

# Cultivating community

## Growing food, connections with local gardens

**A** once-vacant field in **Park Township** (Ottawa Co.) has transformed into what is now a community gathering place.

Since 2009, the township's community garden has attracted visitors throughout the warm summers. Retirees bring their grandchildren to pull weeds and learn about how green beans, peas and tomatoes are grown. Families bike to the garden to eat picnic lunches in the peaceful setting. Residents who were once strangers now chat as they harvest their produce side by side.

Recreation Director **Daniele Dykens** spends a few hours a week each summer overseeing the 101 raised plots that sit on a section of township land next to the Park Township Airport. The gardeners contribute a small fee for each plot they use, and in turn, the township provides water and mows the grass in between the plots.

The garden is not a money-maker for the township—each year, Park Township about breaks even. However, Dykens said she and the township officials believe it's a worthwhile investment. Now in its fifth growing season, the garden has not only connected residents to each other and to their township government, it has also boosted the health and fitness levels of participants. It's also beautified a field that would otherwise sit empty.

Park Township is far from the only Michigan township in the garden business. In recent years, the community garden movement has exploded throughout the country. Essentially, they are pieces of land gardened by a group of people who either take home their own produce or share it among the group or community. While some were started in response to the economic recession, many are done in an effort to grow food locally, often without pesticides and chemicals. Townships are finding ways to provide their residents with a place where they can grow their own produce, whether it's on township grounds or a leased piece of land. Some township employees are heading up their garden projects, while others seek out partners or interested residents to take the lead.

Their gardens are different sizes, and their organizational structure may vary widely, but the end result is largely the same—healthier residents and a better use of public spaces.

### **Community gardens—a pure Michigan tradition**

Though community gardens have surged in recent popularity, they're certainly not new. They got their start more than a century ago, right here in Michigan.





Historically, community gardens were responses to food shortages, economic hard times and crises such as wars. The first gardens appeared in 1890s Detroit as a way to provide land and technical assistance to unemployed workers. The gardens also served as a lesson in civics and hard work for young people.

Then, in 1918, community gardens were used as a tool to expand the domestic food supply during World War I. The Great Depression sparked an explosion of community gardening, allowing those without jobs to grow their own food. State and local agencies even provided garden plots for some people as well as employment in cooperative gardening.

With the start of World War II came the Victory Garden campaign by the U.S. government. Citizens were encouraged to grow their own food as the government rationed items like sugar, milk and eggs, and labor shortages made it difficult to transport fruit and vegetables. Nearly 20 million Americans planted gardens, many of which disappeared when the war ended.

Community gardens saw a rebirth in the 1970s in response to rising inflation and growing concerns for the environment. The movement also helped citizens get to know their neighbors and beautify unsightly vacant lots.

The more recent gardening movement coincides with tough economic times. However, Alex Bryan, garden project

manager of the Greater Lansing Food Bank Garden Project, believes this particular movement is broader and has more staying power. Besides supplementing their income, modern produce gardeners are passionate about improving their overall health and well-being. They're interested in where their food comes from, and they want more control over how it's grown.

"I think unlike the cyclical patterns of recession times, today's interest in local food is more of a long-term trend," Bryan said.

### **Why community gardens?**

In some municipalities, community gardens have become the new town square. The shared green space is a place where residents can connect with one another, especially in areas where parks aren't plentiful. Residents get to know one another as well as their township officials and personnel who are involved in the garden.

Community gardens are also known to improve the areas around them, especially in more urban settings. The plants and greenery spruce up vacant lots and turn eyesores into attractive places where people want to be. Studies have shown that community gardens serve as a deterrent of crime and litter, with more residents outside keeping an eye on streets. Scientific evidence has even proven that as green space increases in a neighborhood, crime decreases.

# cover story

Surrounding property values are known to increase, bringing an added tax benefit to the local unit of government. Municipal land also becomes more low maintenance and less costly when used for community gardens, since the bulk of the maintenance is done by the gardeners.

