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Who We Are And Why This Guide Exists

Hello! We are a group of young organizers and between us, we hold a multitude of cultures, personal backgrounds, histories, and experiences working for liberation in the South.

This guide is an offering to share some of the information we have learned in our respective organizing and movement work. While There are many additional resources to explore, we hope that you can use this helpful beginner’s guide to start a community garden here in South!
WHAT IS THIS GUIDE ABOUT?

This guide is made to support those interested in starting a community garden in the Southwest of the United States. Ultimately, we are crafting this guide to acknowledge that access to land knowledge has been controlled by white farmers. Some of whom often author and sell technical books on gardening without giving credit to the ancestors (mostly Black, Indigenous, people of color) who initially created and used these techniques.

As a way of healing, this guide opens a space within ourselves to acknowledge and take action that the land has had to bear witness to the displacement, killing, and harm of Indigenous, Black Indigenous, Black/enslaved people, and people of color in this country.

By having this in mind, we can start reconstructing our foundation of the ownership and use of the land. We can also see how access to land and food is essential for building healthier and thriving communities, especially here in the South. This guide is committed to providing introductory steps to starting a community garden in your neighborhood, and to support efforts of individuals striving to reclaim who gets to label themselves a “gardener.”

TERMS TO KNOW

*these are just general definitions and they don’t limit people’s direct experience with these ideas.

**BIPOC** = Black, Black/Indigenous, People of Color
- gives emphasis on the people most affected by certain factors of inequality, violence, and intentional silence

**Food sovereignty**
- comes from the large global peasant movement La Via Campesina. It is the largest, global social movement made of 200 million farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists who are committed to growing on the land.

(def.) the right of cultures to define, to grow their food, and to make decisions from how that food is grown, who benefits from it, and how it’s grown.

**Environmental Justice**
- can’t talk about environmental justice without talking about environmental racism first. Instead of simply defining environmental racism, we can talk about it by looking at who gets fresh and healthy foods, or can afford to pay for them. Often called “food deserts” by the federal government, Karen Washington from Rise & Root Farm which renames what the government is intentionally doing as “food apartheid.”

All over the South we see fresh food and clean land, water, and air is sometimes relegated based on race-zip codes or white communities. Environmental Justice aims to address this issue and give more freedom and equality to BIPOC environments.
Regenerative Agriculture
From the Regeneration International:
(def.) describes farming and grazing practices that, among other benefits, reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity – resulting in both carbon drawdown and improving the water cycle.

Mutual Aid \(\neq\) Charity
There is a deep history that mutual aid means survival, especially when a crisis happens, as we are seeing now with the COVID-19 Pandemic.
And this can mean that many poor, BIPOC communities are disproportionately affected.
(def.) self-sufficient way in helping communities organize themselves in the absence of adequate state support to provide any resources needed to the communities directly

Brief History of Community Gardens
We can see the start of community garden farming practices coming from a long history of afro-indigenous ways of knowing the environment and collective efforts of feeding their communities. Additionally, we see the relationship that they have with the land is very different from our current capitalistic, “I take more than is needed, and waste more” mentality.

Victory Gardens, an idea that came about in 1917 during World War I & II to address the shortage of food, resembles the current “community garden” idea. However, these gardens were very much rooted in anti-Japanese racism, as many Japanese Americans farmers were forced off their land and put in concentration camps creating a gap in the workforce. At this time, and as it has always been the case, the food system is powered by BIPOC labor.
Many of these BIPOC growers faced violence and oppression which resulted in many wealthier white communities having food opulence, while simultaneously, many poor and BIPOC communities experienced food scarcity and insecurity. In response, the growers developed alternative food systems to sustain their own communities. We can see and honor those principals today.

Additionally, much of the farming collective practices stem from afro-indigenous communities. Afro-Indigenous communities view “land as a communal belonging, where every member of the community by belonging to a family is assured of access to adequate land to secure his livelihood” (Ezeanya-Esiobu, 2019).

