How to Start a Community Garden and Beautify Your Neighborhood

By planting a garden together, you and your neighbors can create a beautiful green space for your community.

A How-to Guide for neighborhood leaders working to make life better for people in Battle Creek
Neighbors in communities across Battle Creek have made their neighborhoods bloom through creating community gardens, planting flowers along their streets, and creating a host of other beautification projects. Working side by side in their gardens, on their blocks, and in their parks, neighbors are coming together to make Battle Creek green. By planting a garden together, you and your neighbors can create a beautiful green space for your community and show that, together, you can accomplish anything!

**Early Questions to Answer**

Gather other neighbors who want to do some “greening” and work together to make some early decisions about what you would like to do. Then follow up with some local preliminary research.

- **What would the group like to do?**
  Do you want to plant flower borders along the block? Clean up a vacant lot and create a community garden for the neighborhood? Start a “window box” contest for neighbors so there will be flowers blooming outside everyone’s house? It helps to have a vision of what you want to achieve. Find out if there are other people who have done this in the neighborhood that could give you advice and help.

- **Who owns the property?**
  Is the property you want to beautify owned by the city? Does it have a private owner? Obviously, if your project involves homeowners, you will need to get their permission before you plant or work on their property. If you are simply encouraging neighbors to plant in their own yards, this will obviously not be an issue.

- **Can you get a deal on supplies?**
  Think about where you might be able to get donated or low-cost supplies such as gardening tools, soil, and plants.

**Vacant Lots**

One likely target for a garden beautification project is a vacant lot. There are a few things you should consider if you decide to pursue this. Vacant lots are under-used open spaces often filled with debris and waste or plastered wall-to-wall with graffiti. They are probably general eye-sores in the neighborhood and may also serve as impromptu “offices” for drug traffickers and criminals. When people complain about the lots, you may hear them say “That’s been a problem for years. I don’t know who owns it.” Don’t let that stop you. There are fairly simple ways to get that information and begin using the lot to create a garden.

1. **Figure out the exact address.** You can use other buildings as a reference to help you determine the approximate address if the exact address is not known.

2. **To find out if the lot is city-owned or privately owned, write a letter to the city assessor that includes the address of the site and request the lot number and owner of record.**

- If the lot is city-owned, call Mike Buckley at the Planning Department (966-3320) and explain what you intend to do with the site and describe detailed, current conditions of the lot.

- If the lot is privately owned, try to contact the owner, explain how your group wants to beautify the lot, and work on building a relationship with them to get their permission to work on the lot. If this is not possible, you can call Dennis McKinley at the City Code Compliance Office (966-3387). A letter will be sent by Code Compliance ordering the owners to clean it out within five days. If the owner fails to do this, the city will send a crew to clean or mow the lot and bill the owner.
Getting Organized

An organized group of individuals will always accomplish more than a number of individuals working independently. If you belong to a neighborhood organization, you have an advantage because your letters and requests will carry more clout. If you do not belong to a neighborhood organization and want some help getting one together, call the Neighborhood Partnership office (966-3339) for help in finding one in your neighborhood or organizing one.

Here are a few tips on how to maximize your cleanup efforts:

• Get your neighbors interested. Distribute copies of this how-to guide or flyers about your vision for the site. Ask them to join you and become involved.
• Hold a community meeting to discuss the problem and plans for the site and organize a cleanup day or other event to tackle the problem.
• Invite representatives of the Leila Arboretum Society’s BC Green program, Waste Management, and leaders of other neighborhood associations with experience in beautification and cleanup issues to speak to your group.
• Form a planning and fundraising committee to recruit volunteers from the neighborhood. These committees should also contact local businesses and ask them to donate supplies or money for your project.

Making Your Garden Grow

Work together to create a plan for how your garden will look once it’s finished. Once people are involved in creating a vision of what can be, they are more likely to get involved in helping that vision become a reality. Establishing a vision will also give people who haven’t yet been involved in your effort a concrete idea about what is being created — all the more incentive to get on board. Here are some ways to capture your group’s vision for the project:

• Measure and make a sketch of the site you plan to improve.
• Think about how the garden will be used. Do you want a shady bench for seniors to rest on? Vegetable plots for growing your own produce? A fountain for kids to play in? A barbecue pit for family picnics? The possibilities are endless!
• Create a list of suggestions residents make about the way they want the final garden to look. List all the details (tables, benches, trees, a pond, flowers, vegetables, etc.).
• Decide on a name for your community gardening group.
• Contact the local and national resources listed on the back page for ideas and support.

