

Guidelines for Developing a Governance Strategy for Community Gardens

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Why would a community garden require governance? To a minor or major degree, community initiatives always have to deal with conflict. Having a clear governance strategy creates mechanisms to better manage conflict. It also projects an image of a well-organized group that can be helpful to attract potential sponsors. Although the following guidelines are presented as a set of steps, their sequence, inclusion and focus should be adapted to the needs of each community garden. Consider running your garden as a learning process made of evolving choices and decisions. Table 1 suggests a meeting schedule to develop a governance strategy for community gardens.

1. **Establish Who Makes the Decisions:** Decisions should usually be made by a steering committee (3-5 people). However, in certain gardens, decisions could also be made by only one person (i.e. someone who is selected by the group; the landowner, etc).
2. **Select a Name for the Garden:** Naming the community garden may help to reinforce the participants' sense of ownership towards the garden.
3. **Establish How Decisions are to be Made:** One of the first things that a steering committee should determine is how to make decisions. Some options are:
 - *By consensus: Steering committee presents and discuss different ideas around a concern. The group reaches consensus when everyone accepts to adopt a specific solution, even though not every member has to agree 100% with it.*
 - *By Vote: This is the traditional "majority wins" approach, which may or may not be preceded by discussion of the ideas.*
 - *Autocratic: The steering committee appoints a leader and accepts his/her decisions in despite of some disagreement.*
 - *Own approach: The steering committee may come up with its own way of making decisions (i.e. a combination of discussion and vote).*

Another aspect to consider is whether the decisions will follow a participatory approach (the committee will listen to the community) vs. a non-participatory approach. It is important to note that there is no "perfect" way of making decisions and the steering committee should be prepared to embrace error as part of the learning process. The key factor is to be consistent with the decision-making process.

4. **Define Roles and Responsibilities:** Within the steering committee, people should have different roles according to the needs. Some examples include: a chair/coordinator, a scribe (to record discussions), a communicator to interface with community, etc. It is important that roles are not imposed and that each person feels comfortable with the task assigned.
5. **Consider Creating a History of your Community Garden:** Keep record of all the decisions, activities, participants, etc. around your community garden (see the meeting minute template at the end of this unit). This helps to keep track of things and can be useful to manage transition periods between steering committees and/or to present the garden to potential participants or outsiders. This also creates opportunities for additional activities such as photography, scrap booking, fundraisers, etc, that may foster further social integration in your community.

Module #1 – Starting a Community Garden

6. **Develop a Goal Statement:** What does the community want to accomplish with the garden? How will participants and the community benefit from the garden? Community gardens often go beyond producing fresh food. It is worthwhile inviting people who are interested in the project to provide ideas on the different things that they would want to achieve by participating in the community garden. It is important to make the goal explicit. Write a simple statement; i.e. “the goal of this garden is to learn to grow some of our food and to meet people with similar interests”).
7. **Come up with an Elevator Speech:** Imagine that you only have 2 minutes to explain to someone what you’re doing in the garden. What would you tell her/him? Preparing brief “sales speech” about the garden is a good strategy to communicate clearly what the project is about. It also helps to attract new gardeners and to sell the project for external support.
8. **Set up Rules:** It is important to have rules in order to reduce conflict among participants. It is desirable to be able to regulate things such as plot assignment, storage, watering, plot management (weed control, use of pesticides, plot abandonment, etc). It would be valuable to invite people to participate in order to gather ideas about the main issues that have a perceived need of regulation. The rules should be clear, simple and practical (easy to enforce).
9. **Define a Communication Strategy:** All decisions concerning the community garden should be clearly and communicated to all participants in a timely manner. The steering committee should look for efficient ways of doing so in terms of time, effort and money. Some options are: e-mail, a community garden board, signs posted in the garden, phone calls, door-to-door flyers, etc.
10. **Set Objective(s) for the First Season:** How would you define “success” for your community garden? Set objective(s) for the season. Make sure that your objective(s) is/are attainable, simple and measurable within a time frame. For example “This year, our objective is to have 10 families involved”; “This year, our objective is to contribute 75 Kg of fresh produce to the food bank.”
11. **Evaluate your First Season Performance:** At the end of the season, the steering committee should review the performance of the garden and report back to the participants. This is important to determine how well the garden is doing and for continuous improvement. As a group, take time to reflect on the things that have worked and on those that need improvement.
12. **Network with other Gardeners:** Share your experiences with other community gardeners. Telling your story and listening to other people’s stories leads to reflection and becomes a powerful way of learning.

