

HOW TO BUILD AND RUN A COMMUNITY GARDEN. Written by Brainerd by Grace (B2G) Community Garden, Established 2010—2011

We are listing how we did it and manage ours, in its 13th year. We are available for help—just contact us. NOTE: community gardens are easy to start and just as easy to abandon within 2- 3 years. A successful effort takes long term management and attention.

- Getting started. Do you have enough experienced gardeners to start with? You only need a couple, and you only need basic gardening knowledge—we're all learning, all the time.
- The Hamilton County Extension Agent can also help, [\(423\) 855-6113](tel:4238556113). There are great, science based free pubs to download at UT Publications. See lists at <https://extension.tennessee.edu/publications/pages/default.aspx?k=Residential%20and%20Consumer%20Horticulture&cs=This%20Site&u=https%3a//extension.tennessee.edu/publications>.
- Crabtree Farms is also a good resource.
- Get a few folks together, acquire pastor and council/vestry/deacon permission, and get started!

I. **Space**. Any empty space will do, in the front, back, side of the property. **This includes pavement, as beds can be built on top of old cement or asphalt.** You need

- full- sun --with at least 8 -10 hours of sunlight a day
- ACCESS TO WATER. **You must be able to water the garden. This can be a real problem.** (We rented a ditch witch and ran our own water lines with PEX pipes to a water point).
- You can install a separate 'watering meter' from Tennessee American Water Company at your site, which eliminates the expensive sewage fee. But it costs hundreds of dollar.

Other things to consider:

- Keep the space looking nice and a pleasure to visit—make this part of your gardener's contract (see below). If possible, provide shady place to sit and rest.
- Beds. **Raised beds versus in- ground plots**. You can do either if you have the ground/lawn space. However, raised beds are much, much easier to maintain, with fewer weed battles .NOTE: Raised beds don't have to be very high to get the benefit—18- 24 inches tall will do. Taller is better, but also more expensive to build and fill.

- Keep rows/beds easy to reach across from either side—3'- 4' wide.
- Raised beds can be made out of ANYTHING: concrete block, scrounged concrete chunks, railroad ties, mortared bricks—any salvaged material that will contain the fill. (we bought composite trex material at half price from Southeastern Salvage on Lee Hwy).
- We found it helpful to design each bed with a 'sit board' across the top rim to help gardeners work and rest.
- Design. Beds can be laid out in any way that **uses space, light, and access to water**. If you have space it's pretty to lay them out in a pattern, but it's not necessary; any garden will be lovely and improvement over concrete and boring mowed Bermuda grass.
- Space it so it's easy to mow around. Weedeaters will destroy your beds.

II. **Beds**— Make beds/plots just wide enough to reach.

- In ground rows. If you plant rows of in-ground plants, you may want to divide it by sections for individuals to maintain part of a row
- We built ours in two sizes: 12' long by 4' wide, and a smaller bed 6' long by 4' wide. We found that most want a large bed; we often add people into the garden with a small bed and put them on a wait list for a large bed. However, some will only want a small bed.

III. **Who's the Produce for?** Generally, the two ways to do this are (1) a few gardeners grow for all, take what they want, and give away/make public the rest. We have found it surprisingly hard to convince people it's ok to pick and take free produce.

The other model: (2) assign individuals/families a plot or bed and let them keep what they themselves plant and grow. We do this in our garden, renting the beds for \$20/year, with a gardeners' contract each bed renter signs. That way it's up to the individual renter to maintain and harvest the bed.

You will always have people pilfering from person's beds. It waxes and wanes. To help fix this, we built a small, separate Free Garden for 'whosoever will' to drive by and pick vegetables and flowers—this is our U-Pick cutting garden. Providing this has cut down, but not eliminated, the general public from pilfering from people's beds.

IV. **How to get \$\$\$.** Raised beds can be expensive to build; in ground beds are cheaper, but much harder to maintain. Traditional, in ground rows require only borrowing a tiller and some soil preparation. Although seeds are cheap- especially when swapped, saved and shared-- tools, supplies, water can add up, *especially* when getting started. Here are some ideas for sponsorship, below.

- (1) Build a test bed and **figure out how much each size bed will cost to build and fill**. Then you'll know how much to ask for or acquire.

- If using in-ground row/beds, calculate the square footage and the cubic yards of amendments you might need—the calculators are all on line. That way you can better estimate what amendments might cost, or the amount you need to acquire by scrounging. You can certainly keep adding them over time.
- Ask! Ask a Sunday school class or a church committee to sponsor a bed. Ask local businesses, individual members, anyone you can think of.
- You can (1) build as you go, or, recommended, (2) build it all in one season and have faith the money will come. We learned that people can't imagine it, but once they see it, they love it and the support will come. Have faith!

