

Section One:

Introduction

The Community Garden Toolkit: who it's for and how to use it

Welcome to the exciting world of community gardening!

Thinking about starting a garden in your community? You're in good company – all across Ontario hundreds of groups in co-ops, high-rises and social housing neighbourhoods have started beautiful community gardens. Maybe you want to beautify the grounds of your building by creating a new garden. Or perhaps there's a resident group in your community that wants to turn an unused area into a viable, welcoming, community space. Or maybe you just want to increase access to healthy fruit and vegetables in your area. There are plenty of reasons to start a community garden, and this toolkit will help you to design, create and sustain your garden for years to come.

How does this toolkit work?

This guide can be used for a few different purposes:

- ⑤ designing a new garden project
- ⑤ expanding an existing project
- ⑤ learning about organizations and resources to help build your garden project
- ⑤ answering basic questions about gardening and community gardens
- ⑤ providing resource guides that can be distributed in your community

The guidebook is broken into two different sections: Resources for Housing Providers and Resources for Residents. The first section provides information about how to engage residents and other stakeholders in creating a garden. Step-by-step instructions explain how to gather information, identify a site, and manage the garden. The second section focuses on the hands-on aspects of running a garden and using the harvest. These chapters describe how to get supplies, plan your garden season, and seek funding for your project. This section also includes ideas for how to expand your project and printable tip-sheets on basic garden care. Throughout this toolkit you'll find stories of other communities across the province that have worked together to create inspiring food and garden projects. The final pages of the book are full of great resources for both housing staff and residents who want to learn more about gardening and building community capacity.

Before we discuss *how* to garden, we'll look at *why* to garden. The next section will give you an overview of what community gardens are, how they fit into social housing, and reasons to start a garden in your community, from improved health to increased safety. It will also introduce you to Housing Services Corporation's SEED initiative, and tell you how SEED can help your garden project thrive.

What is a community garden?

A community garden is a space where people gather to grow food, other plants and/or flowers and create a welcoming communal space. They can be *allotment* gardens, where each gardener has their own growing plots; *communal* gardens, where everyone gardens together, or something in between.

Many gardens have assigned beds as well as a communal bed that is often used for herbs, flowers, or growing food for the food bank. Including both allotment and communal beds makes for a great space where gardeners are able to grow their own food, but also have space to work together, share knowledge and build community.

Community gardens usually have a look and style that reflect their community. Some are highly manicured with bright banks of vegetables and flowers. Others use recycled materials and native plants to create an environmentally-friendly oasis. Still others have art-filled children's gardens or waist-high beds for seniors to use. Community gardens should be welcoming spaces that help people in the community get to know each other.

Why are community gardens valuable?

Community gardens have many benefits that go far beyond just growing food. A few of these are listed below, but an extensive list can be found in APPENDIX A at the end of this guide.

Health gains:

Increase physical activity and access to healthy, organically grown food

Educational opportunities:

Create a space for youth to learn and share their skills and knowledge

Economic benefits:

Reduce food costs and create small business opportunities

Environmental benefits:

Clean air and water; reduce waste and lower summer temperatures

Cultural opportunities:

Provide a space to share knowledge between people of different ages and cultures

Community building:

Strengthen community connections, engage leaders, reduce isolation and provide a gathering space

Urban improvements:

Beautify neglected space and reduce crime by engaging more people to watch public spaces

Social Housing and Community Gardens

As discussed above, a community garden can be a wonderful addition to a social housing community. Although the majority of the work planting and maintaining the garden will be done by residents, housing providers can play an important role in the creation of gardens. Below are a few different ways in which housing providers can support the startup of a new garden.

Space: Housing providers can work with residents to identify a suitable area for a garden. Together they can look for sites which are easily accessible, are not being used for another purpose, and which receive sufficient sunlight. If there is land available on the property, Housing Providers can work with Property Managers to secure permission to a garden site, find space to store tools, and secure a room for meetings and events. If the property has no appropriate sites, Housing Providers can connect with city staff to find suitable land in nearby parks, schoolyards or look for properties belonging to faith groups, local agencies or private business.