For some residents, a community garden is their only option for growing fruits and vegetables. Men and women living in apartments or retirement homes may not have a plot of ground where they are allowed to plant a garden. Homeowners might not have a yard large enough to accommodate a garden, or it might be too shaded for plants to grow.

In Park Township, the soil is just too sandy for most gardens, and ample tree cover makes for less-than-ideal growing conditions. So, the township built raised beds filled with high-quality soil and manure as a solution.

Community gardens also offer a way for inexperienced gardeners to sow their first seeds and successfully grow vegetables. They have the opportunity to learn from fellow township residents who are more seasoned gardeners as they work side by side. Some communities even bring in master gardeners to offer advice.

Residents who take advantage of the community garden bring home a bounty of fresh vegetables for much less money than they might spend on a trip to the grocery store. One

study estimates that, on average, community gardeners spend between \$75 and \$380 less on food each growing season.

At the same time, they're also improving their health. One survey of Flint residents found that only 17.8 percent of those without a garden ate fruits and vegetables at least five times a day. Among gardeners, the number nearly doubled to 32.4 percent.

Gardeners also improve their physical fitness without even realizing it. Activities such as pulling weeds, digging with shovels and hauling water burn calories while also toning muscles and increasing flexibility.

Health was the main objective when **Cheryl Debano** helped start a community garden in **Norman Township** (Manistee Co.). At the time, she worked at her local health department and was involved in a program that encouraged women to have cancer screenings, lose weight and improve their overall wellness. Gardening was a way for the women to have easy access to fresh produce without stretching their household budgets. It worked so well for them that after a season of renting space in a Manistee garden, they asked Debano if she could help them start one in Norman Township.

"It's empowering for them to know that a \$2 pack of seeds can lead to a small change in their lives," Debano said.

## What the law says

Townships are authorized to adopt ordinances to regulate and protect public health, safety and welfare. A township may also establish parks and places for public recreation. Community gardens can serve to advance both goals, according to an opinion by MTA Legal Counsel Bauckham, Sparks, Lohrstorfer, Thall and Seeber P.C. For this reason, community gardens can be planted on township land as the land is being used to advance legitimate township objectives. A township should consider if establishing and/or supporting a community garden is a goal that the township wants to pursue. Land used for a community garden must comply with a township's zoning ordinance, if one exists. If the township zoning ordinance doesn't allow for community garden uses, the township can consider amending the zoning ordinance to permit such use.

The law firm also believes townships can decide to run or administer the community garden itself, whether it's through the parks department or by assigning project oversight to a particular township official or employee. Townships could also enter into an agreement with a community garden organization to run the garden. If the garden is on township land, the firm recommends that the township consider entering into a lease agreement with that organization.

Townships that run or provide land for a community garden may also consider adopting rules and regulations for the operation of those gardens. For instance, while residents from other communities could be included in the garden, townships can give preference to township residents who want to use garden plots since township resources such as staff and water are being used.

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Volunteers are an integral part of the leadership and administration for the Chocolay Community Garden (pictured above), in Chocolay Charter Township (Marquette Co.).

## Getting started

The push for a community garden is often started by interested residents, but township officials can just as easily lead the way. Bryan recommends starting the planning process at least by the fall the year before planting season.

A township that decides to start a garden must start with three top priorities—leadership, a site and resources such as water. Each of the three is essential in the garden’s success.

In some cases, it might make sense for a township official, employee or department to take charge of the garden. For other communities, residents who are experienced gardeners might make the best leaders. Either way, Bryan said, creating a team of leaders is the best way to ensure a garden’s ongoing success. A garden led by one person could collapse if that leader moves out of the community, and no one takes his or her place.

Leadership in **Chocolay Charter Township** (Marquette Co.) started with the planning and zoning department, but community volunteers are integrally involved. Director **Kelly Drake Woodward**, with the assistance of township administrative staff and Chocolay Community Garden board members, oversees the leasing of plots each year. The garden board of directors is elected annually by Chocolay Community Garden members. The board is charged with making decisions such as scheduling work days, enforcing rules and overseeing administrative duties.

