



Establishing and Managing On-site Garden Projects

A Guide for Marin County Faith Communities

The Power of Congregational Gardens Many garden projects begin with a passionate member of a congregation seeking to use underutilized space to support the community. While we often move forward with "hope and faith," transitioning to a structured plan ensures long-term success and sustainability. This Fact Sheet will introduce best practices for community gardens at faith community sites focusing on 3 phases: Initiation; Production and Maintenance;; and Transition.

Phase 1: Initiation

Planning early will increase your chances of long-term success. Taking time to consider your vision and if that can sync with other 'stakeholders' is important before you start to dig soil and build beds. Consider a 'Green Team' or 'Earth Ministry' leader excited about a garden that doesn't talk to the congregation's maintenance point person, 'landscape committee', or Board member who is most concerned about liability. Lack of coordinating with these individuals early on can cause delay at crucial times later in the season.

Set Clear Goals:

How will you measure success? Common metrics include pounds of food grown, the number of engaged members or neighbors, and new partnerships established. Some congregations develop community gardens as a way to connect their faith-mission as a way to teach concepts like: Stewardship, Tikkun Olam, and care of God's Creation. Is the garden designed to supplement your pantry or other charitable giving? Do you want to grow traditional foods that help your community connect with 'food culture'? Do you want to turn an 'eyesore' or abandoned lot into a resource? Should the garden solely be a place to work and grow food, or also a place to gather, relax, meditate and/or contemplate the Divine? Do you want to connect your faith community to neighbors as a form of outreach or support for people who are under-resourced including some members of the immigrant community? Basic models include:

- a. **Multiple Private plots** for individual gardeners within a single community garden;
- b. **Communal plots** that all volunteers tend together; food is typically donated to those in need, with some being sold at a produce stand to facilitate project sustainability;
- c. **Hybrid:** in this model, a gardener will have their own plot for their own use, but also spend an agreed upon amount of time tending larger community plots within the same site with produce from the larger plots donated to people in need.

Site & Community Assessment

Some say, 'if we build it they will come'. We do not recommend this approach to planning a community garden. Instead, assess your community and neighborhood to see if there is interest in: individual plots, community plots, and volunteering. Think about resources: people, supplies, and cash that may be needed for the first year or two, and plan accordingly. We have seen a couple of well-meaning and passionate people install garden beds, but they lay empty when no one has stepped up to plant. Top-down leadership can work against the goal of engaging volunteers, especially volunteers of varying ages.

If you don't have much space for garden beds, or a significant number of volunteers ready to give enough hours on a weekly or monthly basis, consider perennial fruit trees or other plants that don't require frequent maintenance and attention after they are established.

- **Conduct Inreach:** Survey your congregants to find those with the knowledge, time, and energy to guide the project. Often, new volunteers "come out of the woodwork" for garden opportunities.
- **Community Outreach:** If internal interest is low, consider inviting neighbors to work plots or "renting" the space to an experienced gardener who can manage a full community garden.
- **Environmental Factors:** Assess sunlight, potential pests (like gophers or deer), and soil quality. Be sure to check for nutrients and potential contamination.
- **Timing:** If your main 'labor force' will be kids from your religious school, and religious school is seasonal with a long summer break, consider planting a Fall garden. If you have a team that will be available in late Spring and Summer be sure you get your 'build days' scheduled in time to plant seeds or seedlings for Summer harvest.
- **Who Gets the Produce:** Clarify if gardeners will be growing for personal use or as part of a mission-related project to serve the local food bank or soup kitchen.
- **Funding:** Determine if the congregation can provide one-time infrastructure investments for fencing, raised beds, and efficient irrigation systems.

A Note on the Marin County Context: Since many Marin residents have their own backyards, the primary draw for a congregational garden may be fellowship and building community while serving others. In some neighborhoods a church or other place of worship is near dense apartments with individuals that have a personal and/or cultural affinity and tradition with gardening but no place to garden.



Members of the Buddhist Enlightenment Center/ **Chùa Phổ Giác** a Vietnamese temple in Novato tour a garden site before finalizing their plans for garden design.

