

Community Gardens by Rebecca Miller-Cripps

In these times of social and economic change, many people are interested in growing some of their own food. Reasons for growing food are as individual as the people doing the gardening. Motivations range from a desire to be more self-sufficient, the joy of picking something you've grown yourself, and becoming "more green," to attempting to reduce the amount of fossil fuels required to move food from one place to another. There's also the better taste and improved quality of grown-on-site produce. Think of the taste of homegrown tomatoes, celebrated in a song by that title written by Guy Clark and performed by local musical group Doodoo Wah.

Whatever the reason, many people are expressing interest in developing or participating in community gardens. Churches, neighbors, schools, and employees are all groups that can develop a community garden. Some gardens are designed to provide produce for food banks, some community gardens rent spaces where anyone can garden, and some are simply loose affiliations of neighbors.

Community gardens have been a response to economic downturn since the late 1800s. According to the Georgia Street Community Garden website, located in Detroit, Michigan, community gardens started as a way for city residents to grow their own food during a depression from 1892 to 1897. Originally called "Pingree's Potato Patches," urban gardens developed when Detroit Mayor Hazen S. Pingree called upon owners of vacant city lots to allow unemployed residents to grow vegetables there. In the first year, the city of Detroit invested \$3000 in the urban gardening program and resident gardeners harvested \$12,000 worth of vegetables and potatoes, saving the city \$9000 in relief costs.

If you are interested in developing a community garden, first organize the group of gardeners who will use the land. Identify a space for the garden and contact the owner (if not a part of the group) to obtain use of the land. Start gathering supplies and developing a garden structure (for example, materials for raised beds, if desired; water supply and irrigation; sources of organic matter and fertilizer). Now is the time to plant summer vegetables. **For information on soil and water management and appropriate planting times, contact the UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener office at 533-5696.**

Currently, many organizations offer information about community gardening:

- Ventura County Cooperative Extension hosts a Victory grower website at <http://groups.ucanr.org/victorygrower/> with extensive blogs and references to food safety, food security, and local food production.
- Los Angeles County Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners at <http://celosangeles.ucdavis.edu> offer a primer on how to start a community garden. Just click on the "Common Ground/Master Gardeners" link. The program goals of their community gardens are "to improve nutrition; increase access to fresh, low-cost produce; offer gardening education; build bridges between neighbors and communities; help create employment opportunities; and encourage cleaner, greener" communities.

- The American Community Gardening Association also hosts a website: <http://communitygarden.org>. Click on “Start a Community Garden” for a complete set of guidelines.
- Plant-A-Row for the Hungry, a program developed by the Garden Writers Association, encourages home gardeners to grow an extra row of produce and donate it to local food banks, soup kitchens, and service organizations to help feed America's hungry.” For more information, go to www.gardenwriters.org and click on the “Plant a Row for the Hungry” logo. If you have produce to donate, please call the ATCAA Food Bank at 984-3960 for drop-off times and locations.

There is growing interest in Tuolumne County to form a collaborative network of individuals, community gardens, organizations and landowners all working to grow food. Stay tuned for future developments. If you wish to start a community garden and would like to have a Master Gardener provide advice, at no charge, call 533-5696.

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