



What makes community gardens on institutional land successful – from their creation to their long-term operation?

How have garden organizers navigated through the many challenges and pitfalls of their projects?

The Eight Key Success Factors

What follows is the list of success factors we have gathered from our interview and research process. It is not exhaustive nor is it the only possible list of success factors. It does, however, reflect common themes that emerged in our interviews and is echoed in the wide body of publicly available information on forming community gardens. (See Appendix 1 in the full [Community Garden Guide](#) for key information resources and model agreements)

The success factors are set out here in a ‘checklist’ format - with goals and key components - in the hopes that they can be easily followed by community garden organizers in the design and development of successful gardens. They are as follows:

1. A compelling vision, articulated early
2. Solid organisation and governance
3. Clear rules and obligations of membership
4. A trusting relationship with the landowner
5. Good infrastructure, supported by community gardeners and landowners
6. Designs that build-in accessibility and inclusivity up-front
7. Informed and supportive neighbours
8. The ability to plant “Community” into the community garden

1

A Compelling Vision, Articulated Early

A compelling vision outlined early on in the garden's planning stage will help attract and motivate support behind the garden, the garden organisation, and in its relationship with the landowner.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- Organisers of the community garden should articulate an early vision of what they want their garden to be. The vision should include:
 - Location and dimensions
 - Type of garden – i.e., communal gardens (common + individual plots), individual plot allotment gardens, community food gardens
 - Prominent focus and features of the garden – i.e., food production, pollinator, therapeutic plants, demonstration gardens with educational component, etc.

The vision should outline the benefits of the garden to the community – articulating who will be involved (i.e., neighbourhood members, children, newcomers, local Indigenous residents, BIPOC) and what role the garden should play in the community (i.e., accessibility, education, food production for food banks, reflecting community diversity, etc.)

Success Story: Capital City Allotment Association & District of Saanich

From the very beginning, the Capital City Allotment Garden and its Association (CCAA)'s vision was to practice sustainable gardening that improves water quality in the vital Swan Lake watershed around it.

Since European settlement, this watershed has suffered from agricultural, residential, and manufacturing activities that dumped large amounts of untreated organic waste. As a result, this water system has experienced fish die-offs, algae blooms, and severe degradation of water quality.

The CCAA executes their vision of a healthy watershed through strong policy and accountability.

- Firstly, they acknowledge their civic responsibility to care for this beautiful piece of open land and the surrounding waters. With other community groups, the CCAA actively improves water quality through sieving and purifying pollutants from human activity and reducing the amount of human pollutants entering the system in the first place.
- Secondly, the CCAA works with the District and the Peninsula Streams Society to protect and restore the stream banks with native vegetation. The CCAA bylaws state that “Swan Creek is a protected waterway. Gardeners are prohibited from “altering creek banks, removing vegetation, or placing any objects in the creek”. As an example of this bylaw in practice, garden boxes can only be constructed with unpainted wood and retiring gardeners' deposits are only returned when their garden is clear of all foreign objects (i.e. wood, plastic, and glass).

Resources:

Capital City Allotment Gardens - [Terms and Conditions](#)

Peninsula Streams Society – [Swan Creek Restoration and Stewardship Project](#)

2

Solid Organization and Governance

Attention to organisation and governance is critical in the long-term future of the garden and building a strong and trusting relationship with the landowner and among garden members. A formal organisation representing the gardeners/plot holders is better positioned to deal with an institutional landowner than an arrangement where the landowner contracts with individual plot holders.

An organisation is better equipped to screen applicants, support work on common infrastructure and earn credibility in the community. Furthermore, a community garden organisation that is formed and sponsored under the umbrella of a broader organisation (i.e., community association, church parish council, etc.) is able to take advantage of the sponsor organisation's financial and administrative capacity.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- A committed group of active volunteers with the energy, time, and capacity to establish and operate a community garden.
- Ability to develop an inventory of already existing skills and assets in your community that can be accessed to establish and operate a successful garden – incorporating what kind of help can be secured from municipalities or other gardening groups, residents with skills and experience in landscaping, soil preparation, fencing, finance etc.
- A written constitution that clearly sets out guidelines, rules, defined governance procedures, management processes and community garden policies.
- A clear “coordinator” or “organiser position” - preferably a paid staff member (salary paid through grants or levies) and/or committed volunteers. Having paid staff supports continuity throughout the life of the garden and meaningful livelihoods in community agriculture.
- Administrative support – to handle applications, fee collection, budget, insurance and communications with members and neighbours etc. This function could either be served in-house or through a community ‘umbrella’ group sponsor that the gardens organisation can nest under – i.e., a community association, university student union, church administration.
- Capacity to raise funds for garden design and infrastructure construction (i.e., water, perimeter fencing, allotment boxes etc.) It is unlikely that initial allotment fees from members will be enough to cover all costs required to establish the gardens. So, an ability to raise funds for these components and secure available grants for this work is important.
- Solid financial management with accountability to members (for fees) and funders (for grants and loans).
- Capacity to understand and address landowner's processes and requirements and report regularly on compliance (more information on this in Success Factor #4 on page 10)
- Communications with members – scheduling regular meetings (including an annual general meeting), preparing and distributing meeting minutes and summaries, e-mail communications with members, and regular newsletters



