

# Community Garden Information and Permit Application Packet

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

A City of Austin Community Garden is an approved site for growing produce for non-commercial use. It is operated and maintained by committed volunteers and is divided into individual or shared plots and common areas. Management practices of the community garden must promote sustainable urban agriculture and incorporate water conservation, composting, non-polluting growing practices, and integrated pest management methods. Harvested produce can be consumed by the volunteers or donated through the community garden organization.

The American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) recognizes that community gardening improves people's quality of life by providing a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family food budgets, conserving resources, and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education.

The City of Austin (COA) recognizes the importance of and need for community gardens on public land. Such gardens provide individuals and families with the opportunity to grow their own nutritious and affordable food, contribute to healthy lifestyles by encouraging physical activity, connect urban dwellers with nature and the source of their food, and create opportunities for community bonding through commitment to a common interest. The gardens also provide invaluable habitat for native wildlife, including songbirds, butterflies and other pollinators.

The City makes land available for community gardens, but it is up to the community to create, cultivate and manage each garden. This packet is intended as a guide for community leaders and groups wishing to create a community garden on City owned and managed property in Austin and/or to obtain City assistance with water tap waivers when starting a community garden on privately owned property. **Under City Code Chapter 14-7, it is required that each community garden project be endorsed by a nonprofit organization. The proposals are subject to approval by the COA department director responsible for that property.** Following the instructions in this packet will both help you plan a well organized, sustainable garden, and will improve the likelihood of securing approval for your proposal.

Please note that this application is for City supported community gardens, and is not required for the establishment of community gardens on property owned by churches, businesses and other private entities that do not need waivers for platting, site plans or water tap fees.

To find out more about this program, contact the COA Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens (SUACG) Coordinator. If you have a specific community garden site in mind and would like to verify whether your prospective site is on the list of potential properties, contact the City of Austin's Real Estate Division at 974-7090, or visit their website: (<http://www.austintexas.gov/department/real-estate-services/services>).

## II. STARTING A COMMUNITY GARDEN ON CITY OF AUSTIN LAND

Working together to create a community garden can be an inspiring and transformative experience for a group of neighbors. However, the steps involved in establishing a community garden require a significant investment of time, energy, and patience. It is important to take time in the early stages of your planning to research and draw from the experience of others. Below are some steps to guide you as you plant the seed for a future community garden.

### 1. **Organize your steering committee**

A Steering Committee should be organized to focus on planning for the establishment of the community garden. This group should be able to demonstrate the need for a new community garden, such as a lack of gardening opportunities in the vicinity, long waiting lists at existing gardens, or long commuting distances for existing gardens. Your core group of organizers should include at least four dedicated people to be on the steering committee, and have the support of the adjacent property owners, your neighborhood association, and neighborhood businesses. There is a lot of work involved in starting a community garden so getting a group of committed people to support the planning process will help build a sufficient number of stakeholders to sustain the effort.

### 2. **Get educated**

There are many gardening groups in Austin with information about organic food gardens. The Coalition of Austin Community Gardens (<http://communitygardensaustin.org/>) provides a great way to make contacts with community gardeners and get up to speed on available trainings and events. If possible, have one or more members of your Steering Committee attend the Sustainable Food Center's Community Garden Leadership trainings, which provide valuable information about starting and sustaining a community garden in Austin. For the date of the next scheduled trainings, visit [www.sustainablefoodcenter.org/events](http://www.sustainablefoodcenter.org/events).

### 3. **Identify a site**

Look for a location that receives 6-8 hours of full sunlight, is relatively free of paving, trash and debris, and is within walking distance or a short commute from your gardening group. An ideal site for community gardens will be adjacent to a road, over 100 feet from a waterway, and have limited slope with optimal available light. An important consideration when selecting a site is water availability, since running a waterline to the property will add considerably to the start up costs of your community garden. When possible, irrigation of gardens should come from rainwater collection or alternative water sources. Work with the City of Austin's Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens (SUACG) Coordinator to contact Austin Water Utilities and catalog existing infrastructure at a site. Make sure you conduct soil testing for fertility values, pH, and heavy metal or other contamination.

If you have found a site, and need to identify the property owner, visit the Travis County Tax Assessor's website at [http://www.traviscad.org/property\\_search.html](http://www.traviscad.org/property_search.html). If you are interested in a property owned by the City of Austin, SUACG has a list of City-owned properties screened for these attributes and identified as potentially available for community garden development. In addition, SUACG staff can identify City-owned parcels of land not on the prescreened list that may also be identified as available, following a vetting process.

