

Starting a Garden in your Faith Community

Note: In this guide, [blue underlined text](#) indicates an online resource. Those viewing this PDF online can click on the links to view the resources. Readers of the printed guide can view the online version with active links at: <https://www.healthandwholeness.org> under “Resources.”

As faith communities seek to ensure nutritious food for all, care for the Earth, and build relationships with neighbors, many are creating community gardens. This guide outlines key steps for organizing, designing, planting, and using a faith-based community garden. Much of this guide is adapted from the [Guide to Starting a Garden in Forsyth County](#), a resource of the Forsyth Community Gardening (FCG) program at N.C. Cooperative Extension, Forsyth County Center.



As you Get Started...

- **‘Root’ your garden in your faith tradition:** Community gardens connect with the values and mission goals of many faith communities, such as alleviating hunger, promoting health and human dignity, and caring for the Earth. You may wish to explore these connections through an education series. A list of study resources is available in [Food Sovereignty for All](#), and your denomination may also have guides for studies connecting faith, food, and environmental stewardship.
- **Connect with Cooperative Extension:** Extension educators offer programs in sustainable gardening, foods and nutrition, youth development, and more. Use the USDA’s [Land Grant University Directory](#) to find your state’s Cooperative Extension website. From there, you can find your county center.
- **Patience, patience!** Plan to spend time building community support, inviting input into garden organization and design, and securing land and resources. Allow *at least six months* from the time you begin organizing to the time you build and plant your garden.

Step 1: Form a Leadership Team

- **Start by talking with your congregation, neighbors, and potential community partners to identify people who are interested in a community garden.**
 - Be sure to involve committees focused on hunger, social justice, earth care, and/or health in initial conversations. One of these groups may ‘adopt’ the garden as a committee project, ensuring ongoing support and connection to broader efforts in your congregation.
 - You can adapt [FCG’s interest surveys](#) to identify potential participants’ skills, availability, and learning needs with respect to gardening. There are sample surveys in both English and Spanish that can be adapted for your faith community garden.
- **When you have 5-10 people committed to the garden, organize a meeting** to determine the feasibility of a garden and – if you decide to proceed – plan next steps. See the University of Missouri’s [Community Gardening Toolkit](#), p. 10, for questions to address at an initial meeting.

Step 2: Find a Good Site & Secure Tenure (permission to use the land)

- **Locate a site.** In many cases, faith communities can start a garden on their own land, which will streamline the process! A community garden site should:
 - Be easily accessible for intended gardeners
 - Be relatively flat
 - Get 6-8 hours of direct sunlight in all seasons
 - Have access to water
 - Have soil that is free of contaminants (or be suitable for raised beds with imported soil)



- **Identify the site owner and obtain written permission to use the land (a lease).**
 - Your local Planning Department may have publicly accessible Geographic Information System (GIS) tools, which you can use to identify the owner and zoning of any potential site.
 - If your congregation is not the landowner, inquire with the owner if s/he will grant written permission to use the land for at least three years. Review the sample lease in [Ground Rules: A Legal Toolkit for Community Gardens](#) for things that should be included.
 - You may need insurance to gain permission to use land for a community garden. If your congregation is the landowner, check if your faith community's insurance will cover gardening activities. If you plan to garden on another site, investigate [Brunswick Companies' Community Gardens Insurance](#).
- **Inquire with your local Planning Department about any permits needed to start a garden.** Some cities have a permitting process, which may require a site plan and/or evidence for a public hearing.

Step 3: Organize the Garden

Discussions about garden organization will occupy several meetings. Here are some key tasks:

- [Craft a garden mission statement](#) to clarify your goals, and guide garden design and activities.
- **Decide how the garden will be managed.** Will it be an allotment garden (members have their own plots), a communal garden (members plant and maintain the garden together and share or donate the harvest), or some combination of these two models?
 - **If you create an allotment garden: Develop plot-holder's agreement**, in which members commits to following certain guidelines (see below), keeping up their own plots, contributing to maintenance of common areas, and serving on a committee that benefits the whole garden. FCG has a sample [Plot-Holder's Agreement](#) you can adapt for your garden.
 - **If you create a communal garden: Develop a schedule of workdays and ongoing garden maintenance and harvesting.** A common structure for communal faith gardens includes:
 - **Monthly family workdays** to accomplish larger tasks such as bed-building and repair, soil preparation, and planting. These also offer opportunities for fellowship and education.