V. **Build**

- Get all your supplies in advance, and have them stockpiled on site in a secure place. Try not to waste volunteer time because you missed crucial supplies.
- Have a plan. Offer a meal. Get people to label their personal tools, so they don't get mixed up at the end.
- We had an empty lot that was only mowed, for years. We installed our raised beds in this sequence:
 - Measured and laid out (with marker paint, flags) where the beds were going. We wanted to be able to drive a truck in, and mow around the raised beds so we tried to leave space for that and for mowers to turn. When you lay out the beds or rows, people will really begin to get interested.
 - Called work days to build the boxes out of composite lumbar, we bought it in advance (Southeastern Salvage) over time and stockpiled it out of sight, but on site (less moving!)
 - Got enough material to build two test beds, our first in our lay out. Check the design and your computations. Note: we changed the design of our first test bed before we built the second: we added more interior bracing.
 - After we built beds, we then tilled up the ground inside the bed frame (it was hard as a rock), and then put non-plastic cardboard on top of the tilled soil. This really helped with initial weeds, especially with the nasty Bermuda grass.
 - Got a dump truck of high quality soil delivered beforehand. Filled and leveled the beds—with a wheel barrow army. This is hard, hard work. (NOTE: we used the expensive 'Black Gold' product from Winwood Bulk. It is very high quality fill, without mysterious dubious ingredients.]
- Work in several sessions, as needed.
- Have fun! We broke out champagne when we built our last bed!
- Offer a weather date, if you want; we always go 'rain or shine' because we've found it too hard to get all the moving parts back together.
- We built our beds in the winter, and they were mostly ready the next spring. We also added beds over time—you don't have to do it all at once.

- Don't forget to call the city/county to mark city utility lines.

VI. **Garden Rules**. We run our garden with the following general rules, which we strongly recommend:

- No pesticides, excepting only fire ant bait as needed, and once a spray for black widow spiders. We do not use rat poison or any sort of poisons. Bees, bugs and wildlife are part of the garden, and we need to help them all we can. We just accept the inevitable crops losses from insect, as our grandparents did. Generally—'pick before ripe.'
- No fungicides. Fungus and disease are inevitable with hot season vegetables, especially in a wet, humid summer. We are not growing vegetables for how they look.
- No chemical fertilizers except slow release, bead- type (like Osmocote) that are added when planting. Most people overuse fertilizers and won't measure them properly. That said, vegetables take a lot of nutrients from the soil, so we make sure and try to replenish it organically, from compost bins on site or any other humic material added in by the gardener.
- Organic mulch. We require beds to be mulched with 2 to 3 inches of mulch in summer and winter.
 - Mulch must be of any organic material: pine straw is cheapest, and will stay put.
 - Mulch keeps moisture in and helps—but does not eliminate—suppress weeds. It also breaks down and enriches the soil.
- Winter crops. We always try get people to grow them—thick leafy greens like collards and kale will survive snowfalls—but most won't. These crops are the easiest to grow: you don't have to water and the insects and diseases are nonexistent.
 - Gardeners are required to keep beds mulched in winter, right after they clear out their summer crops. This is certainly by the first hard frost.
 - If they don't grow a winter crop, they must still clear and mulch their beds. This winter mulch helps screen weed seeds from blowing in all winter while the beds are dormant, and continues to decompose and enrich the soil.
- Appearance and dead plants. Beds need to be tidy and nice looking: the garden should be pleasant to visit. You may want a popup tent or some other shade nearby, with benches or chairs too heavy to steal.
 - Dead and dying plants must be removed. This also helps stop disease and pests spreading.
 - Fall clean-up of summer crops. Gardeners must clear this out. Take vegetable debris to the dumpster, and NOT the compost bin as these

vegetable detritus is full of pests and diseases. Most community compost bins are not well maintained enough to heat up sufficiently to kill them.

- Unharvested crops. If someone doesn't take ripe fruit, our gardeners ruled that it's free to others.
- If someone isn't maintaining their plot—and won't ask for help—we kick them out of the garden and assign the bed to someone else.

VII. **Management.**

- **Managers.** Get one or two people to manage the garden.
 - Be the boss. Keep a list of who's assigned which bed. Require them to pay (something token?), and sign a gardener agreements with the garden rules.
 - Maintain a waiting list if possible.
 - Kick people out with fair notice and move someone else in. Some people will get huffy about this. Be the boss.
 - Because of people leaving the garden, we sometimes offer the 'extra' beds to the other gardeners.
 - Have meetings of gardeners as necessary. We do two a year: one in early spring—usually late February or March-- and one in November. Require attendance (with reasonable exceptions, which are up to the garden managers to call). Review problems, rules, give out seed pax (the Food Bank garden coordinator and/or Crabtree Farms often gives away their excess), extra sets, discuss problems, have a class. We always ask people to bring food & drink.
- Make sure the church office can answer basic questions or at least pass on the managers' contact info.
- We tend to see a fair amount of work at the beginning of the season—emails and phone calls to the gardeners, etc.—and again at the very end of the season. We tried having vegetable garden classes for a while, but they petered out. Try anything, though—pot lucks, work day, clothing drives-- anything that will get people outside and working with God's Own Nature.
- We admit we cut the gardeners slack over weeds in the hottest part of summer. Within reason.
- Last tip: do not let Bermuda grass get ahold of your beds! This is one of the few plants we will treat with herbicides: it is a foreign invasive and it will take over!

Good luck! FEAR NOT, the Lord will provide! Please call us over at Grace Episcopal if you have any questions or need help. We will joyfully do so: 423.698-2433

-- *Brainerd by Grace Community Garden*

BEHIND Grace Episcopal Church building, 20 Belvoir Avenue. The garden is by the Pavilion 'out back', off Sunbeam Avenue.