#### 4. Outreach—Get your community involved

Throughout the early phases of pulling together a steering committee, getting yourselves educated and identifying a site for your community garden, you should be doing regular outreach. Gather people together across generations and cultures. People will be motivated to get involved at different times for different reasons so it is important to be doing outreach throughout the planning, implementation and operational phases of the development of your community garden. Be sure to engage beyond your circle of friends to the larger community. Make use of the following outreach methods:

- Word of mouth among steering committee members and those involved in identifying a site. Contact people on waiting lists for existing community gardens. Meet with groups already functioning in the neighborhood (community councils, neighborhood clubs, church groups, schools, senior service centers, business owners, etc)
- Advertise in neighborhood newspapers, community council newsletters, on bulletin boards, by putting a sign on the lot telling people about the future garden, and flyer the neighborhood.
- Create a Facebook page and send it out to your contacts. Ask neighborhood groups and community members to “like” your page, and include it in online community newsletters. Make sure you keep the page current, and develop engaging messages.
- Large groups of volunteers from the broader community can really help get you started. Think about getting help with large projects, new construction, or periodic weeding projects. When a community group volunteers, you should provide drinks, maybe lunch, gloves, plenty of tools, and a first-aid kit. You should always send a thank you note afterwards so make sure to get folks to sign in with their contact information (this will help you create a list of people for future events)! Some sources for volunteers are the United Way, school service learning programs, garden clubs, faith organizations, girl and boy scout groups, eagles club type groups, community court crews, etc.

#### 5. Locate a nonprofit to endorse the community garden

The purpose of nonprofit endorsement is to provide community gardens with access to City Properties and Liability insurance through a license agreement between the nonprofit and the City in support of the community group. In addition, non-profit organizations can offer organizational capacity, expertise, best practices, training and additional support to community members embarking on the development of a community garden. See page 9 of this document for more information and for a list of potential non-profit organizations.

#### 6. Create & Submit your Community Garden Permit Application.

A *Community Garden Permit Application* is required to request permission to start a community garden on City of Austin owned property. The *Permit Application* includes:

- List of steering committee members and their contact information as well as a list of committed gardeners
- Design sketch for the garden

- Garden By-laws or Rules
- Gardener contracts or membership agreements and fee waiver
- Project Timeline
- Budget & Fundraising Plan for first year
- Endorsing nonprofit organization and copy of letter of support
- Letter of Support from community organization (e.g., Neighborhood Association) and from adjacent landowners

Submit your application to the SUACG Coordinator. Your application will be reviewed with the following factors in mind:

- Evidence of community support
- Permit requirements
- Maintenance requirements
- Implementation and ongoing cost
- Water availability
- Planned or existing uses on the site
- Impact on adjacent land uses

Following approval of the garden permit application, the SUACG Coordinator will guide garden groups through the process of obtaining license agreements and any other permits that may be required by City ordinances.

#### **7. Obtain Community Garden License Agreement**

Be sure to do this with assistance from the SUACG Coordinator.

#### **8. Break Ground with a Work Party**

Invite the neighboring community, and dig! Your Nonprofit Endorser, the Sustainable Food Center or Austin Parks Foundation can assist you in recruiting additional volunteers to make your work day a success. Plan your workday as an inclusive and festive event—remember, the most important part of a community garden is the community. Happy Gardening!

### **III. ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES**

Thriving community gardens on City lands are achieved through a partnership between your community garden group, City departments, and a nonprofit organization. Each of these entities has a particular role to play and holds certain responsibilities, as outlined below.

#### **1. Community Garden Group**

##### **Roles**

In order to succeed over time and be eligible for COA land, each community garden must establish an organizational structure. This includes the creation of a **Community Garden Leadership Committee** made up of gardeners who volunteer to take on extra duties to help the garden run smoothly. The Leadership Committee may be made up of Steering Committee members, but their roles differ. While the Steering Committee is focused on planning for the establishment of the community garden, Leadership Committee roles handle operations once the community garden is up and running. Roles should include:

##### **Site Coordinator**

- Organizes community work day projects
- Keeps plots rented – meets with new gardeners and orients them to rules
- Coordinates signing and renewal of plot rental agreements
- Coordinates general garden communication
- Coordinates waste removal from site, when necessary

##### **Treasurer**

- Collects plot rental fees
- Maintains fund balance and reports annually to the garden members and to the City