SUCCESS STORY: UVIC CAMPUS COMMUNITY GARDEN

The University of Victoria (UVic) has sponsored a campus community garden since 1998. The 90 allotment plots are split equally between UVic students and faculty + staff with 10 plots reserved as communal “giving gardens” that extend an educational and food-sharing component into the garden’s work.

Rather than creating a separate organisation to manage the garden and its relationship with the landowner, the UVic garden is operated under the UVic Student Society (UVSS). As an umbrella organisation, the UVSS is able to provide significant benefits to the garden – including:

- Financial support: 95% of the garden’s budget is provided through the UVSS budget – which comes from student fees designated to support the UVSS. This budget not only supports infrastructure spending at the garden, but, importantly, it provides part-time salaries for four staff to coordinate the garden. Staff salaries are also subsidised in the UVSS’s broader UVic “Work Study Program” that places students in paid work assignments on campus. One of the many benefits of being able to staff the garden is the often-overlooked “institutional memory” – that ability to provide strong continuity on garden policies and practices over time.
- Administrative support: The UVSS provides the gardens with other support including governance (through the UVSS’s Board of Directors), insurance coverage, fee collection, and financial and accounting assistance.
- Stronger relationship with the landowner: Dealing with a complex organisation like a University could be a daunting task for a small garden organisation. However, positioning the garden within the established, larger relationship that the UVSS has with UVic provides the garden with more influence than it might otherwise have with the university.

Resources

University of Victoria Campus Community Garden – [Annual Reports](#)

3 Clear Rules and Obligations of Membership

Community gardens are made up of their members. Attention to membership must cover the full life-cycle of the relationship- from joining the garden, to working in it, to voluntary and involuntary termination of membership. This life cycle must be supported by clear roles and responsibilities of membership – both with respect to individual plots and the communal infrastructure work and obligations. There is no room for ambiguity here. Everyone needs to know what to expect and what is expected of them.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- Defined, clearly specified processes and obligations on membership including:
 - number of members and plots
 - criteria for who can be a member - i.e., “tenant”, “parishioner”, “registered student”, “neighbourhood resident (defined area)”
 - definition of membership ‘levels’ or ‘classes’ (and associated fee differentials) – i.e., for larger plots, for communal gardeners (working on communal plots rather than an individual allotment) etc.
 - time and term limits on holding individual plots and terms and processes for renewal
 - obligations to perform communal work on the gardens (i.e., clean-up, composting, fence construction, general maintenance etc.)
- Clear procedures on how to apply for a garden allotment and the distribution of garden allotments among eligible members – i.e., “first come, first served? lottery? etc.”; waiting lists; rules regarding transferring allotments to other eligible members if they chose to leave the organisation.
- Clear rules and conditions where members can resign or be suspended from the organisation
- Clarity and accountability on how fees are set and what are they used for (i.e., share of the garden’s capital; share for annual membership), rules on any refunds of member contributions when they leave the organisation



4

A Trusting Relationship with the Landowner

The key success factor in building an effective partnership between landowners and community gardens lies in establishing trust – trust in the capacity of the garden organisation to deal with landowner’s processes and requirements and trust in the commitment of the gardening organisation to the longer-term - allowing for longer-term planning, investments in infrastructure, etc.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- Ability of the gardening organisation to develop and present a well thought-out plan for the garden that encompasses the needs and potential risks for both sides of the partnership. The ability of the gardening organisation to clearly understand and consider the landowner’s interests in this plan helps form a powerful platform for trust going forward
- Simple but formal agreement representing a committed contract for the operation of the community garden over its ‘life cycle’ – from creation to dissolution, regularly reviewed and refreshed. Such an agreement should clearly state the respective roles and responsibilities of the gardening group and the landowner in the management and operation of the garden
- Commitment to regular meetings, dispute resolution processes, and flexibility where possible to change rules as needed
- Commitment by the gardening organisation to communicate with and be prepared to address the needs of neighbours and other tenants of the landowner

TOOL: STREET TO SKY GUIDES

The Food Eco District created two guides to make landowner-urban growing relationships easier and less daunting: the Urban Farmer Guide and the Landowner Guide. These extensive guides are built on months of interviews and research. They cover everything from lease information to tax incentives to best practices to successful examples. You can find them at www.get-fed.ca/streettosky

There are several compelling reasons to structure the relationship with the institutional landowner on a one-to-one basis (via a formal organisation representing community gardeners) rather than a one-to-many relationship (between the landowner and each individual plot holder). Both the capacity and credibility of a community garden organisation can be strengthened considerably if it is created under a broader “umbrella” organisation that is already established in the community.

