



Justice & International **Mission**

Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Starting a community garden in your church



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Acknowledgements

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Thanks also to Rev. Gordon Bannon for providing excerpts from his thesis on gardning as a spiritual matter.

Tomatoes, lettuce and parsley photographs by Joel Meadows. Other photos used courtesy of the churches invovled.

About this resource

Community gardens are places where people come together for a common purpose. Most often the term is used to refer to growing food. However, gardens can also provide a place for rest, spiritual reflection, socialising, memorials, conservation of native plants and flowers, wildlife habitat or small scale animal husbandry eg. chickens and bees. They might also include community art, mosaics sculptures or be used as an outdoor classroom.

This guide is for those churches wanting to discern if a community garden is the right option for them and if so what form it may take. It will also provide practical advice about how to get started.

Why have a community garden?

For many, gardening is already a regular daily practice, but it is often quite divorced from the Christian life. Gardening presents an opportunity for the church to encourage and open up connections for people and enable them to relate the practice of gardening to their faith-life.

Research has shown there are considerable benefits in having a community garden¹ such as:

- Physical and mental health benefits from increased access to/consumption of fresh food, exercise, close contact with natural processes, and participation in community activities
- Environmental education, habitat for wildlife, and green spaces in urban areas
- Enhanced community networks, reduced social isolation, and strengthened relationships across diversity
- Cross-cultural learning and sharing
- Reduced crime and vandalism
- Reduced costs for managing open space

... The Gospel challenges Christians not only to look inwards but also to look outwards, to nurture both the 'Mary and Martha' in themselves. Time spent in a 'quiet garden' allows space for stillness and reflection. Ideas come in the silence, and from this action flows.

From The Quiet Garden website

As a church, there are additional reasons why you might consider a community garden such as:

- To build relationships with and across the local community
- To make responsible and creative use of church land
- To care for God's creation in a hands-on practical way
- To serve and equip the needy and marginalised people in the community, such as those who are isolated, unemployed and/or facing food insecurity
- To respond to requests from people who were looking for a place to site their community garden
- To build relationships across generations and cultures
- To invigorate their church's mission, purpose and profile
- To connect together witness and service, right there at the place of worship
- To provide an opportunity for spiritual contemplation
- To provide an opportunity for healing

Why grow your own food?

The environmental benefits of local (and often organic) food production are just some of the positives of community gardens. At a household level, food is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions². Food can be energy intensive if it is transported, stored frozen or refrigerated, grown using pesticides and herbicides, harvested with heavy machinery, cooked and packaged. All of these processes require the use of fossil fuels. Reducing the amount food has to travel to get to our tables (food miles) as well as the processes involved can reduce our impact on the environment.

To see a quick animation about the process a tomato goes through to get to the supermarket go to:

<http://www.localharvest.org.au/a-little-local-knowledge/>

1 A current and comprehensive bibliography of community gardens research is available at <http://communitygarden.org.au/bibliography>

2 Consumption Atlas, Australian Conservation Foundation, Greenhouse indicator for Victoria, <http://202.60.88.196/consumptionatlas/>

Case Study

Box Hill Baptist have set up a community garden to encourage children to learn about food production and provide hands on connections to the earth. Research suggests literally getting your hands dirty is important for developing connections with the environment around us.



1. Getting Started

1.1 How do we get started?

Establishing and developing a community garden is a considerable undertaking. But it is one that brings tremendous benefits and rewards. The first step is to establish a committed core group which is willing and able to drive the project. The next step is to establish who the garden is for and why. Once you have established the aims and objectives you will also need to develop a clear system for managing the garden and making decisions so that expectations remain clear. See organisational models in section 5.

1.2 Who is the garden for?

Ensure you are clear about what and who your garden is for. This will help shape what it looks like and determine whether it is a good idea in the first place. Here are some questions to get you thinking.

Is it a food garden? Do you want to encourage a focus on native foods, foods that are easy to grow, but expensive to buy, or food that will be able to be stored for long periods eg. pumpkins. Is the food for the people in the church or outside the church? If it's for people outside how will it be offered? Are you open to anyone helping themselves to the produce or are their reciprocal expectations of some sort, financial or in-kind?

Is there a genuine need? Are there other needs – for example does your church produce a lot of food waste that could contribute to a compost bin? This may be the impetus for planting a few hardy pumpkins if nothing else.

Is the garden to be used for recreation or prayer? Is it a space for the local community or the church community? Do you want people to come and sit for a while in your garden or is it purely functional? Is it child friendly? Is it accessible for people with disabilities?