##### **Tool Coordinator**

- Ensures that equipment is properly maintained and updates inventory report annually
- Makes recommendations for tool purchases to be funded from the treasury
- Organizes activities on work days for tool maintenance and repair

##### **Compost Coordinator**

- Ensures that compost area is properly maintained
- Orients new gardeners to the compost procedures
- Organizes activities on work days for compost maintenance and processing

##### **Responsibilities**

##### **Garden By-Laws**

Each community garden must adopt guidelines for property management and operations. The required guidelines in this packet are intended to ensure that all Austin residents have equal opportunity to participate in gardens on COA property. These guidelines are meant to serve as a framework for structuring your garden, but you are permitted and encouraged to expand on them according to your garden's specific needs and circumstances.

### **Giving Back to the Community**

Community gardens provide abundant opportunities for education and engagement, and thus an excellent opportunity to give back to your community. Community gardens on City-owned land are required to develop a plan that will outline how they are going to provide educational or social services to the surrounding community. Options include making a plot available for use by an adjacent recreation center, senior center, or nearby school; providing a community lecture series that is focused on youth, the elderly, or low income community members; or donating a certain portion of the produce harvested to a neighborhood homeless shelter or food bank.

Community garden leaders are encouraged to be creative, but should ensure that the commitment is feasible and attainable. Each Community Garden Leadership Committee must identify and/or produce two opportunities to give back to the community each year.

### **Annual Reports**

A report shall be submitted each year to the City Sustainable Urban Agriculture Coordinator. The report shall include:

- A narrative explaining how the garden fulfilled the requirement to give back to the community
- An account of:
  - number of current garden participants
  - number of plots currently rented
  - number of work days carried out and work accomplished
- An up-to-date tool inventory
- A treasury report including:
  - quantity of plot rental fees and other income collected
  - garden expenditures
- A waiting list and timeline on list
- Any additional issues that need to be addressed

Reports shall be submitted to the Coordinator by (March 31) each year. Reports may be submitted digitally or by mail to the City of Austin SUACG Coordinator. If the garden was created in the time frame six months prior to March 31, an annual report is not required until the following year. That is to say, if the launch date for the community garden takes place any time from September 30 through March 31, an annual report is not required until the following year's deadline.

## **2. City of Austin (COA)**

### **Roles**

While there may be a number of COA departments involved in the establishment of a community garden (Austin Water Bureau, Watershed, etc.), the main point of contact is within the City's Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens initiative. They will help community garden leaders navigate the permitting process and liaise between the Steering Committee and other COA departments.

### **Responsibilities**

- Identification of available City property
- Direction and assistance in the process of securing use of available City property
- Access to City owned land
- Review of the Community Garden Application and approval to proceed once licensing and all required permitting is completed.

SUACG can also provide the following services to community gardens on City property:

- Installation of a standard sign with the community garden name, hours and contact information (proposed signage other than the standard must be approved and will be the responsibility of the garden group)
- Basic design templates and technical assistance
- GIS coordinates for accurate boundary delineation and inventory purposes

### 3. Nonprofit Organizations

#### Endorsement

Community groups wishing to create gardens on City land should select potential endorsing nonprofit organizations based on their capacity to provide assistance with some or all of the following:

- Technical support, including assistance creating and submitting your *Community Garden Permit Application and License Agreement Application*
- Liaison with City and other community organizations
- Solicitation of grant funds for garden design, infrastructure and construction costs
- Liability insurance
- Paying water utility invoices
- Holding and managing unrestricted and restricted funds generated through grants and donations, and plot rental fees
- Recruitment of volunteers to help with installation

#### Education and Social Services Opportunities

- Austin Area Garden Council at Zilker Botanical Garden [www.zilker garden.org](http://www.zilker garden.org)
- Austin Organic Gardeners at [www.main.org/aog](http://www.main.org/aog)
- Austin Permaculture Guild at [www.austinperm.com](http://www.austinperm.com)
- Capital Area Food Bank of Texas at <http://www.austinfoodbank.org/how-to-help/>
- Green Corn Project at [www.greencornproject.org](http://www.greencornproject.org)
- Keep Austin Wild at [www.Keepaustinwild.com](http://www.Keepaustinwild.com)
- Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at [www.wildflower.org](http://www.wildflower.org)
- Meals on Wheels and More at <http://www.mealsonwheelsandmore.org>
- Sustainable Food Center at [www.sustainablefoodcenter.org](http://www.sustainablefoodcenter.org)
- The Great Outdoors Garden Adventure at [www.gonursery.com](http://www.gonursery.com)
- The Natural Gardener at [www.naturalgardeneraustin.com](http://www.naturalgardeneraustin.com)
- Travis County Master Gardener Association – [www.tcmastergardeners.org](http://www.tcmastergardeners.org)

