Creating Community Gardens

Guidelines & Resources for Gardeners in the Pacific Northwest

Compiled by Elise Krohn, Traditional Plants Educator, February 2013
Northwest Indian College Cooperative Extension
Last updated February 2013.

NORTHWEST INDIAN COLLEGE
Xwlemi Elh>Tal>Nexw Squl

Community gardens are potential places for healing. In a time when families have limited resources including money, community gardens can provide nutritious food and medicine. Gardens are also a crossroads where diverse people come together to interact and connect. Elders can share their stories and wisdom, while youth can share their energy and enthusiasm. A garden has potential to foster community healing by bringing isolated people together over a common purpose. For many, gardening is a great way to relieve stress and to reconnect with the earth.

If you are planning a community garden, remember that it does not have to be big or complex to be successful. Starting simple and slowly working up to something elaborate is usually wise. A garden is sustainable when it is supported by a number of people in the community, not just one or two people. This will probably be the greatest challenge to keeping the garden alive.

A garden can be creatively planned around what is most fun *and* functional. Garden designs are often based on themes including medicine, cooking, food, and art. If you have weavers in your community, you may want to grow basketry plants. If people are interested in making medicine, you may choose to plant medicinal herbs. If cooking is a big interest, a kitchen garden can be deliciously useful. Some of the best gardens mix themes, so you can plant vegetables, flowers, and medicinal herbs together.

Creativity can be far more useful than money when it comes to starting a garden. You do not need fancy new equipment or designer pots. Your project will be more ecologically friendly and unique if you use resources at hand. It is amazing what you can create with what some people consider "junk." Recycled wood can be used to make plant beds or containers. Fallen tree branches can be transformed into an artful fence. Pieces of concrete, river rocks, tires, or old bricks may be the perfect material for making a raised bed, a patio, or a walking trail. An old boat can transform into a playground for kids or a giant garden bed. One of the ways we can take care of our planet is to minimize waste and take good care of the things we *do* have instead of throwing them away and purchasing new resources.

Unfortunately, pollution is something to consider if you plan to grow plants for food or medicine. Some toxins, including lead, can linger in the soil for many years even though they cannot be seen or smelled. These toxins are absorbed by the plants, and then ingested by people, leading to potential health problems. Pollution can be present in the soil in urban areas where old dumpsites, factories, gas stations, or other industrial grounds may have been turned into housing areas. If possible, investigate the safety of the land you plan to garden on. If you suspect that your soil might have pollutants, you can get it tested through your county extension office. Avoid using wood that has been painted or pressure treated when building plant beds.

Some Basic Steps for Getting Started

The following planning list may help you to create a successful garden. Every garden is a unique expression of the people who cultivate it and the place where it grows.

1. **What Kind of Garden Does Your Community Want?** A community garden is most successful when it is generated out of community interest and support. Before you break ground, consider facilitating meetings to gain an understanding of what people want. You can get input from elders groups, youth groups, school programs, tribal council, and others. If you feed people, they will be more likely to show up and offer their input. Suggest possibilities for the garden, then have people share what their vision is. This is a good time to get an understanding of what kind of support and resources the community is willing to offer.

2. **Assess Your Resources at Hand**. What kind of funding do you have? Do you already have a water source, building materials, tools, or plants you can use? Even more importantly, who will work in the garden? Will they commit to a season, or several years? Are there partner organizations or groups who can offer expertise or services?

3. **Get to Know Your Space.** Before you plan and *especially* before you plant your garden, get to know the space. This takes time. Is the soil good, or will you need to bring in soil? Does the soil have any contaminants? What areas are shady throughout the day? How does shade change with the seasons? Are some areas in the garden windy? Are there warm spots up against fences and other barriers? Do certain areas flood in the winter? What grows there now? This information will be valuable in helping you decide where to place plants.

