieve the Full Potential of Washington’s Parks and Open Space*. March 2010, pg 85. Retrieved from <http://www.capitalspace.gov/FinalPlan/CapitalSpaceReport.pdf>

## City Owned Land

The DC City government maintains a wide range of maps that could prove useful in a search for gardening land and resources. Below is the website with links to all of the available mapping resources.

<http://octo.dc.gov/DC/OCTO/Maps+and+Apps/Online+Mapping/All+Online+Maps>

Interest in school gardens in DC has increased dramatically over the past few years. Contact DC's Farm to School Network for tips on working with DC Public School sites on gardening initiatives: <http://dcfarmtoschool.org>

See also City Blossoms' guide *A Toolkit: How to Start a School Garden*, written in partnership with Alliance for a Healthier Generation

([http://www.healthiergeneration.org/uploadedFiles/For\\_Schools/1\\_SnacksMeals/GardenTK.pdf](http://www.healthiergeneration.org/uploadedFiles/For_Schools/1_SnacksMeals/GardenTK.pdf)).

### **Helpful City Mapping Services include:**

- Atlas All-in-One
- Enterprise Zone-Finder
- Government Property Search
- Master Address Repository
- Property Quest
- Real Property Finder
- Watershed Finder
- Zoning Map

## **Private Land**

### Vacant Lots

The transformation of a vacant lot into a productive garden is a beautiful thing, but going through the process to do it legally and on the record can take a lot of work. *The Food Production and Urban Gardens Program* mandates that the city keep current inventory of all vacant lots and encourage gardening on vacant land, by enacting policies and programs that encourage landowners to donate land for cultivation of food. Property tax rates also serve as incentive for property owners to turn blighted land into useful space – blighted land is taxed at 10%, vacant land at 5%, and occupied land between 0.85 and 1.85%.

To acquire the use of a vacant lot, there are several steps that must be taken.

1. Determine the parcel number. The DC Office of Planning offers a database with information on properties throughout the city, and may provide you with all of the information you need to start work on acquiring use of the land. <http://propertyquest.dc.gov>
2. Figure out how the land is zoned, to ensure that gardening is a legal use for the space. The above Property Quest program can tell you the zoning of a property. Additionally, the DC Zoning Map can be accessed at: <http://maps.dcoz.dc.gov>

3. Identify the owner of the property. The DC Recorder of Deeds maintains a searchable online database that may help in determining the property owner. The website requires the user to create an account in order to search properties, but it is free. Access this page information at: <http://otr.cfo.dc.gov/otr/frames.asp?doc=https://gov.propertyinfo.com/DC-Washington>
4. Contact the property owner. There are many ways to approach this, but often groups will send a short letter describing the gardening project, including a request to meet in person – if possible, on-site at the land in question. Then present your full proposal including diagrams, sketches, and supporting evidence as to the benefits of community gardening.

Some organizations, such as the **Capital Hill Community Garden Land Trust**, have been successful in acquiring land donations from owners of vacant property. The Land Trust was established as a 501(c)3 non-profit in order to take ownership of the parcel of land where the King's Court Community Garden is located. Before the creation of the King's Court garden (founded in 1997), the land was a vacant back-alley lot. With help from a local City Council member, special legislation was passed to waive back-taxes on the property and allow the landholder to donate the land free of a land-transfer charge. The Land Trust now officially holds title to this land, and as long as the space is used for community gardening, has been exempt from future property taxes by the DC Council.

The Capital Hill neighborhood where the Land Trust has established its gardens has a unique layout that creates interior lots. Because the alley access roads are less than thirty feet wide, DC Code prohibits the construction of buildings on the lots. Undesired by developers, some of these lots remained vacant and unmanaged.

If landowners are not open to donation of the property, arranging a low-cost, long-term lease may be an option. It is typical for community gardens to pursue 5-10 year leases with fixed rent set at \$1/year.