#### Potential Nonprofit Endorsers

The following is a list of potential nonprofit organization endorsers for community groups applying for a community garden permit. Any nonprofit organization designated 501(c) 3 is eligible to endorse your community garden, but it is to your advantage to select a nonprofit with experience in establishing and/or managing urban agriculture programs and community gardens.

Please Note: *The following nonprofit organizations are not vetted, but are being provided as potential endorsers.*

1. **Sustainable Food Center**  
[www.sustainablefoodcenter.org](http://www.sustainablefoodcenter.org)  
1106 Clayton Lane  
Austin, Texas 78723-2491  
(512) 236-0074
2. **Sunshine Garden**  
[www.sunshinecommunitygardens.org](http://www.sunshinecommunitygardens.org)  
4814 Sunshine Drive  
Austin, Texas 78756-3113  
(512) 458-2009
3. **Austin Parks Foundation**  
[www.austinparks.org](http://www.austinparks.org)  
816 Congress Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78701  
(512) 477-1566
4. **Green Corn Project**  
[www.greencornproject.org](http://www.greencornproject.org)  
1210 Rosewood Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78702  
(512) 249-3171
5. **Windsor Park Baptist Church (Eastside Baptist Church)**  
[www.tx.citysquares.com/austin/windsor-park](http://www.tx.citysquares.com/austin/windsor-park)  
2400 Northeast Dr  
Austin, Texas 78723-2104  
(512) 929-3722
6. **Austin Green Art**  
[www.austingreenart.org](http://www.austingreenart.org)  
2906 Collins Creek, Suite B  
Austin, Texas 78741  
(512) 743-4245

#### **IV. DESIGN GUIDELINES**

Community garden design must include the following elements:

- Plot organization - Allow for a minimum of 10 plots, between 10'x10' and 20'x 20' in-ground plot size, and for raised bed plots, 4'x 8' in size. Pathways between beds and plots should be at least 3 feet wide and be maintained (mulched, for example) to control weeds.
- Watering Plan - Design a simple watering system with approximately one hose bib or faucet for every four plots. Automatic watering systems will not be allowed.
- Signage - The location of a community garden sign with the garden's name, endorsers, and a contact person's phone number for more information.
- Composting - A shared composting area for the community gardeners, with space for compost piles at different stages, and a location for mulch and soil to be staged. All compost and stored materials areas must be contained to prevent runoff and sedimentation.
- Wildlife Habitat – Common areas of the garden area shall have landscaping focusing on native drought tolerant flowers and shrubs which will attract butterflies and hummingbirds.
- Education and Social Services – Depending upon the plan developed to give back to the community, one plot may be dedicated, free of charge, to an educational or social service.
- Fencing – Provide a fence no taller than 6-feet around the perimeter to prevent vandalism or theft by two- and four-legged visitors. For safety reasons, fencing **may not** impede visibility into the garden. A fence higher than 6 feet will require additional permitting.

When designing a community garden, consider including these important additional elements and ideas:

- Tool shed - A tool shed or other structure provides a place for storing tools, supplies, and materials. Tool sheds must be no larger than 120 sq. ft. (10' x 12'), rodent-proof, and situated on the site to satisfy City setback ordinance requirements. Any larger structure will require a building permit.
- Gathering space - A social gathering space with bench or picnic table provides a place where gardeners can sit and relax, and host educational presentations, and can serve as space for a shared plant nursery and potting table.
- Kiosk or Bulletin Board - A community bulletin board for information sharing where rules, meeting notices, and other important information can be posted.

Keep in mind:

- If pathways, pads or parking spaces are to be paved, additional permits are required.
- If obtaining a new water tap, engineer-sealed drawings and a water tap permit is required.

## **V. CITY OF AUSTIN PROPERTY MANAGEMENT REQUIREMENTS**

Community gardens on City owned property are constrained by the following rules. These rules will be incorporated into the License Agreement for use of City property.