4. **Plan**. It is easy to catch the gardening bug and plant by impulse, but a little planning in the beginning will pay off later! Take time to develop a bigger vision for the garden based on community input. Will you have individual plots or will people garden collectively? Who will be in charge of making decisions? Will you need a place to store tools, etc? Can you create partnerships with local agencies or schools? Create work parties so many people can get involved in the creation of the garden. By making it everyone's garden, everyone will share the benefits and learn along the way.

5. **List the plants you want to grow**. Do a background check on plants you would like to grow to make sure they suit your garden conditions. Many plants have specific needs including soil quality and amounts of sun and water. You will find this information in herb and gardening books, or by checking out where the plants grow in the wild. If you buy plants, the tag or seed packet usually have sun, water, and soil recommendations. Some non-native plants should not be used because they may become invasive weeds that take over native plant habitat. Examples include Scotch broom, St. Johns wort, and English ivy. Many gardening books list plants that can become invasive.

6. **Design.** Consider drawing a map of your garden with measurements in square feet. Find out how large plants will get, then draw them in so you know how many to bring in. Sketch plants into areas that match their needs for sun, water, soil, etc. Will they change the conditions of an area as they grow to full size? For example, some plants may eventually grow into shrubs and shade out other plants that need sun. As you draw in pathways, consider what will be approachable and easy to work with. Are there places where people and animals already walk? Place pathways around or through beds so that weeding and harvesting will be easy. Use pathways that will be accessible for elders and disabled people. Open spaces can provide kids with a place to play. Working with the natural flow of energy in the garden can make your job easier. Natural features like sun, water, slope, trees, and soil conditions can work for you instead of against you. If there is an area that has standing water most of the year, plant wetlands plants there. Tapping into the power of nature will make your garden more sustainable and energy-efficient.

7. **Find Your Plants.** When selecting plants, try to find ones that are native or hearty to your region. These plants can resist disease and harsh weather better than plants that have not historically grown in your area. Starting plants from seed is much cheaper than buying potted plants. It can also become a fun home science experiment. Just remember to factor in the time it will take for the plant to grow to full size. Slow growing plants like lavender and most native berries may be worth buying in pots. You won't have to wait so long for your first harvest.

8. **Plant**. This is the fun part. Plan a work party with community members. Make sure you have an organized plan ahead of time. If you are placing soil or building beds, make sure you have enough tools for everyone. Bring in helpers who know the plan so one person is not directing everyone. Demonstrate how to dig the right sized hole, massage the roots of the plant, place it at the right depth in the soil, and water it in. You may even want to place plants before hand so people know where to dig holes. Celebrate the completion of your work with food or music.

9. **Maintain**. Most plants will benefit from regular care. Pruning becomes necessary for keeping a garden in balance. When trees and shrubs are pruned correctly they produce more and are healthier. Plants will especially benefit from liquid fertilizers in the early spring when the soil is cold. There are many organic commercial fertilizers out there, or you can make your own. Apply them once a week, or when your plants look like they need an extra boost. Compost will help keep soil fertile, along with placing mulch on the garden in the fall.

10. **Invite the Community into the Garden**. Garden celebrations will help keep the community involved in the garden. Have demonstration classes connected to the garden including cooking, medicine making, art, etc. Some communities have seasonal harvest celebrations and feasts. Bring youth and elders into the garden for interactive walks. Some tribes employ community members to work in the garden seasonally, thereby increasing employment and food security.

Growing Good Soil

Soil is the most important part of your garden. If soil is healthy, it is actually alive. According to Seattle Tilth, one gram of healthy soil is home to as many as 500 million beings including bacteria, yeast, algae and protozoa! These microscopic creatures can fix nutrients, hold water, and ward off disease. If the soil is full of nutrients, your plants will be healthy and robust. If soil is poor, your plants will struggle for survival. Just as people get run down when they are not eating enough good food, plants will wilt when they are hungry.

Minerals are as important for soil health as they are for human health. Plants grown in soil with low minerals may wilt or rot faster and will be prone to disease. Soil in Western Washington is generally low in minerals. Rainwater washes them out of the soil, and overuse by farmers or industry has stripped valuable nutrients. You can add minerals back into the soil by adding a balanced fertilizer with minerals. This costs money, so you can get creative and come up with your own mineral soil additions including fish carcasses, seaweed, compost and mulch.

