
DEVELOPING A **COMMUNITY** GARDEN MINISTRY





When John Clark, Youth Pastor at Central Baptist Church in Ashland, Kentucky, realized that many of the diverse students in his ministry had never seen a cucumber — much less other kinds of vegetables and fruits — he suggested growing vegetables on the church’s Hope Central ministry property to teach children and teenagers to grow and cook them.

His plan allowed the church to mix science and nutrition into teachings on how to apply God’s Word daily.

With help from the Boyd County University of Kentucky Extension Office and local farmers, they started an urban garden program using box gardens. As the program progressed, Shelter of Hope, a housing ministry in Ashland, asked for help getting their residents started in gardening. Another church in the community donated land, and the first community resource garden was started.

When other community residents requested help developing small gardens in their yards, Hope Central created “pallet gardens” that could be planted inside pallet boxes and then delivered to homes. Recipients of these pallet gardens received several weeks of training through the community garden and then received regular follow-up at their homes, giving Hope Central an avenue for developing gospel-centered relationships within their community.

Over the years, the gardening program at Hope Central has continue to evolve and expand. A gardening program is already in operation at one elementary school in Ashland with 60 children participating, and another program is in the works for the middle school. Besides the schools that have been impacted, eight community and church gardens have also been developed, along with cooking classes for homeschool groups and a 12-week Bible study kit to help churches begin an agricultural gardening ministry.

Discover the Needs in your Community

Before you begin any new ministry, it is important to first take time to discover and understand the unique needs within your community. Explore the physical community, listen to and learn from people living and working in the area and seek God's guidance by prayer-driving and prayer-walking the neighborhood.

If preparing your church to develop a community gardening ministry is a need and desire within your congregation, keep reading! We have practical steps to help you get started.

To learn more about how to identify needs in your community, download [*How Can You Serve? An In-Depth Guide to Discovering Community Needs.*](#)

If not, [check out some of our other ministry guides](#) for opportunities that fit for your church's gifting and community's needs.





The Need for Churches to Develop Gardening Ministries in their Communities

The census' definition for poor is not having enough money to pay for even the barest of necessities.

In the United States, over 39.7 million people were reported as poor — that's 12.3 percent of the total population, or one out of eight Americans. That's down from 15.1 percent in 2001. Yet, the overall 2017 statistics on the poor are still above those of 2000. The census also found that “women had higher poverty rates than men and minorities had higher poverty rates than non-Hispanic whites.”¹ Further, the rate of senior adults in poverty (65 years or older) has grown to approximately 10 percent, and the rate of childhood poverty is around 17.5 percent. Children from a household headed by a mother or grandmother have a poverty rate around 50%.²

What the U.S. census reported as poor, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) calls “food insecurity,” meaning that members within the household do not have enough food to eat.³ The USDA found 15 million households fell into this category.⁴ Additionally, three times that number (45 million Americans) use food stamps to feed their families each month.⁵

When the food insecurity for children is considered, the situation is dire. One out of every six children in America will not know where his next meal will come from.⁶ Twenty-two million children in America participate in the free or reduced-price lunch programs at school. Of these, approximately three million do not receive breakfast either at home or at school.⁷ These children are at higher risk of developing health issues such as asthma, dealing with anxiety or depression and having little success in school and/or sports and physical activities.⁸

Community gardens are helping to meet the needs of the poor or the “food insecure” by providing home-grown food to these families, as well as creating opportunities for social interaction, relationship building and ultimately the sharing of the gospel. How can food grown in your garden meet the needs of the “food insecure” in your community?

1 “The Range of Poverty in America,” *UsaNews.com/news/health*, September 12, 2018; available at <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-09-12/poverty-in-america-new-census-data-paint-an-unpleasant-picture>.

2 Ibid.

3 Feeding America, “Facts About Hunger and Poverty in America,” *Feeding America*, 2017; available online.

4 A. Coleman-Jenson, C. Gregory, M. Rabbitt, and A. Singh, “Household Food Security in the United States in 2017, USDA Economic Research Service, 2018; available online.

