

# Creating Community Garden Networks

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## Introduction

Community garden networks are useful tools to support the development of sustainable community and school gardens within a given geographic area. Network members include individuals, groups, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies linked together to facilitate the sharing of gardening information, educational opportunities, and funding resources.

## Network Models

A network can initially be formed as a directory of community and/or school garden sites that lists the location, basic information, and contact person(s) for each site. At this basic level of organization, members can be either passive or active in the network. An individual or group may volunteer to maintain an online garden directory for the network on an accessible web site.

Networks can also function as an association of community and/or school gardeners with common interests and goals. A nonprofit organization or government agency may agree to facilitate the network as part of its broader mission. In this model, network members are offered opportunities to actively participate in a list serv, educational workshops, or networking events.

At a higher level, a network may form as a coalition of community and/or school gardeners, garden coordinators, and representatives of partner groups such as Master Gardeners. The network can operate under the umbrella of a nonprofit or government agency, or it may exist as a separate nonprofit organization. As a visible entity, the network actively pursues funding and resources to help support participating gardens. In this model, network members work in partnership to advance both the network and their own community garden projects. The American Community Gardening Association at [www.communitygarden.org](http://www.communitygarden.org) is an example of an independent membership-based nonprofit network.

## Benefits of Community Garden Networks

Within a community garden network, people and projects are connected via an information and communication system maintained by a network coordinator or by a facilitating organization. The network can support individual members and their garden projects by:

- increasing awareness and visibility for established community-based gardens
- offering help and mentoring for new community and school gardens
- providing up-to-date information on gardening and community events
- connecting community garden projects with prospective volunteers
- organizing educational workshops and conferences
- promoting community gardens through publications and the media
- sharing information about grants and funding opportunities
- securing funding for mini-grants and technical assistance
- advocating for public policies that support community and school gardens

## Examples of Community and School Garden Networks

**The Kingston Community Garden Network** was established by the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG) in 2005. The network was formed to support existing community gardens in Kingston, inspire new community gardens, and help residents find gardening opportunities. KCGN's major project is the maintenance of a website at [www.web.ca/~opirgin/KCGN.htm](http://www.web.ca/~opirgin/KCGN.htm), which includes a directory of community gardens, gardening events, and contact information. Organizers have solicited ideas for additional projects including a member newsletter, garden workshops, and fundraisers.

**The Toronto Community Garden Network** supports the community gardening movement in the City of Toronto, which has more than ninety community garden sites. TCGN is sponsored by FoodShare and receives support from several organizations including the Toronto Food Policy Council. TCGN hosts garden workshops, publishes an email newsletter, and sponsors seasonal events including "Seedy Saturday," a summer community garden tour, and a fall harvest celebration. The Network negotiates discounts through garden retailers and is working to develop a resource center. Information on TCGN is listed on the FoodShare web site at [www.foodshare.net/train09.htm](http://www.foodshare.net/train09.htm).

**The Community Food and Garden Network** of Madison, Wisconsin works to strengthen food and gardening partnerships that include youth, seniors, and people with special needs. CFGN is a division of the Community Action Coalition for South Central Wisconsin. The CFGN web site at [www.cacscw.org/gardens/cfgn](http://www.cacscw.org/gardens/cfgn) includes resource links, an events calendar, and a member list serv. CFGN's accomplishments include creating opportunities for gardeners with disabilities, hosting an accessible garden conference, and organizing an educator workshop focused on school gardening.

**The California School Garden Network** launched in 2006 as a collaborative effort between resource organizations and educators. CSGN is a nonprofit whose members represent state agencies, private companies, educational institutions, and organizations dedicated to creating and sustaining gardens in every willing school in California. CSGN serves as a central organization to distribute school garden resources and support. The CSGN web site at [www.csgn.org](http://www.csgn.org) includes extensive curriculum resources, links, a partner directory, and information on grants, research, policy, trainings, and events.

**The Australian Community Garden Network** was organized in 1996 to create a country-wide network of people interested in community gardens, city farms, urban agriculture and community education centers. In forming the ACGN, contact people were identified in Australian states to provide information on community gardens and to serve as a reference for inquirers. The ACGN maintains a comprehensive web site at [www.communitygarden.au](http://www.communitygarden.au) and partners with Australian Community Foods to maintain an online community garden directory. ACGN member volunteers are active in documenting the development of community gardens in Australia, coordinating list servs, advocating for community gardens, providing advice to local groups, and organizing a national conference.

**The Vermont Community Garden Network** launched in 2005 to create a statewide garden network, conferences and workshops, and publish a directory of community-based gardens hosted on the [www.burlingtongardens.org](http://www.burlingtongardens.org) web site. As of early 2009, the VCGN has grown to involve more than 700 participating members representing 150 Vermont communities. Members are connected via the web site and a list serv highlighting garden news, resources, and events. From 2006-2009, Friends of Burlington Gardens has provided technical assistance and mini-grants to support 125 community-based garden projects statewide to help community and school gardens obtain signs, fences, bulletin boards, top soil, compost, tool sheds, and water systems.

