STEPS TO STARTING A COMMUNITY GARDEN

Land and location

- What is the duration of land usage? The initial development of a garden site takes time and resources. Decide if the land access duration justifies the time and expense of establishing a garden. Recommended minimum commitment is 5-10 years for a community garden.

- Sun exposure – Is there adequate sun exposure for the site? Select for sunlight. An open, south-facing, gradual slope is best, but if you don't have that, look for a shade-free place. All vegetables need a minimum of six hours, preferably eight, of sunshine. Less sunlight will cause the plants to be weak and spindly no matter how much tender loving care given them.

- Wind exposure – Is there wind protection? If not, what plans can be made to provide protection?

- Will fencing be needed for security at the site?

- Accessibility – Can a vehicle get to the site? If not, will this be an issue?

Water source – A garden without water access spells disaster in eastern Oregon climates.

- Who will pay the water bill? What kind of watering system will be used?

- Drip-lines have a low water impact. In addition to drip-lines, laying down plastic row covers over the top of the drip-lines will decrease evaporation and cut down on weed growth.

- Overhead sprinklers are another option. Watering early in the morning prevents sun damage to wet plants and allows plants to dry before nighttime. Wet plants at night will increase the chance of plants contracting disease. The downfall with overhead watering is that it uses more water.

Soil - What kind of soil is at the site and what types of issues might it have?

- Soil condition - Get a soil test and follow the recommendations given. Getting a quote of the cost of the soil tests before having it done is important. If you let them know that it is a community garden site, they will recommend what test you should have. Otherwise, if you say “test for everything” expect to be billed accordingly. The labs will instruct you on how to collect and submit the soil sample. Umatilla Master Gardeners have two labs that we recommend locally:

  1. Agri-Check Inc, 323 6th St, Umatilla, (541) 922-4894
  2. KUO Testing Lab, 1300 6th St, Umatilla, (541) 922-6435

- Compaction issues – Old roads, construction sites and walkways will create soil compaction issues. The soil will need to be loosened up and amended to a depth of 3’.

- Find sources for leaves, straw and other organic materials that you can recycle into the garden site, make sure they are weed free!

Type of garden

- Vegetable, herb or flowers or any combination of are possibilities.

- Are raised beds an option?

- Plants – Will plants be started from seed or purchased from a nursery?
Compost Bins at the site can be used to recycle: old garden debris, non meat food scraps, egg shells, coffee grounds and cardboard just to name a few. If coffee grounds are used, be aware that the otherwise biodegradable filters may become airborne during a wind storm.

Management

- Soil temperature - Ideally, soil temperatures should reach 50 degrees before planting warm season crops.
- When to till – the soil should be moist but not so moist that it holds shape when squeezed. Also, it should not be so dry that it crumbles when squeezed. Till only the rows themselves. If the space between rows is tilled, there is a good possibility that the number of weeds will increase because the seeds hidden under the top of the soil will have sun exposure which may germinate them.
- Master Gardeners practice sustainable gardening practices which minimize inputs of labor, water, fertilizers and pesticides. Consult with the local chapter for specific recommendations.
- Weeds – keep them knocked down early to prevent spread and minimize their impact.
- Harvest – Think about the harvest potential and its impacts. Example: If you plant green beans do you have the time to pick them every other day or a volunteer to help pick? If you are planting corn, do you have room to plant multiple rows?
- Vacation – What is the backup plan for garden care if one is off for work or play?
- Winter squash stores easily and is a good crop to grow to extend the fresh produce season well into the winter months.
- In the fall the garden will need to be put to rest. Pull up plants and put in compost bin. If plants are diseased discard them accordingly.
- Pull up and drain watering systems to prevent damage from freezing.
- Mulch the garden with leaves to cut down on weed growth. Mulching also helps keep the ground from freezing as much.

Funding Sources

- Grants – Many gardening grants are available via the web. Also, check for local sources.
- Donations – Local businesses.
- Fundraisers - Plant Sales, bottle drives, etc.
- Eagle Scout Projects – Cold Frames, Benches, Raised Beds

Project Supplies:

- seeds or plant starts,
- starting mix,
- automatic timer,
- hoses,
- hose nozzle,
- straw bales (for wind breaks as well as mulching between rows),
- garden tools,
- plastic row covers,
- drip line,
- attachment to assemble drip line,
- fertilizer and other soil amendments,
- containers to use to get produce from garden to delivery site,
- supports for tomatoes and cucumbers,
- storage space.
Manpower and Yearly Maintenance Schedule

This example is an approximate recommendation for a 4000’ square foot garden area that contains eight rows of vegetables (tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, eggplants, summer squash and winter squash) and an 80’ bed of flowers and herbs. Site also contains cold frames, compost bins and storage shed.

A volunteer pool of around 8-12 people is recommended. Church groups and local civic groups including Scouts or Key Clubs may be available to pitch in from time to time. The crop you choose to grow will affect manpower needs. Green beans will need picked every other day. Winter squash can be planted in May and basically needs no care until harvest which is around the time of the first freeze.

March  
Clean-up work session. Takes 4 people working 2 hours for a day to perform general maintenance including spreading leaves on the rows (adding organic matter) and to spread straw between rows (to reduce weeds). Note: You may find that leaves need to sit over the winter and draw moisture to partially decay to help prevent the wind from blowing them away.

April  
Fertilize, add amendments as soil test recommends and till the rows, takes 2 people 2 hours for one day.

May  
Lay drip-lines, cover with plastic row cover, put wind barriers in place and connect water system. Using an automatic timer is highly recommended. You will need to adjust the watering lengths according to weather conditions. Takes 6 people 3 hours for one day.

Plant seeds and transplants. Takes 3 people 2 hours for one day

June to Oct  
Periodic maintenance
1 person 1 hour per week to weed and provide general care.

Throughout growing season - Pick on Sundays and Wednesdays, Takes 4 people 2 hours per picking when in full production. Mid June expect 10 pounds per picking. By mid August it may reach weights of 200 pounds per picking. Total weight for the season could be near 2500 pounds.

November  
Clean-up work session. Pull plants, take down supports, pull up plastic, drain watering system and store. Takes 5 people 3 hours for one work day.

Organic matter - neighbors unload leaves at garden into pile; let sit for several months.
Educational Community Garden Component and Educational Partnerships

Add educational components to your garden project. Suggestions may be to invite the public or school classes to work parties. By doing so, you have some extra man power and they get to have hands-on learning.

Hold clinics for the public or your Master Gardener group. Specific subjects could be drip-lines, insect identification or herb gardening. If there are demonstration gardens specific topics of a clinic could be trimming roses or digging fall bulbs for storage.

Partner with local schools for a project. If the school has a greenhouse, offer a clinic on greenhouse management. Invite a class to pick vegetables to take to a kitchen to make salsa. The list is endless.

Suggested Plantings:

A few of the many plants grown successfully in Eastern Oregon may include: tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplants, green beans, peppers, summer squash, winter squash, carrots, lettuce and basil.

If you are interested in perennials that can possibly survive the winter try leeks, parsley, garlic, chives, thyme and sage.

For a complete list of varieties recommended by OSU and additional information see http://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/

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