### Other Private Land

Signing private lease agreements with landholders is another option for garden. Some gardening organizations, such as **City Blossoms**, a non-profit dedicated to children's garden education, have experienced success with private lease agreements. City Blossoms has had success in acquiring land through direct leases with private landowners and housing developments, in addition to partnerships with schools and community centers.<sup>4</sup> Although land tenure is a common roadblock to forming long-term gardening projects in cities like DC, **partnerships with entities that already have control of the land is a great way to increase the permanence of a gardening project.**

Churches, schools, and housing complexes all hold potential to be partners in community gardening projects. Many churches already engage in food distribution activities, and some have cleared land that could potentially be used for gardening projects. Schools often have outlying fields that are not regularly used. Housing complexes may be willing to work with residents who want to create a gardening space for themselves and their neighbors.

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<sup>4</sup> Bloom, Lola. Personal Interview. 21 January 2011.

## Part Three: Looking Forward – Where to From Here?

### *Visions for Urban Agriculture in DC*

Urban agriculture initiatives, such as community gardens, seek to increase local production and consumption of healthy foods. Such projects may focus on different objectives, ranging from environmental education and childhood development to urban renewal and improved food security for low-income communities, or the objective may simply be neighbors finding a common space to each grow a portion of their family's food. Whatever the ultimate goal of each gardening project, all efforts can be enhanced by working together to transform the DC landscape into a fertile environment for urban agriculture.

What might collaboration look like? Some visions from people in the field include:

- Active and flourishing community gardening space at every recreation center in DC.<sup>5</sup>
- Initiatives to open up school gardens to the community during summer months, when school is not in session and the growing season is at its peak.<sup>6</sup>
- Building new gardens where playgrounds already exist - playgrounds often have extra land and already have a community of families utilizing the space.<sup>7</sup>
- Seeking partnerships with local churches and religious organizations, many of which already have programs to distribute food in their neighborhoods, as well as space to build new gardens.<sup>8</sup>
- Establishing a government-based organization to streamline the process for creating new urban agriculture projects and protecting land from industrial development.<sup>9</sup>
- Concentrating efforts for new gardening projects in areas considered food deserts, to enhance access to fresh and healthy produce.

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<sup>5</sup> Melsted, Kelly. Personal Interview. 2 February 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Toscano, Laura. Personal Interview. 27 January 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Toscano, Laura. Personal Interview. 27 January 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Rollins, Carl. Personal Interview. 14 December 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Rollins, Carl. Personal Interview. 14 December 2010.

## Best Practices for Community Gardening

- Confirm a water supply.<sup>10</sup> Though securing land for a community garden may be the biggest hurdle in creating a new garden, a reliable supply of water is just as important. If there is no existing water source in the garden space, arrangements can often be made with neighbors or nearby businesses to utilize their water supply.
- Test your soil! Urban environments are home to many potential soil contaminants, notably lead and arsenic. These substances are heavy metals that accumulate in soils, and can be especially toxic to children and pregnant women.<sup>11</sup> Before you start gardening, make sure the soil is safe. If soil contaminants are a problem in your garden space, using raised beds is a viable alternative.
- Have an organizational structure for your community garden.<sup>12</sup> Be sure to identify committed leaders and develop a set of ground rules or garden bylaws. Deciding who gets priority for plot space, setting plot fees, and deciding the fate of neglected plots is important. Clearly communicating these expectations to all gardeners is essential.
- Be an active and positive addition to your surrounding community.<sup>13</sup> Becoming allies with other neighborhood organizations (such as churches or housing associations) will be advantageous in the long run. Working together on projects with community organizations can be mutually beneficial, and becoming known and appreciated in the neighborhood will be helpful in maintaining the use of your land.
- Coordinate with other local community gardens. Figure out who else is out there so you can collaborate and share resources. Coordination among gardeners can help reduce costs and labor.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, Pat. Personal Interview. 18 November 2010.

<sup>11</sup> "Urban Soils and Soil Testing: Avoiding Lead & Other Heavy Metals." *Start a Farm in the City*. 2009: pg 9.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Pat. Personal Interview. 18 November 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Rollins, Carl. 14 December 2010.