5 Feeding America, “Poverty and Unemployment Impact Food Insecurity,” *Feeding America*, 2018; available online.

6 Feeding America, “Facts About Child Hunger in America,” *Feeding America*, 2017; available online.

7 No Kid Hungry, “Child Hunger Facts,” No Child Hungry, 2018; available online.

8 Food Research and Action Center, “The Impact of poverty, Food Insecurity, and Poor Nutrition on Health and Well-Being,” FRAC, 2017; available online.

Strategically Considering Ministry Opportunities

Take the next step by enlisting a small group of people within the congregation to assess ministry opportunities by working through the following questions with you:

- **What partnerships in your community have you considered establishing to help you meet this need?** These could include government officials, university extension programs, school officials and teachers, other community churches and leaders, local shelters and other pre-established programs addressing poverty and hunger.
- **What groups in your community could you partner with to meet this need?** These could be other community churches, police and fire departments, community leaders and local civic clubs.
- **Who in your church is passionate and equipped to lead or participate in this ministry?** Consider children's workers, parents and/or families, teenagers or youth groups, Sunday school classes, senior adults—anyone with a desire to help provide resources to help those who don't have enough money to buy healthy food for their families.
- **What resources and relationships has God given your church to support this ministry?** Consider missions offerings, other financial resources, church members who are connected to local schools and community groups, those with the gift of couponing and Sunday school class members.
- **What would you do with the garden as a ministry?** Possible goals include: feeding people, building gardening skills, growing fresh food to donate, creating a space for people to come together, providing space for people who want to grow food and utilizing these relationships as opportunities to share and live out the gospel.⁹

These questions can lead you to determine whether or not:

1. There is desire within the congregation to meet this need.
2. There are resources of people, space and money to meet this need.
3. This ministry is sustainable over time.
4. You feel God leading your congregation in this direction.

⁹ Adapted from "Want to Start a Community Garden?" ConservationFund.org; available online.

Starting a Community Garden Ministry

Careful planning in the beginning stages will help lessen problems that could come up later. For a garden that draws people from the community, make sure to enlist community members to serve on the planning group and the leadership group.

Step 1: Learn about gardening in your area. Talk to gardeners, specialists in local nurseries and your county extension agent to find out about gardening in your region. If possible, visit several community gardens near you and talk to the gardeners there about what they've learned in the process of creating and maintaining a community garden.

Step 2: Determine which community garden model you want to follow:

- Individual garden plots—each gardener is given a plot to garden on his/her own.
- Communally grown garden—everyone gardens the crop together and decides what to do with the produce raised.
- Market garden—crops raised are sold for income or donated.¹⁰

Step 3: Determine how many leaders and volunteers will be needed to take care of the garden. You'll need a minimum of four people as a core group who are committed to the garden ministry before you start. Make sure some of these are local. Besides planning and working the garden, volunteers will be needed for each of these on-going tasks:

- Serve as the primary contact for the garden
- Publicize the garden to the community
- Send out weekly updates to gardeners
- Schedule and promote community workdays
- Daily maintain the garden between workdays
- Manage budgeted funds and expense receipts for all expenditures
- Keep track of utilities, such as water and energy
- Write grants for funding and follow up with reports, if needed¹¹

Step 4: Plan carefully to determine how to meet each of these needs:

- **Land for the garden.** Things to consider:
 - Your garden site needs to get five to six hours of direct sunlight per day.
 - If you don't own the land, you'll need a written, signed contract for use of land.
 - Conduct a soil test to make sure the land is free of hazards or toxins. Check with your county extension agent about soil testing.
 - Check with the phone and/or utility company about underground cables and lines.
 - Check city/county regulations.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