In Norman Township, Debano shared the lead with others in the community and helped organize the garden in her spare time. Now, she’s passed the reins on to another volunteer, **Sandy Moore**. Debano also worked with other groups, such as the county health department, Manistee Community Kitchen and even the local Home Depot, in the early phases to help get the garden started.

Whoever leads the community garden doesn’t necessarily need to be an expert gardener, Bryan said. Other skills, such as conflict resolution, managing volunteers and navigating community resources, are more crucial, especially in the start-up phase. Experienced gardeners can always be brought in later to provide their knowledge and assistance.

“Most people think, I need to know how to grow food. Really, for some of our best garden leaders, those skills don’t

matter at all,” Bryan said. “It comes down to how good they are with people and how well they can organize.”

Just as important is finding an ideal spot for growing plants. The perfect site is one that gets a minimum of six hours of direct sunlight each day in the spring, summer and fall. The ground should be somewhat flat and, if possible, should be within walking distance or a short drive from the people who are intended to use it. It is also recommended that the garden be easily visible in order to encourage safety and attract more support from neighbors.

One consideration is how the site has been used in the past, especially in urban areas. Bryan always recommends having the soil tested to be sure that it isn’t contaminated. This can be done easily through the Michigan State University Extension, with directions found at [www.msusoiltest.com](http://www.msusoiltest.com). If the soil turns out to be contaminated, the best option may be to build raised beds filled with soil that is brought to the site.

Some townships choose to use municipal land, while others lease land with another entity. In Chocolay Charter Township, the community garden was originally planned for a township recreation area, but those plans were eventually scrapped over a variety of concerns. Woodward was wondering what to do until one day, while working in the recreation area, she noticed a flat, sunny yard next to a church.

“I looked across the street and thought, wow, now there’s a spot that’s perfect for a garden,” Woodward said.

The church loved the idea and put together a five-year lease agreement, with rent costing just \$1 per year. The agreement also stipulated that if the garden disbanded, the township was responsible for cleaning it up.

A lease agreement is recommended any time the township uses land that it does not own. Garden leaders must also make sure that the land they use has the proper zoning to be used for a community garden.

The third priority is a key element for growing plants—water. Community gardens can’t count on rain to provide a sufficient amount of water. The chosen site must have some kind of access, whether it’s a municipal water hook-up or an on-site well. To avoid wasting water, Bryan urges gardeners to fill barrels with water, then dip watering cans or buckets into them each time they water their plants.

Gardens using municipal water will need to decide how this cost will be paid. Some townships may choose to cover the cost, while others will use garden plot rental fees to pay the water bill.

## What do you want to be?

With the basic priorities in place, community garden leaders should sketch out a plan of what they want their garden to be and how it should be run. The group should consider whether they want raised beds or ground plots, and how many plots they should have. Members should decide how they will distribute the plots, and whether any plots will be reserved for specific purposes, such as a children’s garden, a food pantry garden or a communal plot from which anyone can eat.

Leaders must also think through the basic logistics of running the garden each year. Issues to consider include how the garden will get started each year, whether to charge plot



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rental fees and should there be a required number of work days for gardeners.

Many garden leaders create a set of rules stating the consequences for untended beds and when plots must be cleaned out for the winter. This could be done in formal bylaws, or in a simple set of rules given to gardeners when they rent a plot.

Frequently, community gardens are organic, meaning no chemicals of any kind are allowed. However, your garden may choose to take a more lenient approach. Your garden philosophy depends on the priorities of your leadership and stakeholders.

## Creative resources

Many community gardens charge some sort of rental fee for using each plot, with fees averaging in the range of \$20 to \$35 per plot. However, start-up money is usually needed in order to build beds, haul in soil and, in some cases, provide equipment such as rakes and shovels.

Chocolay Charter Township started its garden thanks to a grant from two Rotary clubs. In Norman Township, the gardeners took out a loan from a local nonprofit, which they repaid with the plot rental money they received each season.