1.3 Is it practical?

Do you have a good position for a garden that will get adequate sun or shade for your purposes? What soil type do you have? Will you need to import soil? Do you need to raise the garden beds so that people do not have to bend down and are accessible to all people? Do you want to do a garden with minimal infrastructure so that it can be undone easily? Is there a water supply handy or will you need to get a tap plumbed or a tank installed? What financial resources do you have? The answers to these questions will help you determine whether you need to get a grant or additional financial support.

Case Study

St. Andrew's UC in Bendigo offered their garden space as hospitality and a gathering space for the Karin refugee community. Is there a wider need that your garden could incorporate?



2. What makes a community garden work?

2.1 Link it with the mission of your church

The most successful projects which enjoy support from their church community are those which resonate with the mission of the church. Are there ways you can link the garden to other things your church is involved in?

2.2. Get the neighbours involved

Before embarking, talk to your neighbours about what you are planning to do. Having the support your neighbours will assist with security and ensure they are on board with the project rather than worried about people coming and going.

2.3 Build Community Partnerships

Community gardens are good at strengthening communities through developing partnerships among community groups and organisations. Uniting Churches have collaborated with a range of groups in their local areas in developing and running their community gardens, including:

Local councils

Schools and other educational establishments

e.g. TAFE

Mission Australia

Aged care facilities

Permaculture groups

Artists and musicians

Local farmers

Aboriginal groups

Other churches, Christian groups and agencies

Other local community gardens

Many local councils have existing programs, funding opportunities or gardening clubs or local environment groups. Consider making contact with groups in your area to see if there are overlapping needs. For example, is there a group wanting land and do you have land that is a problem to manage? Whilst your church may not have the resources to do it all yourselves, with the right combination of interests and needs you may find opportunities emerge.

2.4 Get some financial support

The costs of establishing and running community gardens can be minimised by recycling waste materials for garden construction (e.g. waste bricks and wood) and for organic matter (e.g. green waste from your local council or garden business). This is also environmentally beneficial.

Where possible, make use of skills in the community rather than employing consultants – this also helps with building relationships and skills in the community.

Case Study

Part of the mission of Wodonga UC is to offer an emergency relief program. The food grown in their garden now goes to provide food for the UnitingCare agency. The hens lay eggs but also provide welcome companionship.



Wodonga UC have also made use of marginal land and created a vegie garden on their nature strip.



Seek cash or in-kind sponsorship from local businesses (e.g. a local nursery may provide seedlings at a discount). Many garden programs have received support through their local Bunnings store. Make an appointment to see the manager and present your case. Be specific in what your needs are.

Taking things slowly to allow low-cost options to be pursued will also be beneficial.

Things that may incur a cost include:

- Printing of promotional materials
- Construction materials (e.g. for raised beds, pergolas etc)
- Water harvesting and irrigation equipment
- Toolshed and tools
- Organic material to establish raised garden beds
- A selection of books for a small resource library for gardeners
- Staffing costs (e.g. a consultant to help with garden design)
- Ongoing costs (e.g. sourcing new plants, manure, mains water consumption etc) can be covered by charging fees for garden membership.
- Public liability insurance is a significant cost for many gardens. An advantage for church-run gardens at church facilities is that they should be covered by the church's existing insurance.

Grants which Uniting Churches have accessed to support their community garden projects include:

- Government grants – particularly local Council, and federal government grants
- Open Garden Scheme Community Garden Grants
- Grants from other community groups (e.g. Lions Club or Bendigo Bank)

It is important to note that community gardens may actually result in some cost savings. For example, if your community garden is to displace a lawn, mowing costs will be reduced/eliminated.

2.5 Appoint a co-ordinator

Most community gardens start out with a group of people with a shared idea or vision for what the garden could be or do. Typically others will get involved over time who have not been part of the initial vision and those who instigated it will have gone on to start other projects. To ensure the long term viability of your garden consider having someone who will act as a coordinator. This will mean that the garden can continue to be watered, weeded and planted with some regularity and other people will be more likely to be involved if there is someone 'in charge'.

2.6 Encourage shared ownership

Whilst a co-ordinator will ensure smooth running, it's important that others feel a sense of shared ownership for them to continue to want to be involved. This can be as simple as taking on tasks that they can be responsible for – watering once a week, taking home produce or designing one aspect of the garden.

What do you do with excess produce?

People tend to feel uncomfortable if they are given something without giving anything in return. We are trained to be suspicious of a 'free lunch'. If you have excess produce consider asking people to make a donation towards the garden or a project your church supports instead of offering it for free. This can also be a way of involving other people in your church indirectly in the gardening project.



3. Getting the support of others

Often good ideas in churches are hampered by internal decision making processes. Generally we don't want to get people offside and we don't like conflict. Here are some ideas for dealing with your church council or property committee.