Foundationally, community gardens are about taking care of Mother Earth while simultaneously sustaining our communities and being equipped to feed them.

Their labor is also shared through working groups and cooperatives that rely on others to service each other’s farms when the project is too large. The Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria and Benin share drinks/food with each other at the end of the workdays and yet don’t consider it payment. (William, 1987). It’s just what each member of the community does for each other. There is a deeply rooted system that can be founded here.

As you share your time and energy, even money with others the rest of the community will do the same for you. This is the foundation of building community gardens.

**Brief History of Community Gardens**

**Let Us Get Started!**

Adapted from NC State’s extension Guide on Community Gardening and University of California extension on start up guide for a community garden.

**Step 1: Engage the community in the beginning!**

As the title states, we are bringing in the people from the community to engage them in this long-term gardening project. At this stage, you are trying to find people who will be committed to joining this discussion and to work on dreaming and scheming on what is possible!

This can get together can look like; coffee/tea, a potluck (bring your own dish!), or a get together via Zoom meeting. Allow at least six months from the time you begin organizing, to the time you build and plant your garden.

*Note: Consider partnering with existing gardens.*

Before beginning a new garden. Many gardens need more members, and may be happy to welcome additional gardeners and the programming you hope to do. On the other hand, if there aren’t accessible gardens near you or if you have a large group of committed gardeners, starting a new community garden may be the best option.
Step-by-Step Process

Step 2: Identify the purpose
This is where we begin by identifying the purpose: why do you want to set up a community garden? This is important for observing how you will all collaborate to maintain the garden; a cooperative, families, neighborhood(s), group, church etc.

As well as what areas are you looking to support with the things you garden. You can take a look at what’s going on in your respective communities, and perhaps even identify combined purposes this community garden can take.

Step 3: Assess what you have (and don’t have!)
The main principle behind community gardens is collective effort. It’s an essential step to take inventory of what you have (ie. people, time, resources, skills, seeds, support, funding etc), and to gather additional items you might need around this. This can also be a good step to identify members in your community that can be potential partners, sponsors, and funders.

Note: To build effective relationships with partners, donors, or funders, it is useful to track several kinds of information: 1) contact information; 2) actual contacts (who from the garden contacted whom); 3) when contacted, what will be requested of them, and what was the outcome; 4) gift history (what have they donated to the garden in the past)

Step 4: Form non-hierarchical planning group
Included in this group are those who will be gardeners, nearby residents, and potential partners. Identify tasks that will come up for you in this garden.

Again, equal input, equal decision making. This will help in making sure everyone’s input is discussed and decisions are made unanimously. In this planning group, you can establish what the community garden will be offering ie. educational classes, volunteer recruitment, partnership development, special events, construction, food etc.

It will help later on to identify the next steps going forward and basic organization of the garden. It will also ease relationships with residents as they are aware of what is going on.

Step 5: Develop community agreements and farming practices (see additional resources)
We want to honor the history behind community gardens. This is a crucial step in clarifying values and farming practices that will be put forth in the garden. As we named in the terms to know, regenerative gardening is one of the ways many people are honoring afro-indigenous farmers before and as a way to heal the land.

Additionally, community gardens use community agreements to set values for the collective space it can also help in naming the garden as it symbolically represents the culture that they are trying to cultivate.
Step-by-Step Process

**Step 6: Decide on the vision of Garden**
This aids in creating a balance in what is needed and what is realistically manageable for the participating groups. Included in this discussion is the size of the lot, the components that will be planted on the land (fruit trees, berries, shared community plot for large crops), and what type of farming practices the group knows of or needs to gain knowledge of.

**Step 7: Create a Prioritized Budget and Wish List**
Once you have assessed your needs, resources, and vision the next step is creating a prioritized budget and wish list. Here you can create three seasoned budgets (Fall, Spring, Winter) for the annual year, and then create desired donations with updates regularly. This is a good point to involve community/local businesses to donate materials by either asking in a personalized email, a letter, or even following up with them in person.

