

Build a Community Garden at a Veterans Home or School that Serves Military Families

Starting or joining a community garden drives many benefits:

- You give veterans or service members an opportunity to connect to their community, make friends and have fun
- You support veterans, service members and their families and recognize their service by developing the community garden in memory of a fallen soldier, a military family or service in general
- You support veterans, service members and their families through nonprofit organizations where you deliver the harvest
- You are able to teach military kids about the benefits of eating healthy food, and engage them in activities that make them more caring, responsible, service-oriented and independent, therefore helping and strengthening military families as a whole
- You are able to play a role in building and strengthening your community by giving access to land for people who wouldn't otherwise grow their own food

Type of service: family/guest volunteering, group volunteering, ongoing/long-term volunteering

Objectives: engage employees in a service project helping veterans, service members and their families reconnect with their community and improve their quality of life.

Difficulty level: moderate

Special skills: moderate physical activity

Resources:

- Shovel
- Scissors
- Access to water
- Items to plant
- Mulch
- Gloves
- First aid kit
- Hand cleaner
- Snacks

Project instructions:

Step 1: Plan Ahead

Start early by asking yourself the following questions:

- Where will the community garden be located?
- Who are the direct beneficiaries? Who will the garden serve?
- Who are the possible partners you can engage in this project?
- What will be grown (vegetables, flowers, etc.)?
- How will minimum maintenance (especially weeding) be handled both inside plots and in common areas (such as along fences, in flower beds and in sitting areas)?
- How will work be shared? Who does what?
- Are there conditions for membership?
- What are your short and long-term objectives?
- How will decisions be made?
- How will you community garden be funded and sustained?

Answering these questions will help you map you project and draft a plan which will help you keep your project under control. Make sure you also prepare for the unexpected and review your plan with you planning committee.

Step 2: Assess Interest

Talk to your colleagues and assess their interest in getting engaged in a community garden build-up in the community. Perhaps a community garden already exists and your colleagues could join the effort?

Discuss about the benefits of a community garden and how their engagement will help veterans, service members and their families.

Talk about prospective roles and responsibilities. Volunteer positions within the project may include participating on a planning committee or PR committee, planting seeds, watering, weeding, maintaining work and various other roles. Consider creating a planning committee for a start. This will ensure that you have a dedicated team of project ambassadors to work on the project and get it running.

Step 3: Select a Site

Once you have identified what type of community garden you would like to create, reach out to organizations that serve military families and “pitch” your project. Assess if there is a need and desire to build a community garden in your respective community. You might have to speak to administrators and representatives of these organizations. Meet them and conduct a site visit. This visit will help clarify many of your questions, such as:

- Is the site suitable for a community garden
- Is there space available?
- Is there water available?
- What is the soil composition?
- Does the site get appropriate amount of sunshine throughout the day?
- Are there any pollutants in the area which could influence your crop?

Above all, remain flexible during these conversations and allow others to help mold your garden’s final goals and purpose.

Make sure you discuss with your community partner (school, Veterans Home, organizations and associations that serve the military, shelters which serve the military or veterans, city councils, etc.) who owns the land, who and how will the garden will be maintained, if additional approval or documentation is needed to have your project started and running.

If you do not know what “ingredients” to look for creating a successful community garden, make sure you contact experts in the field. Local farming or gardening associations or nonprofit organizations such as the [American Community Gardening Association](#) which hold a vast bank of resources and can help with suggestions and guidance.

Make sure you consult and engage all stakeholders in choosing the project site. This will make them feel useful and more connected to the cause.

Step 4: Recruit Volunteers

Once you have finalized your project plans and identified your community partner, you can begin to recruit volunteers. Begin recruiting volunteers among your friends, family members and co-workers. Remember that the personal “ask” is usually the most effective. Engaging your community is essential for the success of this project. Ask friends, family and other members of your community to get involved and spread the news about this project.

Step 5: Identify Resources

A community garden requires not only commitment, but also resources. You will need tools, materials, seeds, plants, etc. Some of them can be provided by volunteers, some by the local government, and some by the partner organization itself. Make sure you contact all potential stakeholders to discuss your project and communicate all your needs. Local businesses (such as supply stores or even national chains) are enthusiastically supporting initiatives which aim to improve neighborhoods. Planning for

resources in advance will ensure you keep your project under control and secure the resources you need just in time.