3.1 Find common values

When conflict arises it is usually over a clash of values or expectations. Be clear about why you want to do the community garden and how it links in with the church's wider mission. This will ensure there is some common ground.

3.2 Prepare adequately before presenting

When presenting an idea to a property committee or church council they will want to know what impact this will have, what risks there are, how much it will cost, what you are asking of others. If you are vague, it will be hard for a committee to make a decision. If you can assure them the risks are minimal, costs are affordable and appear confident that it will be a success you are likely to get a much better hearing. Be as specific as you can. Work out all the details with a supportive group of people first, before approaching your church council or property group. Leave them with a written proposal so they can consider it.

It may be worth talking to key decision makers prior to putting forward your proposal so that it is not coming 'out of the blue'. Having an advocate on the inside is much more powerful for getting an agreement. If there is contention over how a part of a church property may be used, don't frame the proposal as either / or. See if you can find a way of linking other concerns or interests that the church has.

3.3 Do you need approval?

Consider whether you really need to get the support of the church council. If you just started a small garden would people mind?

4. Answers to Common Concerns Raised by Churches

Being prepared for questions can assist you in presenting your idea to the church or church council. Here are some commonly raised concerns by churches and some possible responses.



4.1 Our church is small and/or ageing. Will we have to do a lot of the physical work or have to cover costs associated with the garden?

There is no need to build the community garden all at once – you can start slow and see what develops. Taking the time to grow relationships with the broader community, and to build interest, common vision and commitment means that people will be inspired to work together on the project and that church members need not be overly burdened by physical work. It is wise to have some people with an interest or skills in gardening to get the project off the ground.

Obtaining funds from those sources listed in section 2.4 can help to ensure that the garden is cost-neutral, and doesn't need to draw on churches' existing finances.

4.2 Will the garden be vandalised?

Most gardens are likely to experience minor theft or vandalism at some stage (e.g. missing tools or veggies), or attacks from cockatoos or possums. Being aware of this possibility at the outset and taking it into account in garden design and operation can minimise this. Some gardeners are happy to live with a bit of missing produce, and even see it as a gift to the community. While some community gardens

erect a fence, others choose not to. Cultivating community involvement, and a sense of ownership and appreciation can be more effective than fences. Supportive neighbours can greatly assist with an added level of security or you may wish to place your garden in such a way that it is open to public viewing. Gardens that are hidden ironically may also be more open to vandalism.

4.3 Will we lose control over the space if we let others use it?

It is a basic Christian claim that we don't own land, or churches or indeed anything – God owns it (Ps 24). The best way to deal with issues concerning use of the land is to:

- Have a clear memorandum of understanding – if the garden is run by an external group
- Have clear garden rules governing conduct in the garden – if the garden is run by the church
- Build strong relationships between the church and the garden group so that concerns can be addressed before they escalate

4.4 A community garden is a lot of effort. Will it bring people into the church?

Some churches have seen gardeners come along to worship services. But the growing relationships between church members and (other) gardeners are often manifest in other ways and provide many opportunities for spiritual sharing.

When the O'Connor Community Garden was first established, the gardeners organised a morning tea for the church congregation as an expression of thanks for hosting the garden.

At the Garden of Eden community garden at St George's Uniting Church Eden, unemployed people on Mission Australia placements share grace and lunch together with church members.

At the Cooma Uniting Church, gardeners and worshippers often share morning tea on Sundays.

Case Study

Port Melbourne UC have transformed the front of their church into a garden. Every Wednesday afternoon the garden is open to anyone who would like to come along and join in some free gardening and food growing activities.