## The Story of the Vermont Community Garden Network

During winter 2004, organizers in Burlington, Vermont began discussing whether the community garden movement in Vermont was ready to enter a new stage of growth. Anecdotal reports indicated that community and school gardens were springing up in small towns and cities across the state. Yet little information was available about these gardens, which were often initiated by Master Gardeners, 4-H Club leaders, teachers, and community volunteers.

At the summer 2004 board meeting of Friends of Burlington Gardens (FBG), a vision was shared for the creation of a statewide network of community, school, and neighborhood gardens. Establishing the network would involve research to determine the scope of community gardening in Vermont, together with coordination to link community garden leaders, sites, programs, and partners together.

As the first step toward achieving the vision, a joint resolution was passed by the Vermont Legislature in April 2004. The resolution supported the expansion of community and school gardening statewide and recognized the efforts of nonprofit partners and agencies including Friends of Burlington Gardens, the UVM Extension Master Gardener program, Vermont Recreation and Parks Association, 4-H Growing Connections, Foodworks, and the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger.

To spur interest within the gardening community, Friends of Burlington Gardens organized the Vermont Community and School Garden Expo held at Gardener's Supply on February 5, 2005. Nearly 100 people attended the Expo to gather resources and meet other like-minded community organizers and educators. The Expo proved successful in helping to catalyze the formation of several new community, youth, and school garden projects in the Burlington area during the summer of 2005.

By fall 2005, Friends of Burlington Gardens was at a crossroads. As a grassroots nonprofit, it was challenging to generate enough revenues through small grants, community events, and fundraising to sustain a full time executive director and a range of local gardening programs. Yet at the same time, the demand for community and school gardens was growing, as were requests for technical assistance from garden organizers within and outside of the Burlington area.

In November 2005, the FBG staff and board refocused the organization's mission by seeking funding to establish and facilitate the Vermont Community Garden Network (VCGN). The new network would help to support a range of community garden projects in Vermont, with a special focus on underserved groups including at risk youth, seniors, and people with disabilities. The first step was to identify and create a statewide directory of community and school gardens on the [www.burlingtongardens.org](http://www.burlingtongardens.org) web site, together with on line resources for garden organizers.

In 2006, Friends of Burlington Gardens received grant funding from The Bay and Paul Foundations, the Windham Foundation, and the New England Grassroots Environmental Fund to establish the Vermont Community Garden Network, provide mini-grants for school and community gardens. FBG launched the VCGN at the Vermont Community and School Garden Conference held February 4, 2006 in Burlington and attended by 100 participants from across the state. During the spring and summer, \$10,000 in mini-grants was awarded to support 48 community and school garden projects statewide.

Four regional VCGN symposia were held in 2007 in Burlington, Rutland, Springfield, and Newport to provide opportunities for mini-grant recipients to share the stories of their gardens. With support from the Ben & Jerry's Foundation and The Bay and Paul Foundations, FBG awarded \$12,000 in mini-grants in 2007 to support 30 school-based gardens and 30 community-based gardens.

In collaboration with VCGN members, the Community Gardens for Vermont Conference was held on March 8, 2008 at Vermont Technical College, with 55 participants attending despite an ice storm. On April 12, 2008, Friends of Burlington Gardens collaborated with Food Works, UVM Extension, and 4-H Growing Connections to host the Vermont School and Youth Garden Conference held at Vermont Law School and attended by 70 participants. With support from Ben & Jerry's Foundation, The Bay and Paul Foundations, the Vermont Community Foundation, and Ronald McDonald House Charities, FBG awarded \$17,500 in mini-grants in 2008 to support 30 school-based gardens, 25 allotment style community gardens, and six youth gardens.

From its inception, the VCGN has highlighted the role of community and school gardens in fostering food security and encouraging the production and consumption of fresh vegetables, while reducing reliance on food sources from outside the state. Expanding access to community gardens is viewed by Friends of Burlington Gardens as a critical means to address the food-related problems of hunger, malnutrition, and obesity, while also engaging Vermonters in healthy recreation.

Gardens created and sustained by community residents increase food security while yielding a host of social, economic, recreational, and educational benefits. Community gardens have long been a traditional means by which low and middle income have produced fresh, wholesome, inexpensive food. Unfortunately, the skills and knowledge associated with gardening have been on the decline in recent years, at the same time that rates of obesity and hunger are rising dramatically. Community and school gardens have helped to bridge this gap, while encouraging participants to develop a sense of place, intergenerational ties, and a strong connection to the land.

Education is the key to ensuring that K-12 Vermont students have hands-on opportunities to not only learn where their food comes from, but to actually grow food and share this fundamental experience with others through service-learning. By matching the principles of community empowerment with the best practices of service-learning, students and adults will plan and design gardens that meet genuine community needs and are sustainable over time.

As new gardens are developed across Vermont, our state and its residents are becoming more self-reliant and less dependent on distant food sources. Agricultural and educational policies are beginning to take into account the role that gardens play in a sustainable community. The Vermont Community Garden Network is working to ensure that connections grow between school and community gardeners across the state. Development of a strong garden network, that can provide technical assistance, mini-grants, and professional development opportunities, will empower grassroots change in communities.

For more information on the Vermont Community Garden Network, please visit the Friends of Burlington Gardens web site at [www.burlingtongardens.org](http://www.burlingtongardens.org).