Phase 2: Production and Maintenance

- **Resource Alignment:** Match your project's scale to your available labor and other resources. Sometimes it is best to start small, show success and then grow the size of the garden later, as more people join in. *"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together", is an African proverb.*
- **Cultural Integration:** Gardens can incorporate religious motifs and artistically designed raised beds to evoke connection to your faith tradition. Think beyond the rectangle! The possibilities are endless: a raised bed can be in the shape of a cross, a Star of David, a moon, or a fish.
- **Aesthetics:** Ensure the site remains well-maintained so it remains a point of pride for the congregation.
- **Security:** Ensure there is a safe, locked place to store equipment like shovels and hoses. We recommend installing a gate to keep out deer and dogs. Consider whether you want a combination lock that will allow volunteers and 'members' to come in, but keep out occasional gleaners. Do you want the garden to be exclusively for members of your congregation, or are you open to having neighbors coming and going on your property anytime of day?

Phase 3: Leadership Transition and Maturation

Community gardens, or at least community garden leaders don't last forever. A few years after getting the garden going the 'founder', or founders may move on to other projects or 'retire' based on health or other factors. Volunteers, especially high school youth are likely to 'lean in' to a project for a limited duration of time. Even the most dedicated high school student will likely contribute for a period of a few months to 2 years. We recommend developing the garden with this in mind. Records should be kept in a place that more than one person in the congregation can access them. Basic notes like where the insurance purchased should be kept.

A second reason for a transition with the garden is a change in the available material or financial resources. For example if the congregation was subsidizing basic expenses like water, insurance and seedlings, but decides to cut it off. If the congregation members that organized a garden no longer have the time/capacity, there may be secular community group ready to take over. We recommend planning for transitions at the outset, for example will the congregation reassess financial support every few years (on a predetermined time table. What criteria will they use to decide? Knowing that will help shape goals and expectations, and can help lead gardeners do a 'course correction' if necessary.

Frequently Asked Questions:

1. How can community gardens be self-sustaining financially?

We do not recommend starting a community garden specifically to raise money for the congregation. However, gardens can generate revenue through modest plot rental fees, or selling produce at a farm stand.

Other options for revenue include: seeking "adopt-a-garden" sponsorships from local businesses. Congregations may be able to apply for grants from their Diocese, or other regional or national religious bodies. Grants can also be pursued through secular programs. Mini-grants in the range of \$500-\$5,000 can be relatively easy to apply for, and are great for helping with infrastructure for establishing a garden or upgrading facilities. Revenue can also cover annual costs like water, compost and seeds. Other creative revenue generating projects include a: veggie starts plant sale; or a "seed-to-table" fundraising dinner. It is unlikely that the garden will generate enough revenue to cause any risk that a congregation risks it's status with the Internal Revenue Service IRS. See fact sheet on 'Unrelated Income' in the resource section below.

2. How can we find volunteers outside of the congregation to help?

Reach out to local schools with environmental clubs or community service hour requirements, North Bay Conservation Corps, California Climate Corps, or Scout troops. Utilizing platforms like VolunteerMatch or Nextdoor can connect you with neighbors who want to garden but no land of their own, or people with time and expertise who can help with planning and design.

3. Can faith-based organizations rent our space to a secular community garden association?

Yes. Many congregations lease land to secular non-profits or community associations that seek to operate a community garden. We recommend a clear Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to define responsibilities regarding water bills, liability insurance, standards for aesthetics and maintenance.

Additional Resources

- **FaithLands ToolKit:** www.faithlands.org
- **UC Marin Master Gardeners:** ucanr.edu/county/marin-county/master-gardeners
 - A good source for advice, free guidance, and gardener training. UCCE can also connect you with affordable soil tests.
- EBT at Faith-based Produce Stand Sites
- Unrelated Income Fact Sheet
- Edible Landscaping

The above can be found at www.interfaithfood.org in the Resources section.

- Sample agreement for a plot rental. (Available via Interfaith Food office)
- **Congregation Survey Template** (Available via Interfaith Food)

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For more information contact www.interfaithfood.org | 707 634-3672