5. Organisational models of church involvement in community gardens

Model	Church land, church run	Church land, others run	Church in partnership	Existing garden
Description	The church runs the community garden, which is on church land. The church has oversight of garden development and operations. People/ groups beyond the church are involved in gardening, and to a greater or lesser extent in the organisation and management of the garden (e.g. on the garden committee).	The community garden is on church land, but run by a group external to the church. There may be greater or lesser church involvement in that group – minimally a liaison person. In some cases, people from within and outside the congregation may participate equally in garden development and management.	The church works in partnership with other individuals and groups to develop a garden that is not on church land.	The church joins an existing community garden, which is not on church land.
Particular church needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity within the church to initiate and sustain a community garden • A clear set of garden rules/gardeners agreement. See www.unitingearthweb.org.au for a sample • Good community engagement and community development processes to ensure that the garden builds interest, involvement, and ownership in the broader community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear MOU between the church and the garden group. See a sample at www.unitingearthweb.org.au. The group will generally need their own public liability insurance. A template MOU for external groups' use of church land is available from Uniting Resources, www.unitingresources.org.au/ps • Minimally, a church member to act as a liaison person between the garden group and the church council • Efforts to build relationships between the congregation and the garden group. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity within the church to initiate and sustain a community garden in partnership with others • Good community engagement and community development processes to ensure that the garden builds interest, involvement, and ownership • Land and public liability insurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest within the church in community gardening
Example	The “Feed My People” community vegetable garden is a new project of Moree Uniting Church. It aims to building meaningful relationships between and among the church and different parts of the Moree community, particularly the marginalised and needy. The garden is managed by a church committee, and plots will be allocated to individuals and groups both inside and outside of the church. The committee has approached groups e.g. Fairview Nursing Home and Moree College.	A member at O'Connor Uniting Church was interested in establishing a community garden on two old tennis courts next to the church. He decided to approach Canberra Organic Growers Society (COGS), which run a number of community gardens in the area. After meeting together, the church and COGS decided to proceed. COGS manages the garden, there is a MOU between the church and COGS, and a liaison person who is both on the church council and the garden committee.	“Sustaining Our Suburbs” is a community partnership of Permaculture Hunter and Adamstown Uniting Church, helping low-income people to grow organic food. The project involves, in part, establishing new community gardens at facilities such as schools, community centres, and childcare centres.	Maroubra Junction Uniting Church is a member of the Randwick Community Organic Garden.

6. Gardening for spiritual growth

When a community garden is established, participants are being given much more than a garden. Through their access to a patch of earth, they are being nourished in ways that are spiritual, as well as physical and emotional. Through their gardening experience people can be given a chance to experience community, companionship and hope.

Cheryl Maddocks (*The Age*, October 4, 2003) points to the value of a small garden to an asylum seeker (Hassan) at Villawood detention centre. She describes some of Hassan's background, his horrific journey to Australia, and his wait for four years in Villawood. Hassan says, of the role of gardening in his life, "Plants grow, life doesn't stop and – like my plants – my life will change one day, It's not Australia's fault that I am here, so I would like to repay this country by looking after this little bit of land."³

Maddocks then goes on to describe Hassan's gardening, and the formation of his garden. Hassan created his small garden on hard, unpromising ground. He had to water the packed earth every day for two weeks before he could even break into the tough clay. Hassan had no tools, so he used a table knife to dig into the earth. He placed weeds in a heap and, when they decomposed he added them to the clay to help break up the soil. After rain he collected any topsoil that had formed in puddles and added it to his emerging garden. ... Hassan took cuttings from a rose that was growing in the detention centre, placed them outdoors during the day and took them inside every night. They all rooted. Someone gave him seeds which he sowed into trays and planted out when they were large enough.⁴

Case Study

Castlemaine UC has created a 'Lacuna' garden. Lacuna refers to a gap or space. The aim of this garden is to provide a place where people can take time out and reflect or sit or be contemplative.



³ Cheryl Maddocks, "The seeds of Hope", *The Age Good Weekend*, October 4, 2003, 65.

⁴ *ibid.*

Contacts and Further Resources

Rev. Gordon Bannon - has a wealth of experience in setting up a range of community gardens.
Email: gordonbannon@gmail.com, 0417037450

Tips for Starting a Garden, and a "Getting Started Checklist"

<http://www.communitygarden.org.au>

This website is a one-stop shop for resources and support for community gardens.

Cultivating Community - Info, stories, gardens, links and resources.

info@cultivatingcommunity.org.au Ph) 03 9429 3084

<http://www.cultivatingcommunity.org.au/>

C.E.R.E.S - Community Gardens

Email: ceres.community.gardens@gmail.com

The Quiet Garden <http://www.quietgarden.org/>

A resource for using gardens as places of hospitality and prayer

Thomas, F (2008) "Getting started in community gardening", City of Sydney, Sydney.

Available at: <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au>

Claire Nettle (2010) "Growing Community: Starting and nurturing community gardens", Adelaide: Health SA, Government of South Australia and CANH Association Inc.

Available at <http://www.canh.asn.au>

'Too tired to care' A personal reflection on the ups and downs of being involved with a community garden from a faith perspective by Carlyn Chen

<http://www.arrcc.org.au/>

Join the Google group for Christians involved in community gardening

This google group is for Christians and churches in Australia who are interested/involved in community food initiatives (e.g. community gardens, community supported agriculture, food buying groups/cooperatives).

It is a place for sharing ideas, asking questions and mutual support. If you have a google account go to

<http://groups.google.com/group/churches-and-community-food>

If you have problems joining contact info@unitingearthweb.org.au

Further Reading

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Nollman, Jim. *Why we garden: Cultivating a sense of place*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc, 1994.

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The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth,--
One is nearer God's heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth.

Dorothy Frances Gurney, excerpt from *God's Garden*

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