- **In between workdays, individuals or families may sign up for a week of garden maintenance**, such as watering, pruning and trellising plants, checking for insects and diseases, and harvesting. A poster or whiteboard can be used for sign-ups (as in the photo at right), or you may utilize an online tool such as [SignUp Genius](#). Either way, experienced gardeners should orient volunteers to gardening tasks. Some gardens have a notebook of general guidelines and information (e.g., guides to weeds, insect pests, when to harvest specific crops, etc.), supplemented by weekly email updates on season-specific tasks.



- **Develop leadership roles, committees, and garden guidelines** appropriate to your garden's goals, activities, and management style. See FCG's sample [Garden Organization and Rules](#) for ideas.

Step 4: Design, Prepare, and Plant the Garden

- **[Make a site map](#) and design the garden together.**
 - Invite broad input on plantings, paths, and infrastructure (such as toolsheds or compost bins) that garden members would like to see, and map these onto a site plan.
 - Be sure to consider the needs of people with disabilities. [Accessible and Inclusive Gardens](#) has information on designing garden beds and paths to include people of all physical abilities. Tall raised beds (as in the photo at right) and smooth, firm paths at least 5' wide will allow people in wheelchairs to access, plant, and maintain a garden.



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- **Identify and secure resources to prepare and plant the garden.** This will include services (e.g., initial tilling), equipment (things you could borrow for the garden build, such as a cordless drill), and materials (lumber, hardware, soil for raised beds, fencing, etc.). Most faith community gardens rely on a combination of grassroots fundraising, in-kind donations, and small grants.
- **Organize work crews, then host work parties to clean up and plant the site!**



Step 5: Sustainable Horticulture and Integration in Congregational Life

Once the garden is established, this is only the beginning! To keep your garden productive and vibrant, strive to learn and use sustainable horticultural practices, and integrate the garden into congregational life.

- **Sustainable Horticultural Practices:**

- Check out FCG’s [Printed Materials](#) page information on building healthy soil, crop planning, managing pests, and more.
- Your local Cooperative Extension office may also offer opportunities to learn about sustainable gardening practices.



- **Integration in Congregational Life:** Here are a few ideas:

- **Worship:** Mark planting and harvesting milestones with blessings (of seeds, vegetable harvests, etc.) during worship. Include liturgies related to caring for creation to open and close workdays.
- **Fellowship:** Encourage your congregation to join in family workdays! [Steps to a Successful Garden Workday](#) has advice on planning workdays that engage people of all ages.
- **Education:** Workdays can be an opportunity to share skills and tips on sustainable gardening practices. The garden can also inspire reflection on the connections between faith, more just food systems, and environmental stewardship.
- **Mission:** A faith garden can enhance access to nutritious food and promote dignity and self-reliance, particularly when the garden offers neighbors the opportunity to grow their own produce in allotments. Faith gardens can also offer fun, educational activities for children’s programs.



Further Resources

Explore these more comprehensive community garden resources for guidance and ideas on creating and sustaining your garden:

- [American Community Gardening Association](#)
- [Collard Greens and Common Ground: A North Carolina Community Food Gardening Handbook](#) (N.C. Cooperative Extension)
- [Community Garden Start-Up Guide](#) (Gardening Matters)
- [Community Gardening Toolkit](#) (University of Missouri)
- [Food Sovereignty for All](#) (Interfaith Food and Farms Partnership, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon)
- [Ground Rules: A Legal Toolkit for Community Gardens](#) (ChangeLab Solutions)