The next step is to identify how you will raise money (membership dues, cooperative, fundraising, grants, 501(c)/sponsors). Usually the cost for basic elements range between $2,500 to $5,000. Crowdfunding can also be a great way to obtain these funds!

**Step 7: Create a Prioritized Budget and Wish List Cont.**
Consider the need for insurance, as well as potential sources and costs. Some land allotments require liability insurance because many landowners are worried about their liability for injuries that might occur at the garden.

Be prepared to purchase liability insurance to protect the property owner (and yourself) should an accident occur at the garden. Another option could be employing a simple “hold harmless” waiver in the lease and the gardener agreement forms.

**Step 8: Choose a potential site(s) and identify site owner**
It is essential to have clean water, healthy soil (local or imported), 6 hours of sunlight per day, and a location in which gardeners feel their impact will be most received by the community as well as support the needs made in the visioning step of the garden. Be mindful too of providing accessibility for all people with physical disabilities.

There should also be easily accessible, clean, and affordable irrigation water available. To see if the site has water, contact the water service provider in your area and find out if it has an existing water meter to connect into. You can call your water provider’s customer service department and ask them to conduct a “site investigation”, or bring the necessary water system to the site.

If possible, obtain a list of previous uses of the land to evaluate potential contamination (seek out a landscape contractor, nursery, or a garden center professional to help you develop a basic layout and list of materials for an irrigation system.)
Step-by-Step Process

Step 8: Choose a potential site(s) and identify site owner Cont.
Perform a soil test to identify its existing nutrient level and ensure that it is not contaminated with heavy metals (lead is usually common in urban sites). This is a great time to make a pro/cons list if you have multiple sites.

Furthermore, to identify the site owner, you can reach out to the county’s tax assessor’s office or use google to search through public records.

Step 9: Contact Land Owner or Realtor
If you are contacting the land owner, you will be writing a letter/email to the landowner asking to use the property for a community garden. Be sure to mention the value of the garden to the land owner (see resources), and the fact that the gardeners will be responsible for keeping the site clean and weed-free. This also saves landowners from maintaining the site or paying city weed abatement fees).

Step 10: Buy Land or Lease Land
Depending on funds, you will make the selection to buy or lease the land. This an important step in setting up your community garden. Typically, groups lease garden sites from land owners for $1 per year.

This agreement should center the land ownership for BIPOC. As we are building more equitable land ownership, this is critical in understanding that there needs to be more support of gardening led by BIPOC.

Step-by-Step Process

Step 10: Buy Land or Lease Land Cont.
You will want to negotiate a lease or written agreement that allows the space to be used as a community garden for at least 3-5 years. In the written agreement clearly identify:

- who is responsible for providing water and safety
- which liability insurance is required? If any?
- what fee, if any, will be required and when it is due
- who will be responsible for clearing the property to prepare it for gardening
- what, if any, resources the owner will be providing
- what would be the grounds for terminating the contract
- who the primary contact for the garden and the property owner will be, and their contact information
Step-by-Step Process

Step 11: Plan Community Garden

Planning, designing, and setting up the garden makes up a big part of organizing the community garden and the role members play in the garden. Before the design process begins, you should measure your site and make a simple, to-scale site map. Then hold multiple garden design meetings.

One way to get the creative process started is to visualize the design by using simple drawings or photos cut from garden magazines. These will represent the different garden components--flower beds, compost bins, pathways, arbors, fencing, benches, rabbit wire etc.--that can be moved around on the map as the group discusses a layout.

Simple Gifts Community Garden, Apex.

Step 11: Plan Community Garden Cont.

This is also a good time to plan and identify how funds (if collected) will be used and when they are due. If you decide to obtain communal tools such as hoses, and supplies, identify how they will be stored and distributed.

Decide how often the gardeners will be expected to participate in group workdays. Schedule group projects, workdays, and potlucks. Social events enhance the success of the garden. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of forming a non-profit organization or business and working toward owning the garden site.