- **Fencing** to keep out deer and other animals
- **Tools** (either donated or purchased)
- **Storage** (if needed for tools and garden supplies)
- **Water** for the garden. How will it be obtained? Who will pay the costs involved? Note: The water startup costs could run from \$3,000 to \$30,000 if water is not already available at the location.
- **Seeds/seedlings** for planting (possibly through donations)
- **Materials for beds and/or soil amendment as needed** (either donated or purchased)

Step 5: Based on estimated costs, determine if the funding is available through missions resources. Grant money is available to help you get started:

- [The Community Development Block Grant Program \(CDBG\)](#) provides annual grants to cities and urban areas to develop a suitable living environment by expanding economic opportunities.
- Scroll down the CDBG site for other private grants.
- Make sure you include the benefits of community gardens such as revitalization, nutrition and education in your proposal.
- Other grants include:
 - [Therapeutic Garden Grants](#) for schools, nonprofits, and retirement centers
 - [Scotts Miracle-Gro Foundation](#) for edible gardens
 - [Fiskars Project Orange Thumb](#) for non-profit organizations working within the community

Other funding sources focus on getting community involvement, either through fund raising or donations from local vendors.

- Selling seeds and tee shirts, for example, will reach a larger number of participants as well as publicize the community garden in the process.
- Talk to local vendors such as discount box stores, hardware stores and plant nurseries about participating by providing seeds, starter plants and even tools.

Step 6: Visit local stores (such as, Lowe's, Home Depot, Wal-Mart Gardening Center, Ace Hardware, Tractor Supply and local gardening and hardware stores), ask for donations and develop partnerships. Supplies needed include:

- Gardening gloves
- Scoops, shovels and/or spades
- Rakes
- Tarps
- Hoes/cultivators
- Storage sheds
- Pest control
- Compost

- Fertilizer
- Mulch
- Seeds/seedlings/plants

Step 7: Organize work crews and prepare the site.

- Clean the site.
- Plan your design and create a visible perimeter.
- Prepare the land.
- Plan a storage area for tools and equipment. Set aside a compost area.

Step 8: Organize work crews and plant.

- Lay out garden and place shrubs or flower beds around the perimeter to promote good will with non-gardening community members.
- Plant and water.
- Create work assignments to make sure the garden is tended and watered as needed.
- Establish work days for weeding and harvesting.

Seasonal Planting and Maintenance

EARLY SPRING:

- Clean and rake out beds.
- Check beds for size and re-define edges.
- Prepare soil in beds.
 - Rent, hire or borrow tiller if area is heavy clay or hard dirt.
 - Till to a depth of eight inches.
 - Add amendments, such as sand, peat, well-composted organic matter and fertilizer, if desired.
 - Till to mix added amendments well into the soil.
 - Rake out until smooth.
 - Mark areas within beds where plants are to go.
- Purchase plants for planting.
- Planting.
 - Follow directions received with the seedlings, plants, or seeds. Group plants in masses for greater effect.
- Water the bed when planting is complete, using a fine spray. Water back and forth several times rather than soaking one spot at a time.

Garden Maintenance Guidelines (by season)

Spring:

- **Cultivate** when the surface of the bed dries out to break up crust and uproot weak seedlings. Continue throughout the rest of the season.
- **Water** (and rainfall) should equal one inch per week. Only water deeply once or twice a week.
- **Fertilize** with granular fertilizer, compost or composted manure as a top dressing mid-season, applying it lightly between plants away from the stems.
- **Mulch** with rotten manure, grass clippings, compost, wood chips or bark after soil has warmed up.

Summer:

- **Treat for pests** by hand picking bugs or diseased plant parts. Use pesticides* if nothing else works.
**Call the County Extension office for advice.*

Fall:

- Clean up beds after fade or frost. Clear out dead annuals, trim dried perennials and add refuse to compost pile.
- Apply organic material such as peat moss, chopped leaves, manure or compost.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This is your opportunity to meet a huge need in your community—one community garden at a time—while also sharing and living out the gospel as opportunities arise.



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