Once you’ve created your plan, rally neighbors together to make it happen. Here are some ways to reach out:

• Send press releases to local newspapers and radio stations.
• Distribute flyers in your neighborhoods. Call the Neighborhood Partnership office for details on the city’s flyer policy.
• Hang signs up around the neighborhood, at local stores, and in apartment buildings.
• Make announcements at meetings of neighborhood organizations.

Troubleshooting

Vandalism is a common fear among community gardeners. While there are actually very low levels of vandalism of community gardens, try these proven methods to stop it from happening:

• Make a sign for the garden. Let people know that the garden belongs to someone and that it is a neighborhood project.
• A fence, which can be of almost any material, will mark the boundary of your garden and keep out people who shouldn’t be there. You can even place thorny plants near the fence to serve as a barrier. Call the City of Battle Creek’s Planning Department (966-3320) to discuss the city’s fence ordinance.
• Create a shady meeting area in the garden and have group members spend as much time as they can there.
• Invite everyone in the neighborhood to participate from the very beginning. The stronger their feeling of ownership, the less likely anyone will try to cause trouble.
• Involve neighborhood children in learning about gardens. They can be the garden’s best protectors because children that are included in the garden process become champions of your cause rather than garden vandals. Your garden group may want to create some plots specifically for children. The “children’s garden” can help bring in partners such as local scout troops, daycare centers, foster grandparent programs, church groups, etc. Consider offering free small plots in the children’s garden to children whose parents already have a plot in the garden.
• Make friends with neighbors whose windows overlook the garden. Trade flowers and vegetables with these neighbors to encourage them to keep their protective eyes on it.

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Planting Advice

Remember, you don’t have to do it all at once. Take your time and do things right. Clear the space; plant some grass, clover, or wildflowers; partner with other organizations who can help. There are groups (listed under “Resources”) that can help you test the soil for acidity or alkalinity, tell you where to obtain free seeds, plants, or even trees, teach you about environmental issues, and help you fundraise for your project. Also remember to ask others who have experience for advice. Don’t get discouraged by minor setbacks or delays.

A Community Garden in Battle Creek

When the neighbors around Piper Park began talking about their neighborhood concerns, several issues about the park itself quickly surfaced. They wanted the park’s equipment updated, wanted the space to be better used, and were concerned about its general appearance. The neighbors worked with Battle Creek Parks and Recreation to resolve the first two issues, but they took personal responsibility for beautification of their park. To do this, neighbors worked with a team made up of the newly formed Piper Park Neighborhood Association (PPNA) and The Leila Arboretum Society.

The team designed a landscape that neighbors could manage by themselves. Families and individuals “adopted” portions of the gardens and dedicated themselves to the task of upkeep for those areas. Over the next couple of years, PPNA obtained small grants that were used to purchase water hoses and markers to identify volunteer gardeners. “Sometimes our regular meeting is a work session in the park,” says Bob, who has lived in the neighborhood for about 10 years. Since the beautification, Bob also commented that he’s “noticed people throwing their trash in the cans and taking better care of the place.”

A community garden or beautification project can make life better for your family, your neighbors, and your community.

Local Resources

Leila Arboretum Society’s BC Green program — is a beautification and gardening program aimed at assisting community groups with gardening improvement and beautification projects.

Suzanne Ebright 969-0270 x122.

Visit your local market for plants, gardening materials, and to get ideas.

National Resources

The American Community Gardening Association — helps community gardens throughout the country with networking, support, and coaching new groups just starting out. They also have publications and an annual conference.

540-961-1463

www.communitygarden.org

Urban Community Gardens — is an Internet help and information site with lots of great information on city community gardens. It has lots of resources and links.

www.mindspring.com/~communitygardens

Feel free to share this guide with friends and neighbors. Call 269-969-2228 for additional copies and for other guides on a variety of how-to topics.

Source: The Citizens Committee for New York City, Inc.

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Yes we can! is a collaboration among Battle Creek residents and organizations working to help kids achieve in school and build a solid economic future for the people of our community. Yes we can! is funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

For general questions about Yes we can!, call 269-969-2228 or visit www.wkkf.org/yeswecan. To apply for a mini-grant to support your neighborhood or community project in Battle Creek, call the Battle Creek Community Foundation at 269-962-2181.

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Yes we can!