

COMMUNITY GARDENS

The simple act of planting a seed and watching it grow brings a sense of pride and accomplishment. Plants offer life and beauty — valuable commodities, especially in a place where before there were none. This is part of the concept behind community gardening.

In inner cities, when a neighborhood declines, so do its parks. A neglected park has the potential to become overgrown and even dangerous. Creating a community garden with the help of children in inner cities is a great way to keep those children off the streets while teaching horticulture and fostering self-reliance.

Of course, most neighborhoods don't fall into this worst-case scenario. Community gardens serve a multitude of purposes in addition to providing a safe haven. They revitalize neighborhoods of all kinds, add beauty and provide a place for recreation and social events. They also offer apartment dwellers a place to work the soil and a source for home-grown produce.

To get such a project started in your neighborhood, figure out the short- and long-term objectives for the garden, where it is to be located and who will work on its development.

If the garden is to benefit a specific group of people or a particular neighborhood, people from that group must be involved in everything from planning and preparing to cultivating and maintaining the garden. For example, if it is a children's garden, get the children in your neighborhood involved. Planting seeds that will come up quickly, like radishes, offers (nearly) instant gratification while enjoying an appreciation for nature.

After all of the hard work and time that goes into creating a community garden, the last thing you

want to think about is its destruction. Vandalism and theft can be a problem in some areas. The simple act of creating a sign for the garden to let people know that it is a neighborhood project has been shown to deter vandals.

Most groups must obtain sponsorship or grants to pay for the garden. Start-up costs include the site, gardening tools, fencing and, in some cases, soil improvement. If it is to be a garden of edible crops, you also must know how the land was used in the past and check for contamination. Try to gather free materials, such as tools and seeds, from local garden centers or clubs.

For information on starting a community garden in your neighborhood, contact the American Community Gardening Association.

PHOTO, GARY STOLBERG / CHICAGO PHOTOGRAPHERS INC.



Wildflowers, the West Side Children's Garden, is located in Chicago. The garden and surrounding park resulted from a public/private partnership between the city and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois that transformed the once vacant lot into a beautiful community park and garden.

tion. The ACGA is a national non-profit organization that supports community gardening. Write: 100 N. 20th St., 5th Floor, Philadelphia, PA 19103-1495; or call 215-988-8785. Additional help may be found from the cooperative extension service in your county, horticultural societies and local garden centers. The book *A Patch of Eden: America's Inner-City Gardeners* (Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 1996; \$18.95; 185 pages) offers inspirational stories about transforming inner-city, rubble-filled lots into beautiful garden sanctuaries.

— Jessie Eisenstein

In case of
emergency,

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