5 Infrastructure Supported by Gardeners and Landowner

While individual gardening plots may represent the heart of a community garden, early attention must be given to the design and building of common infrastructure required to support the garden and position it for success.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- Care in site selection – does it have the needed minimum hours of sunlight, quality of soils (if planting in the ground), irrigation, drainage, manageable amount of invasive plants, etc.
- Site size and lay-out that accommodates adequate individual plots, common infrastructure (i.e., greenhouse, toolsheds, processing tables etc.) and accessibility for both users and support vehicles as necessary
- Ability to design, fund, and implement solid common infrastructure – i.e., site preparation, perimeter fencing, water, tool sheds, composting systems as well as the ability to address site-specific issues such as water-runoff and deer fencing
- Infrastructure is attractive, functional, and attentive to the needs and concerns of the neighbours who live beside the garden (i.e., odour management, site appearance)
- Design features that respect other habitats and users – i.e. care for riparian zones around streams and waterways; boulevard gardens that do not impede neighbouring access



6 Start With Accessibility and Inclusivity

Successful gardens are designed to facilitate access to the widest range of participants, taking care to remove physical, cultural, colonial, and financial barriers. Moreover, when sited on public land there will likely be a requirement that gardens are open and generally accessible to the public. Building in accessibility and diversity at the outset will build a stronger sense of community within the garden and help get the acceptance of gardens by neighbours as well.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- Gardens are actively involved with the Indigenous nations on whose land their garden rests. Consider offering part of the land to interested local Indigenous groups to use as they see fit (i.e. for medicinal plant growing, food production, community gathering, etc.)
- Care is taken to grow any culturally relevant plants the community requests in communal plots
- Deferential payment options are available for those who face financial barriers
- Decolonization and anti-racism are central tenets of the garden's ethos
- Garden is designed to be accessible to people with special needs – i.e., wide pathways, raised beds, accessible plots within easy reach of parking spaces, etc.
- Garden is open to the public – only closed under limited and defined circumstances
- Creation of a positive, inclusive space that actively makes everyone feel welcome and safe

7 Informed and Supportive Neighbours

In all probability, members of a community garden may not reside in immediate proximity to it. However, other members of the community do – and the garden's neighbours can be expected to have needs and concerns regarding the operation and appearance of the garden. Some may go so far as to oppose the creation of a garden and may register complaints with the landowner. Many public landowners require that the community garden organisation consult with neighbours and report on outcomes of this engagement as a condition of considering their application to establish a garden.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- Commit to active stakeholder engagement in the neighbourhood adjacent to the community gardens in both its planning stages and regarding any changes proposed while in operation
- Provide public access to the community gardens – restricted only under tightly defined circumstances
- Regular communications with neighbours – through a garden 'newsletter' and publicly posted information boards at the garden site

8 Ability to Plant “Community” into Community Garden

Perhaps the most important success factor in community gardens is the ability of the garden to create and reflect community. Community gardens have an increasingly important role in meeting the food production needs of the community. However, they become much more if they can cultivate a sense of community within themselves. A focus on building community has the potential of creating stronger and deeper commitment among its members. A committed sense of community can also support the landowner’s confidence that the gardens will be well maintained.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THIS SUCCESS FACTOR:

- A dedicated team of volunteers working towards a common vision and goal that improves their community
- Educational components – supporting fellow gardeners, school visits, youth, and newcomers
- Shared communal plots and giving tables that grow and distribute fresh food to the wider community
- Ability of a community garden to advance a broader mission – either its own or that of their sponsoring “umbrella” organisation (i.e., education, church community, provisioning food banks)

Success Story: St George’s Parish Community Garden

St George’s Anglican Church (Saanich) has sponsored a community garden since 2016. The case for a community garden on the site was facilitated by the alignment of the initiative with a core element of the church’s mandate and mission – namely, to build community.

While the garden is primarily structured on individual allotments, there are a few plots reserved for communal work and church needs (i.e., flowers for altars). Membership is open to the community-at-large beyond church parishioners. Members who do not want to have their own plots can, for an annual fee of \$10.00 per person, join the garden to work in the communal plots. All members are expected to volunteer some of their time to support general maintenance and upkeep of the site.

The alignment of the garden’s and church’s common mission of building community has helped the garden gather support in two ways:

- Financial support - funds for garden infrastructure was provided by the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia “Visioning Fund” that was matched by a private donation by a parishioner.
- Administrative support – provided through the Church’s established administrative staff and processes to handle of membership applications and fees.

Resources

St George’s Parish Garden — [Garden Rules and Guidelines](#)

St George’s Parish Garden — [Membership and Vegetable Bed Agreement](#)