

# Guide to Growing Organic Food In an Intercultural Community Garden

Welcome to your community garden – a good place to grow food and a great place to grow community.

A community garden can be used by different people at different times as a farm, a school, a playground, a temple, a gym, a stage, a picnic spot and a nature park – sometimes all in the same day.

Just like each community, every community garden is different. The most successful community gardens are models for their surrounding societies, demonstrating values such as cooperation, volunteerism, respect for diversity and ecological awareness.

An intercultural community garden gets immigrants and Canadian-born people working together towards the same goal. Although the available crops and growing methods vary from place to place, the love of gardening reaches every culture and provides a bond through which people can learn, share and grow.

In British Columbia, many community gardens are considered “organic.” This guide was written to help explain organic gardening in an intercultural community garden to newcomers and anyone else interested in growing their own food together with neighbours.



## Yes, but...

*What if I don't know how to grow anything?*

*Then you're going to love community gardening. It's a good place to learn – from other gardeners! Gardeners everywhere are generous people. Even if language is a barrier, you can use non-verbal communication.*



# What is Organic?

People who grow organic food use natural farming methods. For us, this means no synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. Organic gardeners work with nature (making their soil into a healthy ecosystem) rather than against it (killing everything with pesticides and then adding artificial fertilizer).



Growing your own organic vegetables, fruit and herbs helps build a healthy body and a healthy planet. It's also how people have traditionally farmed for more than 10,000 years. Even those who have never planted a seed before can grow their own food (fortunately, the seed knows what to do). You just need to provide the requirements all plants need to do what they do naturally – grow.

How do you grow organic food?

Think like a plant. What do you need?

- Sunlight – at least six hours of direct sun a day is recommended, but leafy greens can get by with less. In places like Vancouver, which is often cloudy, sunlight can come from various directions thanks to reflected light.
- Water – plants drink through their roots, not their leaves, so water deeply enough to soak the soil, especially when your seeds or seedlings are new.
- Nutrients – plants eat sunshine, an amazing scientific phenomenon called photosynthesis that supports all life on earth. But they need certain nutrients to carry this out. The main three are nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium,

known as N-P-K. Vegetables take these nutrients out of the soil to grow, which then must be replaced. Mixing animal manure or another type of organic fertilizer into your soil in spring may be enough to last the year, but it can help to also lightly feed your soil throughout the growing season. Add a small amount of organic fertilizer such as fish meal or kelp twice a month as your plants mature to help ensure a good harvest. Compost, which you can make yourself from uncooked food waste, is an excellent source of organic matter to add to your soil, especially if your compost pile includes worms which will make it nutrient-rich.

## Shady Characters

*Urban areas crowded with buildings and trees often limit the availability of sunny spots to garden. Leafy things to grow in shady areas include lettuce, spinach, kale, chard and oriental greens.*

*Also consider crops such as broccoli, beets, carrots and turnips that may grow slower without direct sunlight but will eventually reward your patience with food.*

# Planting Seeds

It isn't difficult to plant seeds – nature does it all the time without our help. Seed packages include directions on proper timing, depth and spacing between seeds. Or ask a gardener friend for help.

- Plant in loose, fertile soil warm enough for the particular seed
- Plant as deeply as the package says – usually about three times the width of seed
- Plant as far apart as the package says – leaving space for mature plants
- Cover planted seeds with thin layer of fine soil, press firmly
- Water gently so the seeds aren't moved
- Keep soil moist until the plants develop



# Transplanting Seedlings

*Some plants, such as tomatoes, are best planted indoors in early spring and then transplanted outside when it's warm. Starting indoors is an excellent way to expand your gardening activities. You can also buy seedlings from garden centres. Choose seedlings that are healthy and appropriately sized in their planting pot -- not necessarily the largest.*

- *dig a hole about the same size as the pot*
- *ease the plant out (don't pull on the stem) and place it gently in the hole*
- *refill with the same soil*
- *press firmly on soil to keep the plant in place and eliminate large air pockets*
- *water thoroughly*



# Growing Food in Vancouver

Our mild weather and rich soils in the coastal area of British Columbia offer some of the best growing conditions on the planet, so your crop choices are many. The first step towards deciding what to grow may be to ask yourself: what do I love to eat?

To find out if your favourite foods can be grown here, look at a seed catalog such as the one from West Coast Seeds ([www.westcoastseeds.com](http://www.westcoastseeds.com)), talk to other gardeners about what they grow each year, get some of your favourite seeds sent from abroad (yes, this is legal for small-scale growers), and, perhaps best of all, experiment.



Some easy-to-grow selections to get you started include:

- Beans
- Beets
- Broccoli
- Chives
- Corn
- Cucumbers
- Garlic
- Kale
- Lettuce
- Radish
- Zucchini

More challenging selections (depending on the weather and more):

- Artichoke
- Asparagus
- Basil
- Brussels Sprouts
- Cauliflower
- Celery
- Eggplant
- Leeks
- Melons
- Peppers
- Soybeans

## Good Seeds

Ask your local garden store for organic, non-genetically-modified (non-GMO) seeds from sources such as Saltspring Seeds ([www.saltspringseeds.com](http://www.saltspringseeds.com)), Stellar Seeds ([www.stellarseeds.com](http://www.stellarseeds.com)) and West Coast Seeds.