- Watering systems that operate independently from the above ground faucets (e.g., systems on timers) are not permitted. Water restrictions and water conservation measures are to be followed. All hose end systems, such as drip lines and soaker hoses, must follow City water ordinances. Gardeners must remain on the property while watering, and keep water from running off their plot.
- To build and maintain healthy soil structure, gardeners will use compost, organic fertilizers, mulch and a rotation of plant varieties. Three inches of compost shall be maintained to prevent soil loss and compaction.
- All piles of mulch, soil and compost will be contained to prevent runoff and sedimentation.
- Gardeners will maintain an effective composting system so garden waste can become usable compost to help maintain soil structure and fertility.
- No chemical treatments of herbicides, pesticides, or fungicides, and no synthetic fertilizers are allowed.
- No fuel storage is allowed on site.
- The use of CCA pressure treated wood is prohibited.
- Garden curfew is between 10 pm and 5 am.
- No alcohol, illegal substances, or glass containers are allowed on community garden property. Storage of fuel is also not allowed on community garden property.
- No illegal substances may be grown.
- No driving on the site except to unload gardening items, or for brush pick-up and mulch deliveries or by City vehicles.
- Gardeners should not dig trenches around the perimeter of their plots, and should not extend their garden dimensions.
- Pets must be on leashes within the community garden fencing, and the pet owners must clean up after pet.
- Any structures must be approved by the City.
- Animal enclosures must be approved by the City, including bee hives/frames and chicken coops/tractors.
- All lawn areas within the community garden boundaries that are outside of the garden plots are to be kept mowed.
- A Community garden is considered abandoned if left unattended for more than four (4) weeks. Notices shall be sent to the Garden Site Coordinator and Community Garden Leadership Committee by City landowner department or SUACG Coordinator. (*First notice sent out on week four (4), second notice sent week six(6)*) If abandoned, then the site is subject to having the license agreement terminated, and being decommissioned as a Community Garden.

## **VI. GARDEN OPERATION GUIDELINES (TEMPLATE FOR BY-LAWS)**

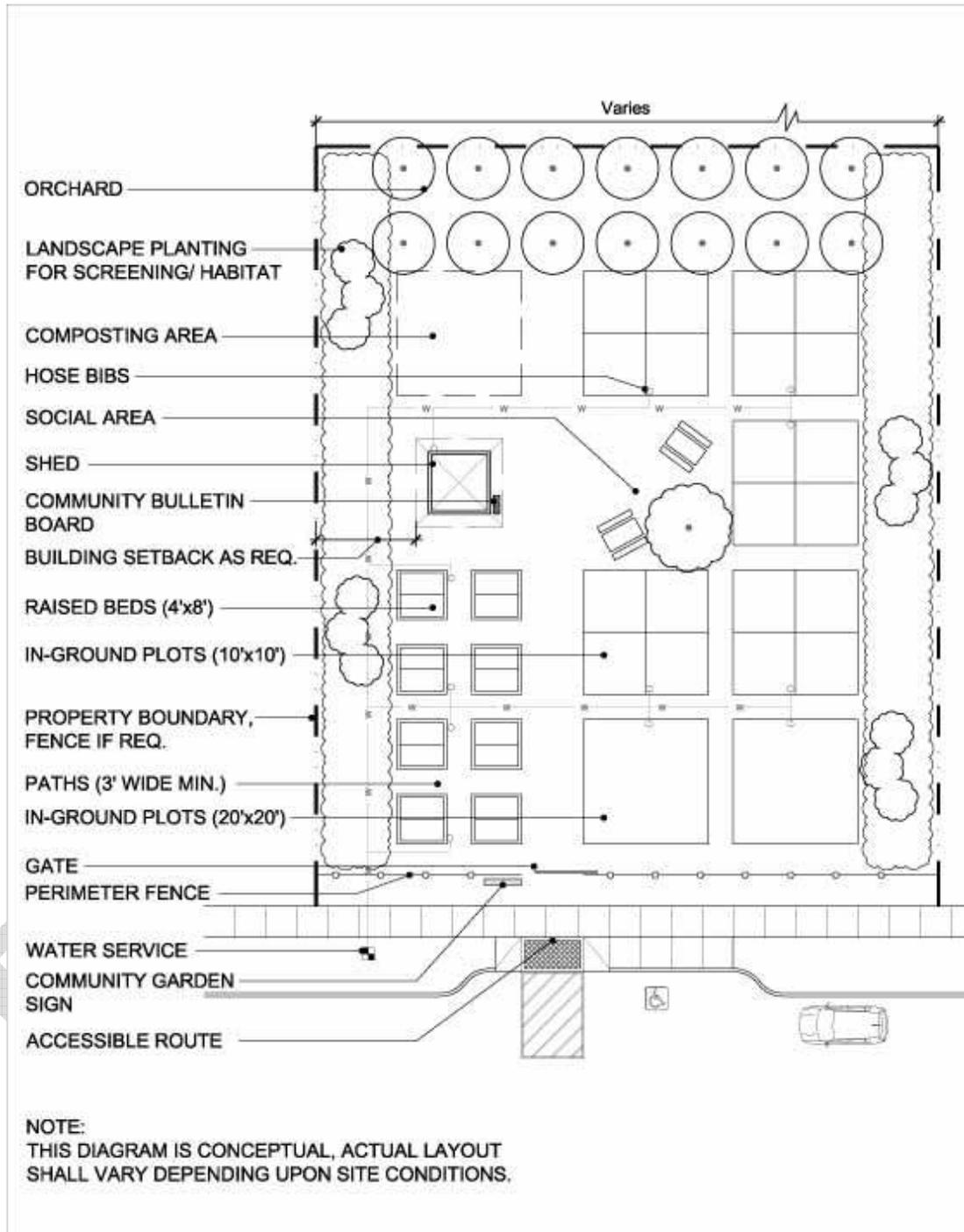
These guidelines are required for directing gardeners on City property. All sites will have By-Laws that incorporate these guidelines.