We can keep our soil healthy by mimicking natural systems. Salmon swim up rivers and into streams. Eagles, bears, and otters carry these fish carcasses up into the forest and fertilize the earth. If you have access to fish carcasses and seaweed, which are often a part of commercial organic fertilizers, you can introduce balanced minerals back into your soil. Salmon carcasses add nitrogen, phosphorous, calcium and trace elements back into the soil. Burying fish under in a garden is an old Indian tradition that has proven worthy over the centuries. Some people put crushed oyster shells or other shellfish into their soil. Seaweeds like bull kelp and bladderwrack are high in potassium and the trace minerals found in seawater. You can go to the beach after a storm and load some in the back of a truck. Seaweed can be worked into the surface of the soil. Cut up big pieces so they will compost more quickly. Remember that the minerals that you put in the soil will be eaten by the plants and then by you. It is worth the effort.

Compost is constantly being made in Northwest forests. You can see life in action as dead plants and animals decay turn into nutrient-rich soil for living plants. This cannot be done without the help of tiny bacteria, microorganisms, and insects that live in the soil. We can speed up the process of composting at home by creating the right environment. Rather than sending food scraps and yard waste to the dump, you can turn them into beneficial compost for your plants. Leaves are excellent mulch and are readily available; as they break down, they re-introduce nutrients into the soil. To learn more about building soil health explore:

Compost and Soil Building Resources

Washington State Department of Ecology. Information and resources for creating a home or community compost program. http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/swfa/organics/soil.html

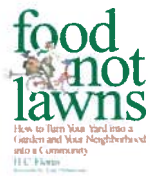
Washington State University Cooperative Extension. Backyard composting information. http://gardening.wsu.edu/stewardship/compost/yardcomp/yardcomp.htm

Seattle Tilth Master Composter/Soil Builder Program. Train to become a master composter or have a master composter consult with you for free in the Seattle area. http://seattletilth.org/learn/mcsb

Books About Community Gardening

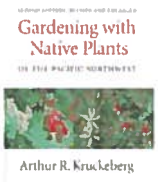
Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden. Gilbert Wilson. This wonderful book is also available online at: http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/buffalo/garden/garden.html

Community Gardening. Brooklyn Botanical Garden. Excellent models and tips for creating community gardens.

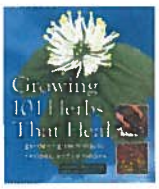


Food Not Lawns. H.C. Flores. This book is written by an urban activist who shares insights into how to design and grow your own garden. She talks about gardening as a way of building personal, community, and global health and well-being.

Gaia's Garden. Toby Hemenway. This book introduces permaculture, which is a way of growing plants that mimics the balance of natural ecosystems.



Gardening with Native Plants of the Pacific Northwest. Arthur Kruckeberg. A useful resource for identifying and growing native plants in our area.



Growing 101 Herbs that Heal. Tammi Hartung. A basic description of how to grow herbs along with medicine making techniques. Good garden layout ideas.

Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades. Steve Solomon. An indispensible resource for growing vegetables Western Washington.

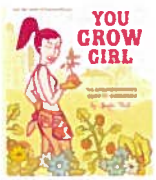
Herbal Renaissance. Steven Foster. A guide to growing and using many medicinal herbs.

Keepers of Life: Discovering Plants through Native Stories and Earth Activities for Children. Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac. Lesson plans and teaching ideas.

The Maritime Northwest Garden Guide. Seattle Tilth. A planning calendar and useful guide for year-round organic gardening.

Organic Gardening. Geoff Hamilton. A basic guide to growing herbs and vegetables organically including soil, composting, and pest control ideas.

Organic Gardening Design School. Ann Lovejoy. This beautiful book introduces garden design in a user-friendly visual way.



You Grow Girl. Gayla Trail. This contemporary, basic gardening book is user-friendly, witty and full of fun garden projects. It offers a fresh perspective for youth. Also check out her book Grow Great Grub: Organic Food from Small Spaces.

