

How to Organize a Community Garden

Notes from a presentation by Judy Tiger at the ‘Greening New Hampshire Ave.’ meeting (March 12, 2008)

Judy Tiger began working in community garden organizing in 1982 in Washington, D.C. and has for many years been at the forefront of the field in the Greater DC area. She was invited to this meeting for interested community members by the City of Takoma Park planning department.

A community garden can be anything you want it to be. It doesn’t have to be only individual plots for food crops: it can be for food, or beauty, or a mix of both. Gardens organized by a community can serve many purposes—education, relaxation, habitat, etc.

The creation of a garden, in organizational terms, should not be conceptualized as a linear sort of thing. It is not an engineering project, where every element can be neatly fit into a timeline. And some goals can be best reached indirectly (in community gardening, the fastest route between two points is not always a straight line).

More precisely, there are some elements that do lend themselves to linear, rational planning: e.g. getting permission from the land-owner must precede doing anything to the soil!

The social element of organizing a community gardening is key—and a prime example of what doesn’t happen through the linear, engineering approach.

To illustrate, Judy asked the audience members to raise their hands if they already had gardening experience. Or access to a truck. Or carpentry skills (etc.). “See? We are already a small community!” she said, noting the presence of so many complementary capabilities.

“Gardening is about the people—it is what comes out of people being together,” Judy said. In fact, community gardening is more about the people than it is about the plants.

Typical Worries

At the outset of a community gardening project, many people will express concern about the absence of some key factor, such as land, or a permit, and so forth. ‘We will miss the planting season!’ is a typical worry. Such calendar panic is misplaced. If people keep plugging away at it, they will catch up. There is something useful to do all year round.

Organizers will always be peppered with questions that seem to express doubts about feasibility. What about rats? What if someone steals food? Who pays? How big? Usually the right answer to these questions will be: ‘let’s discuss.’ These questions are just a normal part of the process. People think out loud.

Next. Having the support of neighborhood leaders is good, but not sufficient. The key is having enough people who actually want to *do* the gardening. Hence, the key task of the garden organizer is to make a continuous search for other leaders. And each of these seeks out their own circle. In principle, everyone should be a leader.

If a garden organizer asks someone else, “Do you want to help me do x?” the implication is that there is a leader and a follower. Better, says Judy, to ask: “What do *you* think?” Make it ‘our’ project.

Go around the neighborhood and knock on doors – invite people to meetings, survey them on their skills. When you find someone who is interested, ask them to knock on doors too. As an organizer, you need to find other people who can lead too. Ten interested people can knock on 20 doors and then find more interested people who knock on more doors...

Organizers should try to keep learning about gardening, whether from neighbors, fact sheets, garden centers ...

An Organizer needs to cheerlead, be patient, and keep (over and over) inviting people. Some people only take an invitation seriously on the seventh go-round. Especially important: *Don't complain in public! Complain at home.*

The Process

Every group has its Vision of the garden. And then there is the reality of what can happen in a single season. The actual process of gardening bounces back and forth between these two.

The Vision may describe: 35 plots, 25 apple trees, public art, a gathering place, a senior center, etc. This is all excellent and needed. Then one needs to ask: what can we do the first year? And most of all: what can we take care of?

Perhaps, having looked at it, the answer will be, ‘Let’s plant one tree.’ Fine. Make that planting a community event. Plant it. Then have a party. On another occasion, perhaps plant a small square with some perennials in the middle.

The more the people involved invest their time and work, the more they will bond as a group. The more they do both, the more others will be willing to support their work with additional financial (or other) resources.

What about money? People are often uncomfortable talking about money. Many feel that it is unfair to even raise the issue of (even minimal) garden membership dues. Judy feels that these concerns should be put to the side, and that it is important to ask what people are willing to invest in making the garden possible. The agreed amount can be small. But the fact of making an investment, Judy feels, is a strong way of providing a bond between

participants and the project. It 'invests' them in the garden. It encourages others to contribute as well.

Yes, some people may not be able to afford it. But Judy feels that it is wrong to just assume that people have simply zero resources. And that it is wrong to consider money a taboo subject. Assume instead, she said, that people all want to give.