In the beginning (and even later for smaller gardens), an informal structure may be all you need. As the number of people and the workload expands, a more formal structure may enable each gardener to participate fully and the group to perform effectively. Structure can promote stability, trust, and a foundation for growth. It also provides a framework within which new leaders can be cultivated.

To remove existing rubbish and weeds, lay out the beds and prepare the soil. Install an irrigation system if desired. This might include installation of 1-inch PVC pipes underground that connect to conveniently located spigots and/or drip irrigation for individual beds. Consider freeze-proofing the plumbing to prevent the expense and inconvenience of flooding should the pipes burst.
Step-by-Step Process

**Step 11: Plan Community Garden Cont.**

Create a garden plan with plot size(s) and location(s). Reserve space in the plan for all of the components you hope to eventually add in the garden, even if you do not currently have the resources to install them.

Consider including storage sheds, compost bins, picnic tables and gathering space, a rainproof bulletin board, a children’s plot, ornamental perimeter plantings (for curb appeal), and an irrigation system.

Wide pathways make for good neighbors. A minimum of three feet is necessary to allow for wheelbarrows and carts to pass by plots without damaging plants.

Set a calendar and assign a full week at a time to garden members. This way nobody’s garden goes without water for more than a day. Set up rain barrels and hoses or stick with watering cans, depending on the size of the garden.

**Step 12: Start building, planting, and composting!**

It’s time to put the plans you all made into fruition and get started on building your design for the land. After you have placed all of your plots, you can buy plants, obtain seeds, or regrow plants from clippings/propagation. So put on your gardening shoes and get to planting with the community!

*Note: Composting-The 3-bin compost system is a good place to start. It’s easy to assemble; you can find instructions online. Until your compost is ready, see if you can get some from your town or municipality.*

This is a great time to also celebrate and thank Mother Earth for providing this opportunity to connect, heal, and build community!

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**Tips/Tricks**

- Check with your local planning and zoning departments for leads.
- Do not plant an edible garden in the floodplain. Stormwater can wash in biological contaminants like sewage from flooded septic tanks and chemical pollutants from a variety of sources.
- Many potential garden sites in communities and schools have had the topsoil removed during grading or have been built on “fill” materials. If this is the case, raised beds with imported topsoil may be needed. Beds should be 12 to 24 inches deep.
- You can use grass clippings to cover the soil surface area around the plants to minimize weeds from growing
- Recruitment can be done through flyering at community center, nonprofits, or online using community members’ social media platforms
- Google Search: accessible gardening beds
What Southern Crops to Grow?

[inspiration is asking to draw graphics of the different plants/herbs, maybe add some pollinators, livestock ie. chickens]

From the Plant Good Seed co. They made planting calendars designed to aid gardeners in making a decision for every crop in our catalog. As they preface, “Our growing recommendations are generalized for the majority of Western Hemisphere growing zones and include recommendations for when seeds should be started indoors, outdoors, or are ideal for containers/small urban growing spaces.”
Resources Links

**Soul Fire Farm**
https://www.soulfirefarm.org/about/safer-space/

**Regenerative Agriculture Practice**
https://regenerationinternational.org/why-regenerative-agriculture/

**Mutual Aid**
https://foundationbeyondbelief.org/news/mutual-aid

**Paper on Afro Indigenous Knowledge**

**Systemic Racism in the Food System**

**Community Gardening Steps**
https://www.forsythcommunitygardening.com/Documents/Start_a_
https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/kindergarden/CHILD/COM/COMMUN.

**NC Extension for Community Garden**
https://heartnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/How_to_Organize_a_
Community_Garden_tool.pdf

**University of California Start Up Community Garden Guide**

**Community Garden Links**
https://www.forsythcommunitygardening.com/PrintedMaterials.a

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**Benefits of Community Garden**
https://www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/high-demand-community-gardens-zb0z11zk0n

**Plant Good Seed Company Calendar**
https://www.plantgoodseed.com/pages/southern-california-crop-planting-calendar-grow-by-season

**Food Justice/Food Apartheid**