- Each Community Garden will have a Community Garden Leadership Committee with a Site Coordinator, Treasurer, Compost Coordinator, and Tool Coordinator, at a minimum. These volunteer positions are voted on yearly. See "Roles & Responsibilities" for descriptions of required duties.
- The Community Garden Site Coordinator and SUACG Program Coordinator shall not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, national or ethnic origin, religion, materials status, age, sect, sexual orientation, or disability, in its community garden membership and the administration of its programs.
- There shall be no harassment, threats, verbal abuse or acts of violence by any person against another person. Such acts must be reported to the Community Garden Leadership Committee and the perpetrator is subject to plot forfeiture.
- A gardener may rent only one plot within the City owned properties of community gardens. If a gardener has a small plot and wishes to rent a larger plot, she or he may switch to the larger plot when one becomes available, however, the gardener must relinquish the smaller plot.
- Gardeners may not turn over their plot to another person; instead, the plot must be rented out to the next person on the waiting list.
- Gardeners are required to control pest grasses and weeds and harvest produce in a timely manner. A garden plot is considered abandoned after two weeks without maintenance. If a gardener cannot care for his or her plot for a length of time due to extenuating circumstances, the gardener should contact the Site Coordinator and make arrangements for care and maintenance.
- A garden plot left neglected/unattended (un-watered and/or overrun with weeds) for more than two (2) weeks without prior notice or arrangements with the Community Garden Leadership Committee shall be considered abandoned. Notices shall be sent out by the Garden Site Coordinator and followed by subsequent communication from the Community Garden Leadership Committee. (*First notice sent out on week two, second notice sent week four*) The Community Garden Leadership Committee will vote to determine if the plot in question will be forfeited and made available to the next person on the waiting list.
- Gardeners must remove all of their garbage from the site, and recycle and reuse as much as possible. Recycling services will not be provided to the site by the City.
- Gardeners, at the end of their gardening contract, will remove all vegetation, tools, structures and debris from their plot.
- Common areas or articles, such as communal plots, sheds, trash receptacles, compost bins, are the shared responsibility of all gardeners. The community garden needs to be maintained in a neat state. Gardeners may not store their personal items in common areas of the garden.
- Attendance and participation in community garden work days as defined by the Site By-Laws, is mandatory for gardeners and gardening partners as listed on the contract agreement.

- Plant and food sales require approval by the Director of the Department managing the City owned property and shall be for the benefit of the Community Garden only.
- Participation fees should be used for payment of garden utilities. Remaining fees can be used at the discretion of the Community Garden Leadership Committee for minor tool purchases or repairs, general garden maintenance needs, work day refreshments, etc. Purchases of more than \$200 must be approved by all gardeners.\*\*

\*\* This rule is a suggestion. Community Gardens can determine specific uses and rules around fees.

# DESIGN LAYOUT TEMPLATE



TYPICAL COMMUNITY GARDEN LAYOUT

Scale: 1" = 20'  
0 10' 20'