Partnerships can also lead to donations of volunteer hours, a commodity that can be just as valuable as money. Multiple Michigan townships have found Boy Scout troops, especially scouts working toward their Eagle Scout distinction, to be incredible resources. Both Park Township and Chocolay Charter Township partnered with their local Boy Scouts to prepare their garden sites for their first planting season. One boy even built a pagoda in Park Township's garden for his Eagle Scout project.

Norman Township found unexpected partners when Team Depot, Home Depot's Ludington volunteer group, offered their assistance to the Manistee Community Kitchen. The team was then referred to Norman Township. Not only did the store donate plants and offer a discount on nails, lumber and plastic, but it also asked DeBano if she could use an extra hand. Before she knew it, four workers headed to the garden. In a matter of hours one Saturday, they'd built 12 garden beds high enough to be reached from a wheelchair, and filled them with soil and fertilizer.

"It worked out great to have them working with the people of our township," DeBano said. "I'm so proud of everybody."

## Gathering community buy-in

A community garden can't succeed if the only people passionate about the idea are township officials. Township residents must support the garden in order for it to get off the ground.

"I think it's amazing how much shaking hands with the neighbors does for the interpersonal relationships of the neighborhood," Bryan said.

Garden leaders should first make sure that those who live near the planned garden know about it. Bryan suggests knocking on doors, hanging up fliers and posting notices in your local newspaper or community newsletter. Contacting neighborhood associations is an easy way to reach a large number of people. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter can also help you spread the word to the entire community.

Key groups in the community should be brought into the conversation. This could range from gardening clubs to hardware stores to the local food pantry. Organizers should brainstorm possible stakeholders to ensure that no one is left out. Some organizations might even be willing to help support your garden.

Spreading the word can also help you to reach potential gardeners. When news of the garden got out in Chocolay Charter Township, Woodward was inundated by residents who were tired of trying to grow vegetables in their sandy soil and wanted to use the township beds. Even neighboring **Sands Township** (Marquette Co.) wanted to be included



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and got permission from the community garden board to participate.

It's possible that some neighbors might not like the idea of a garden being built near their home. In these cases, Bryan takes the time to listen to their concerns and see what he can do to address them. Many times, their concerns are based on misconceptions that are easily clarified. Other concerns may require a compromise by the garden.

### Weeding out the challenges

For as many benefits as community gardens bring, there are also a few challenges. Typical gardening issues, such as insects, diseases and animals eating produce, are common. Experienced gardeners in the group may be able to offer advice to fight these problems.

More unique to community gardens is theft of fruits and vegetables. Barriers such as fences may not be an option in some locations, so gardeners turn to other alternatives. Norman Township decided to counter this issue by planting what DeBano calls a "thieves' garden." Each year, one plot is planted with tomatoes, peppers and other desirable produce, and the community is encouraged to pick from it. If residents have an option for free fruits and vegetables, they may be less likely to steal from a gardener's plot.

Bryan encourages gardens to plant natural barriers around the garden, such as raspberry bushes. Not only can passers-by pick from the bushes, but they might also be wary of walking through the thorny plants.

### Plant the seeds

Planting a garden doesn't fall under the usual list of duties for township government. Townships that have already taken the leap say it's an opportunity to lead their residents in a new way. Not only can township officials provide quality services, but they can also set an example of making a healthy lifestyle a priority.

The start-up process can help to instill the spirit of volunteerism and community pride in residents as they give of their time and resources to make the garden a reality. Later, as they garden plots together, residents grow to know one another and their township officials in ways not possible without the garden.

Woodward looks at Chocoley Charter Township's garden and feels proud of what officials and residents accomplished together.

"It makes you feel good about people," she said. "It rejuvenates you."



**Bethany Mauger**, MTA Staff Writer

An advertisement for MERS (Municipal Employees' Retirement System) set against a dark, chalkboard-like background. On the left, a cartoon blue dinosaur with white spots is shown from the chest up, looking upwards. Above its head is a thought bubble containing a question mark. The text on the right is written in a white, hand-drawn style. At the bottom, there are logos for MTA Webcast Sponsor, Allied Service Provider, and MERS itself, along with contact information.

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