Step 6: Be Aware of Policies

Certain organizations, such as schools, might have special policies you will have to abide by in designing a community garden. Be prepared to discuss them in advance, understand and follow these special procedures and requirements. For example, each school has various policies and procedures regarding volunteers serving in schools. Some may require background or fingerprint checks or specific training for volunteers and/or a school orientation. These policies are there to protect the children so be prepared and be patient. Other organizations might require you to sign a lease or use agreement, while public land has its special set of regulations or requirements. Do your homework and be prepared.

Step 7: Prepare and Plant Something

Once you have secured resources and chose a site for your community garden, you can begin to build it. With the help of veterans, volunteers and community members, develop a plan for your garden, construct your garden and plant something that aligns with your project goals. Take allergies into consideration when choosing items to plant. Make sure you have volunteer roles assigned so that everyone is engaged. Be a leader and manage your project throughout its completion. Upon completion, make sure you determine who will be responsible for maintaining the garden. This is why a community garden can easily become a long-term engagement project.

Consider dedicating a lot or space in your community garden to children and get them involved. Children love getting their hands dirty and projects alike strengthen bonds among family members as well as educate children about the importance of service and healthy food.

Step 8: Share the Wealth

Share the success of your garden. Plants and vegetables take time to grow and get ripe. You can schedule regular community garden visits and document the progress of your garden during your visits, even if you agree that the project partner will take the responsibility to maintain it. It is important that you consider these implications before beginning the project. In addition, you might consider sharing the crop with veterans and their families. Foods can also be donated to local shelters or you can organize a local farmers market where you can talk about your project and get the military, veterans and all partners involved in informing the community about veteran or military-related issues.

In the event you choose to dedicate the community garden to a cause or a fallen soldier, make sure you communicate this to your community. For example, you can use the proceeds you receive after selling your crop at a local farmer market to make a commemorative plaque which you can install near your community garden in your community.

Step 9: Reflect

After your volunteer project, it is important to reflect on the experience and think about the impact of the project on the community as well as what you learned about yourself and others. Here are some suggested activities:

- Tell your colleagues about something you learned and how you will continue to help others.
- Write about your experience and communicate about it through company media channels.
- If you are working with a group of volunteers to do this project, lead a group discussion with questions such as:
 - Why did you volunteer today?
 - What did you learn about veterans and your community?
 - What is the one thing that you will remember most about this service activity?
 - How can you continue to make a difference in our community?

Step 10: Celebrate Your Success

Give yourself a pat on the back for all of your hard work. And remember to thank everyone who helped you. It will make them feel great. Think about what worked well and what didn't. That way you can build on your success, if you decide to do this again.

Everyone likes to be recognized for his or her hard work and achievements, especially volunteers. Show your volunteers how much you appreciate them and they are more likely to fully participate and return in following years. The following are some suggestions on how you can recognize your volunteers.

- Verbally recognize your volunteers' efforts, but also send a personalized note thanking them.
- Plan to recognize your volunteers at your next special event.
- Provide your team with a camera to take before and after pictures. Post the pictures in a visible, public area and online.
- Give each volunteer a small token of your appreciation.
- Ask people who were particularly enthusiastic or helpful to join next year's planning committee.

Note: Many youth-based organizations require that adult volunteers have a criminal background check prior to serving with their agency. Volunteers must attest confirm, represent, and warrant that they have never been convicted of or charged with a violent crime, child abuse or neglect, child pornography, child abduction, kidnapping, rape or any sexual offense, nor have they ever been ordered by a court to receive psychiatric or psychological treatment in connection therewith. Before choosing to organize a project working with children or for youth-based agencies, please make sure that volunteers in your group meet the aforementioned requirements and are prepared to have a full background check and perhaps fingerprinting before they are eligible to volunteer.

Additional Resources

- American Community Gardening Association <http://communitygarden.org/learn/starting-a-community-garden.php>
- Tips and advice on gardening www.gardeningtipsnideas.com
- National Gardening Association: www.kidsgardening.org
- School Gardens Across the Nation; a Resource List for Starting Your Own Garden: <http://civileats.com/2010/01/19/school-gardens-across-the-nation/http://civileats.com/2010/01/19/school-gardens-across-the-nation/>
- HandsOn Network www.handsonnetwork.org
- Community Blueprint www.the-communityblueprint.org