

How to Run a “Grow Drive”: plant, water, give.

1. **What:** This is a ‘how to’ on the kind of drive where community members pick up free seeds or plants, grow them at their own homes until fall, then return the fruits and vegetables to be measured and delivered to whatever recipients are appropriate. These can include needful members, food pantries, food banks.

2. **Resources:**
 - This effort requires an investment of seeds or plants, and some kind of distribution system. We recommend giving them away in several consecutive weeks after services or meetings, and in more than one place if possible.

3. **General Process:**
 - Keep a list of those who took plants/seeds, and then call them back months later with email and announcements.
 - Weigh the produce, roughly, and/or estimate the pounds produced.
 - Report back the results to the community. People like to hear what it all totaled up to.
 - Last, we deliver them. In our area we use the Chattanooga Community Food Bank, but some growers from another church took theirs to the Soddy Daisy Food Bank. We also gave some out in our own small, church food pantry.

4. **Detailed tips.** There are many ways to do this. Local food banks/pantries may have a system for fresh produce donations. This list is what we advise and/or how we did it.
 - Make it a “Thing.” We call ours the “Sweet Potato Palooza”. Sweet potatoes are highly nutritious, and have a long, stable shelf life suitable for food pantries. As also do winter squash.
 - You can simply ask people to donate extra home- grown produce, but we like to make it a drive. A campaign. Put up FB posts, bulletin announcements, FB events, pulpit announcements, etc.
 - Of course, there’s no reason you can’t do BOTH types food collections, but confining this to a spring giveaway and then a fall pick -up drive is less busy work for the organizers.
 - Set your giveaway (late spring) target dates, and also your end or call-back times (late fall).
 - We recommend choosing vegetables that have long shelf life and are nutritious. Of course, that doesn’t mean you can’t accept other items.

- Involve other groups, if possible—master gardeners, Sunday School classes, community and neighborhood groups, other churches.
- Let them know that store bought donations are also welcome. That said, we are trying to get people to garden, so we push the ‘grow-at-home’ concept.
- The Giveaway. Give out free starter plants/seeds (see below).
- Call an ingathering in mid to late fall. We found that people ignore our official ‘call in’, and pretty much just dump their produce in boxes in the designated spot.
 - Do mark designated spots for drop off. Although people will put them where they put them... We tape 8 x11, notebook paper signs in hallways and by doorways. Hopefully, this also reminds them as they walk by.
 - Weigh the produce. Announce the results. People like to know how much you ended up with.
 - Deliver to your agency of choice. We add up all the weights, then drive it over to the Chattanooga Food Bank.
 - ANYTHING is better than NOTHING.

5. Things we tried.

- Our first year we tried to grow our own sweet potato slips. This is certainly cheapest. Although we had several experienced vegetable gardeners trying this, we were remarkably bad at it. Yes, we read UT publications and watched youtube videos, but we ended up having to buy most of the slips in 30+ plant flats. That is the 2d cheapest way to provide them.
- We also probably started too early trying to give our home- grown sweet potato slips away; sweet potatoes are a warm season plant, and they will not grow well until the soil is quite warm—say, late May. See UT Extension for advice.
- We ended up buying multiple trays of slips, mostly from various ACE Hardware stores. We donated this, but it can add up quickly.
- We also put the word out in various forums—master gardeners, garden clubs, church—for folks to report when and where they found the slips for sale. We’d head over quickly to pick up whatever we decided. Generally we go to 3 or even 4 locations.
- Meanwhile, we were advertising this giveaway and its purpose.
 - We coordinated with clergy and when we were ready, set up small tables at the two main front-and-back entrances of our church. People manning the tables sneaked out of service a bit early, and were there and ready to go when the congregation started leaving.
- The first year we had them all potted up in paper cups. However, we learned it was easier to just cut up the plastic trays and hand the plants out still in their cells. We use stout scissors, and hand over the slips in their dirt still in the cell pack.

- NOTE: we are very INSISTENT that people take them. We don't let them back out or sneak by. Who knows? You may start a love of gardening in some unexpected person.
 - The first year we also bought and offered large, 15- 20 gallon grow bags for those without gardens. These bags are not very expensive. But, the produce from those was so small, it seemed not worth providing. We still encourage people to grow them in very large pots, but in truth such pots are too small for the mighty sweet potato vines to be what God wants them to be: BIG..
 - Now we simply encourage folks to plant them directly in any full- sun spot in their yard. Sweet potatoes are NOT fussy about soil type, and can do fine in any regular, old clay yard. People just need to water them about once a week, and mow around them.
 - We also handed out a 'how to grow' sheet, which should be posted with this tip list. Feel free to use ours or make your own.
6. This is pretty simple, but it does take a little money, especially if you don't grow your own starter plants. We gathered probably close to 170 pounds in our second year, so that is good news. Please contact us through our church office (Grace Episcopal Church, 423.698- 4233) or directly or by email at greengracechattanooga@gmail.com if you want more details. Good luck!

-- Lisa Lemza & Kristina Shaneyfelt