You can also join organized seed swaps held each spring (check community events in your local newspaper) or trade seeds you've saved among neighbours. A valuable website to learn more about seeds and the importance of saving heritage vegetables is Seeds of Diversity: [www.seeds.ca](http://www.seeds.ca)

Local Planting Chart adapted from West Coast Seeds catalogue

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
<b>BEANS</b>												
<b>BEETS</b>												
<b>BROAD BEANS</b>												
<b>BROCCOLI</b>		(seed inside-mar)										
<b>CABBAGE</b>		(seed inside-mar)										
<b>CARROTS</b>												
<b>CELERY</b>		(seed inside-mar-may)										
<b>CILANTRO</b>												
<b>CUCUMBERS</b>		(seed inside-may)										
<b>GARLIC</b>												
<b>KALE</b>												
<b>LEEKS</b>		(seed inside-feb-mar)										
<b>LETTUCE</b>		(seed inside-mar)								(cover sep)		
<b>ONIONS</b>												
<b>ASIAN GREENS</b>												
<b>SPINACH</b>												
<b>SQUASH</b>												
<b>TOMATOES</b>		(seed inside-mar-may)										

## When Can I Start?

One of the best things about living in Vancouver is the fact that we can grow food year-round. Yes, in January you can harvest fresh organic greens or root vegetables.

To harvest food in winter you must plant wisely in summer. Some crops, such as leeks and Brussels sprouts, may be started indoors as early as spring for transplanting in summer and harvesting in winter. Others, including kale, broccoli, turnip and cabbage, can be seeded directly into the soil in July and August. Fast-growers such as lettuce, spinach and radish can be tried at the end of the summer season with the hope that the winter frosts won't come too early. If you can get your plants to reach a mature size by Hallowe'en (the end of October), they should be hardy enough to survive the winter.

Why grow year-round?

- Fewer pests and weeds
- Less watering and maintenance
- Plants protect soil
- Green over-winter crops (clover, fall rye, vetch, etc.) rebuild soil fertility

## Natural Pest Control

Work with nature to build a healthy ecosystem in your garden. Using pesticides can destroy beneficial insects that eat predators. Try for a healthy balance in your living ecosystem. Remember that a handful of soil contains as many living organisms as there are people on earth. Some organic ways to deal with garden pests and weeds:

- Aphids –blast with water, spray with garlic-pepper, use insecticidal soap
- Slugs – hand pick, deter with copper, trap with fruit/ beer/ board and destroy
- Powdery mildew – spray with 50% milk solution
- Weeds – hand pull, scald with hot water, spray with vinegar, cover with mulch

# Community Gardeners Grow Community

Good ground and good ground rules. Rules help community gardeners understand their rights and responsibilities.

Clear rules from the beginning can prevent disputes later over member dues, plot assignments, regular maintenance tasks and meeting responsibilities. Think of them as accepted codes of behaviour, like traffic laws, that make life easier for everyone. Remember that people are more likely to follow guidelines they've helped create themselves.

Most community garden groups form non-profit societies that write their own bylaws to help things go smoothly. Every member of the group is responsible to keep the gardens in good shape and to take care of the group as well. The most successful community gardens are run by a great group of "doer" people who get engaged.



## Talk it Over

*Good communication is vital if you hope to build a strong community garden organization. Form a telephone tree; create an email list; start an internet chat group; install a rainproof bulletin board on site; have regular social events, workshops and celebrations that draw people together. Community gardens are all about creating and strengthening communities, so remember to pass the word on.*



## Two-legged Pests?

Thieves are a problem in many urban gardens, although not to the degree some fear. Thieves do less damage than common nuisances such as slugs and aphids. But it's still vexing when a favourite plant gets taken. Consider some of the following anti-theft tactics:

- More people = fewer opportunities for crime. Try to minimize times when the gardens have no “eyes on the crops,” particularly near harvests. Schedule events, coordinate visits, have volunteers keep watch. If your garden is in view of nearby homes, make sure the residents know who you are.
- Hide your prize plants. Most thieves are opportunists. They won't dig through straw to uncover a squash. Yellow tomatoes are just as tasty but less tempting than red ones. Plant easy-to-grab desirable foods (such as raspberries) behind less enticing crops like parsnips.
- Agree on prevention measures before problems arise. Work out a common strategy to question suspicious visitors. Thieves hate a place where people talk to them. Try, “Can I help you find the plot you're looking for?” Or “Would you like to sign our waiting list to join us?”
- Keep the area tidy. Fallen fruit, overripe vegetables and general disarray send a message that no one cares. A well-managed site is more difficult to steal from because the crime is obvious.
- Put up a sign. A reminder not to steal with a description of who the gardeners are (“volunteers from your community”) may convince those with a conscience. Some nibblers actually believe they can help themselves to food in a community garden because they're part of the community until they read the sign!
- Grow a variety of crops so you won't lose a season's bounty to one sack-toting thief.



# Why Grow Food in an Intercultural Community Garden?

- preserve green spaces
- reduce crime
- create economic opportunities
- reduce “food miles” from farm to plate
- enhance biodiversity
- provide urban recreation
- reduce stormwater runoff
- reintroduce “the commons”
- provide youth training
- teach organic practices
- bring together diverse neighbours
- lower family budgets
- encourage self-reliance
- create welcoming neighbourhoods
- localize the food system
- promote intercultural exchange
- enhance civil society
- boost community development
- conserve valuable resources
- promote intergenerational communication



The **Intercultural Community Gardens Project** is a partnership between the YMCA of Greater Vancouver’s Connections Program, the West End Residents Association and the Gordon Neighbourhood House.

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