Garden Organizations and Websites

American Community Gardening Association. This non-profit membership organization helps community gardens to share their resources and expertise through an annual conference, workshops, teleconferences, an email group.

Brooklyn Botanical Gardens. Their website offers many resources for community gardens including specific ideas on how to run a garden and links to other organizations and websites.

The Food Project. This organization is a model for creating sustainable agriculture programs with youth. See toolbox for free download manuals, books and many other resources.

Growing Gardens. This Portland based organization offers trainings, curriculum, books and a other resources on creating school gardens and running garden programs. See "gardening tips" for monthly advice on what to be planting.

GRuB. This non-profit Olympia-based organization provides kitchen gardens to low-income families, teaches youth about gardening and is committed to food justice. A great model on how to build healthy communities through growing food. Check out classes and training programs on cultivating youth leadership through gardening.

Life Lab. A really amazing resource on garden programs with kids and youth. Activity ideas, curriculum, books, etc. Check out "Food, What?" video under the children, youth and families tab.

The Cultural Conservancy. Listen to "Traditional Foodways of Native America – Oral Histories of Native Food Revitalization" Audio Recording Project under media tools and hear our very own Elaine Grinnell from Jamestown.

Northwest Indian College Cooperative Extension. Community classes, train the trainers workshops, books and other resources.

Native Plant Salvage Alliance. This Pierce County organization salvages native plants that are made available for restoration projects. Volunteers get to learn about native plants and take home their own starts. Other plant salvaging programs are taking place in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. In Thurston county see Native Plant Salvage Foundation.

P Patch Community Gardens in Seattle. https://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/

Rooted in Community. RIC is a national grassroots network that empowers young people to take leadership in their own communities. Annual youth leadership conference – this year they drafted a Youth Food Bill of Rights related to the farm bill. They are just starting a RIC toolshed that with resources.

Washington State University Master Gardener Program. Training programs, community events and lectures on gardening in Western Washington.

United Plant Savers. UPS is dedicated to protecting native medicinal plants and their native habitat while ensuring an abundant renewable supply of medicinal plants for generations to come.

Washington Native Plant Society. Educational opportunities, great resources and opportunities to connect with other who are passionate about native plants.

Films about Tribal Community Gardens

Ancient Sea Gardens explores clam gardens, root gardens, and other ancient, forms of intensive food management indigenous to the Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest.
Dirt! The Movie is an entertaining and educational film about how we can cultivate living dirt and raise healthy food and successful garden programs.
The Great Laws of Nature is an Indigenous Organic Agriculture Documentary about the Muskoday First Nations in Saskatchewan.
Harvesting Hope TRADITIONAL FOODS shows how a community in Northern British Columbia is teaching traditional berry picking, fishing, and gardening techniques.
Indigenous Plant Diva is a film about Cease Wyss, a Salish medicinal healer, and her work with the Squamish First Nation developing a community garden.
Skokomish Garden Project: In this short film Native Lens documents the People of the River Healing Garden at Tuwaduq Family Services, Skokomish Nation.
Teachings of the Tree People. This film documents Skokomish elder Bruce Miller's work to revitalize native foods and medicines including developing an ethnobotanical teaching garden.

Native Plant Nurseries

Check out the websites www.plantnative.org/index.htm or www.dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/pi/npnursery.htm for native plant nurseries in your area.

Bank Savers (Stilliguamish native plant nursery)
P.O. Box 2777, Arlington, WA.98223
(360) 435-9365

Sound Native Plants
PO Box 7505, Olympia, WA 98507
(360) 352-4122

Black Lake Organics
4711 Black Lake Blvd. SW., Olympia, WA 98512
(360) 786-0537

Tree Frog Farm
3679 Sunrise Road, Lummi Island, WA 98262
(360) 758-7260

Plantas nativa
210 East Laurel Street, Bellingham, WA 98227
(360) 715-9655

Fourth Corner Nurseries
3057 East Bakerview Road, Bellingham, WA 98226
(360) 734-0079