Water: Sometimes you'll find a good garden space which does not have direct access to water for the plants. Housing Providers can allow access to nearby faucets, install a new water connection or help find rain barrels to collect rainwater for the garden.

Funding: Housing staff may have access to discretionary funds that they can use to support community projects. In addition, they may have connections to local contractors or landscapers who can supply in-kind services. Housing Providers may also know about grants or donations that would be available to help the garden get started or expand.

Outreach: Garden projects need help from the whole community, so it's important to get as many residents involved as possible. Staff can help by printing and posting flyers and sending letters to residents, which gives the initiative a sense of legitimacy. This will let residents know that the Housing Provider supports the project and that they should do so too. Housing Providers can also help to connect the initiative with other community groups and agencies that can provide support, like health centres, youth/environmental organizations, and faith groups.

How is SEED involved?

SEED is Social & Environmental Enterprise Development, an initiative of Housing Services Corporation that **enables the housing sector to build resident capacity through urban agriculture**. SEED initiatives all have 3 characteristics in common:

- 1) **Resident led:** residents collectively design what they will do, and what supports they need to make it happen.
- 2) **Locally adapted:** There is no one size fits all SEED project. The success of SEED comes from addressing local concerns with approaches that have local support.
- 3) **Sustainable:** SEED focuses on sustainable agriculture practices, but also on building sustainable projects which aim for financial sustainability through social enterprise.

SEED can offer a variety of supports to housing staff and residents interested in starting or expanding gardening projects:

- Consultation* Provides **on-site consultation** with residents, Housing Providers, Service Managers and community partners to design a suitable, resilient project plan. This can mean establishing a new community garden or building on existing food initiatives to develop a social enterprise.
- Knowledge* Creates and **distributes information and tools** housing providers need to support residents in community engagement, garden design & development and garden maintenance.
- Networking* **Connects housing staff to local experts** and organizations that can support and enhance their projects.
- Connection* **Links initiatives taking place in housing** across the province to build internal capacity and share knowledge, support and best practises.
- Enterprise* Provides **models for social enterprise** as a way of earning revenue and creating a self-sustaining initiative.
- Evaluation* Identifies community goals and uses innovative techniques to **measure impacts and successes**.

For more information about SEED and what we can offer your community, please contact Emily Martyn at emartyn@hscorp.ca or visit our website at <http://www.hscorp.ca/our-programs-and-services/social-innovation-and-partnerships/seed/>.

10 steps to starting a community garden

All community gardens start differently. Sometimes you realize you have a perfect space, and then move to community outreach. Other times you may have many interested community partners lined up before you even break ground. Just as your garden will be adapted to your specific community, the way you establish it will suit your specific circumstances. We have organized our steps into a linear process that we find most gardens follow, but please feel free to adapt them to your situation – just make sure planning comes before planting!

- 1) **Outreach**
Personal invitations get people out to events! Invite everyone in your community to participate and make them all feel welcome.
- 2) **Community Consultation**
Hold a community meeting to get people excited about a garden and find out how they can be involved.
- 3) **Finding a Site**
Get a group together to find a place for the garden that everyone can agree on.
- 4) **Create Your Committee**
Design your garden committee and plan out how your garden will work.
- 5) **Design Your Garden**
Whether your committee designs it or you have a landscaper to help, create a good plan before you start.
- 6) **Resources and Supplies**
Find out what you have and what you need by talking to residents to identify existing community resources and assets.
- 7) **Build**
Dig In! Host a community wide event to get everyone involved in creating the garden.
- 8) **Make Connections**
Connect with partners in your community who can support your project, with supplies, training, funding or connections.
- 9) **Grow**
Plant your garden, learn to grow, and use your harvest.
- 10) **Maintain**
Keep your project growing every year through funding and community engagement.