Table #1: Suggested Meeting Schedule to Setup a Community Garden Governance

Module #1 – Starting a Community Garden

Meeting #	Main Agenda Item	Est. Required Time (minutes)	Required People in Activity	Activity Goal	Things to Consider
1	Establishing Who Makes the Decisions (creation of steering committee)	30	All people interested in the garden	Creation of a steering committee (ideally 3-5 people)	Invite as many people as possible to this meeting. Start the meeting with a brief introduction on the project. Ask people to introduce themselves and to share with the group why they're attending the meeting.
2	Establishing How Decisions are to be Made	20	Steering Committee	Define/negotiate mechanism that steering committee will follow to make decisions	Select one approach to make decisions. Set the minimum number of members required to make a decision (in case other members are not available)
2	Defining Roles & Responsibilities	20	Steering Committee	Define the role and responsibility of each member of the steering committee	Suggest different roles and explain why they are needed. People should be comfortable with their role. Consider having a meeting scribe, a coordinator, a communicator, a time-keeper, etc.
2	Consider Creating a History of your Garden	10	Steering committee to lead initiative, all participants welcome.	Create awareness that it is important to file all documents to create the garden history	A well-organized binder is enough. Chronological order is important
3	Setting the Goal (part 1)	60	All people interested in the garden	Gather ideas and expectations from people interested in the project	Consider having a facilitator for this session. Do not try to articulate the goal, just gather the ideas
3	Selecting a Name for the Garden	30	All people interested in the garden	Pick a name for the community garden	Ask participants to suggest names discuss them with the group. It is ok to postpone the final decision if the group cannot agree on a name
4	Setting the Goal (part 2)	60	Steering Committee	Define the goal of the community garden and write the goal statement	Review ideas from brainstorming session and write a clear and simple goal statement

4	Coming up with an Elevator Speech	20	Steering Committee	Come up with a short speech to share your project with other people who are curious about it	Based on your goal statement, come up with a simple statement that describes what your garden is about
5	Setting up Rules (part 1)	60	All people interested in the garden	Get input from potential participants on the issues that need to be regulated	Consider having a facilitator for this session. Do not try to set the rules in the same session, just gather the ideas
6	Setting up Rules (part 2)	60	Steering Committee	Define basic rules to run the garden	Based on input from participants, define simple and clear rules. You might consider an additional meeting to refine them
6	Defining a Communication Strategy	20	Steering Committee	Decide how the steering committee will keep participants informed about rules and garden-related events	Based on resources and audience, define the best way to communicate with participants
7	Setting Objectives the first Season	20	Steering Committee	Set tentative objective(s) for the season	How would the group measure success? realistic objective(s) that you can measure within a timeframe
8	Evaluate First Season Performance	60	All participants	Reflect on the things that worked well and on those that can be improved in the next season	Use this meeting to <u>celebrate</u> the end of the first season. Consider having a facilitator to lead the reflection process.

Table #2: Suggested Meeting Minutes Template

Community Garden Name

Participants Invited	Attended (Y/N)	Participants Invited	Attended (Y/N)

Date: Time:

Agenda

#	Item	Who
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

Decisions Made

#	Decision	Decision Maker	Decision Date
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

Items Outstanding That Require Decisions

#	Outstanding Item	Who will take care?
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

Action Points

#	Action Point	Expected Completion	Who will take care?	Status
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				

Additional Details or Comments:

Source: <http://www.together4health.ca/workgroups/community-gardens-waterloo-region/starting-community-garden>