

COVID-19 Recommendations for Community Gardens

April 14, 2020

Background

Community garden organizers recognize the grave, unprecedented challenge that the COVID-19 virus presents. Extreme containment measures are needed to stop the spread of the virus and protect many lives. Within this, food production is an essential service for all, including many low-income people and people from equity-seeking groups.¹ Community gardens must continue to grow produce to supplement household food security, in particular for those who struggle to access food, including fresh food.

This document was developed in consultation with community garden coordinators across North America and with information from local and national public health authorities. It outlines proposed standards to be followed, as well as suggestions on how to implement them, recognizing that due to the diversity of existing gardens (such as size, governance, location, equipment needs and language) some of these suggestions will be modified to work in each garden, while meeting the overall required standard for health and safety

Safety Protocols Work

The recommendation is that community gardens must follow these minimum standards to begin the garden season while following public health guidelines for containing the spread of COVID-19.

Following these guidelines will be additional work for garden coordinators and committees at a busy time of year. Consider asking other garden members to help take on organizing and monitoring tasks.

If a garden does not have the capacity to follow the guidelines for whatever reasons, it must not open until emergency measures have been lifted or until your garden can set up these safety protocols.

We all need to keep safety a #1 concern.

- Before opening, each garden must commit to the following health and safety protocols and must communicate these protocols to all garden members.
- Gardens are to be accessed by registered garden members only (as well as official staff/volunteers designated to gardens) and only for maintenance and planting, not for programming. Suspend all programming (including events, children's programming, training and group builds
- Gardens must be closed to the public. (For gardens without lockable fences, posted signs notifying that it is closed to the public must be up).

¹ By equity-seeking groups we mean: Black, Indigenous, people of colour, people with low incomes, LGBTQ2S+ people, people with disabilities and newcomers.

- All gardens must follow the basic personal guidelines for controlling the spread of COVID-19, which are:
 - Anyone who is exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 or has been exposed to the virus must stay at home for 14 days.
 - Everyone in the garden must maintain physical distancing of 6 feet/2 metres at all times (unless gardening with members of the same household).
 - Use sanitary practices recommended by public health.
 - Anyone displaying symptoms of COVID-19 or who has come into contact with someone who has shown symptoms should not come to the garden. (Something like this document can be sent out to all gardeners to refer to re self-screening: <https://bcfoodsecuritygateway.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/Health-Questionnaire-Covid-19-AgSafe.pdf>)
 - Anyone displaying symptoms should be given public health contact information and asked to leave.
 - People may be infected with COVID-19 and not show symptoms immediately. Even if gardeners appear to be healthy and have had no contact with someone who is at risk, it is still absolutely essential to follow physical distancing and sanitation practices.
- Enforcement: Due to the severity of the circumstances, if garden members do not understand the guidelines, they must leave immediately for the day, with a reminder of the protocols. If a gardener continues to disregard the guidelines that gardener will be banned from the garden, and their plots will be reallocated. Garden members may also be fined by bylaw enforcement officers for infractions of emergency measures (such as not maintaining physical distancing). This is an unusual approach for community gardens and is a process for this unusual time only, however the need to contain the spread of the COVID virus must be our main focus at this time.
- All garden members who will be active in 2020 must sign an agreement to abide by COVID-19 measures and acknowledge they will be asked to leave and/or lose their plots if they do not. (This agreement should be ready in languages used in the garden).
 - It is important to update your list of current garden members and track who has signed off on COVID guidelines.
 - Consider using gate lock with changeable code. Give access only to gardeners who have signed the agreement. Change the code on a regular basis.
 - Consider ways of tracking who is in the garden on any particular day for assistance with communication, tracing contact, etc.

Further recommended solutions that can be customized to work within each garden to meet the above requirements are below

Physical Distancing

- Unless gardening with members of the same household, maintain a distance of at least 2 metres/6 feet from other people at all times.
 - Pay particular attention to high-traffic areas in the garden, such as sheds or water fixtures. These are good places to have physical distancing reminders posted in the languages used in your garden.
 - Have physical reminders in the garden of what 2 metres looks like, such as a couple of swim noodles or sticks, or lay tape/markers to show the intervals.
 - If your garden normally sets up places for people to congregate such as seating areas, block them off or don't put them out.
 - **Arrange garden schedule so that spacing can be maintained and reduces how many times people go to the garden per week.** Set a schedule in place, particularly for smaller gardens, and/or gardens with smaller boxes, to ensure maximum number of people. For example plots can be numbered and ask odd/even numbered plots to come on different days. Online scheduling can be used if garden members all have access to internet and computers. If not, then static rules needs to be put in place that can be communicated to people over the phone.
 - Each garden should determine the safe number of people in the garden at any one time to make physical distancing possible. Do not exceed this number at any time. Ensure all gardeners know the maximum number of people allowed.
- Children should only be brought to garden on an as-needed basis. Children cannot be brought in if they are too young to understand physical distancing and hygiene practices to the garden (unless they can be kept in a stroller or are carried in an on-body support. Parents or guardians who bring children to the garden are responsible for following the guidelines and sanitizing any tools the children use.
- Some gardeners or staff may not feel safe working alone in a garden space. If so, do not require them to work alone but ensure physical distancing across people from different households.
- People can be encouraged to wear face masks as they can *reduce* (not eliminate) the spread of droplets from people who are infected but aren't showing symptoms. Masks don't replace proper physical distancing.
- No pets are allowed. Garden members can bring service animals.
- Gardeners should plan ahead, used gardening techniques that reduce labour, and minimize the number of trips they make to the garden
 - Use mulch to reduce the need for watering and weeding.
 - Row covers can control pest invasions when people are not in the garden as frequently to monitor pest activity.

Cleaning and Disinfection

- Provide handwashing stations and/or hand sanitizer. Anyone entering the gardens should wash their hands before entering and upon leaving.
 - Post Public Health info on handwashing and hand sanitizer in the languages used in the garden languages
 - Plans for building a handwashing station https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/handwashing_station_instructions.pdf?fwd=no
 - Individuals can carry hot, soapy water and a washcloth in a thermos (keeps water hot)
- Soap is very effective at killing the COVID-19 virus if proper handwashing procedure is followed. Ensure all gardeners know how to wash hands properly.
- Gardeners should consider bringing their own tools and garden gloves to avoid sharing tools.
 - If the number of gardeners is small, they can have dedicated bins and buckets.
 - Take garden gloves home to wash after every use and do not share.
- Identify and disinfect surfaces **before and after** use, including: reusable bins and buckets, shared tools, railings, doorknobs, water spigots and tables. Non-porous plastic, metal and glass surfaces are best.
 - Be sure to remove all dirt and other organic matter from the surface of tools before sanitizing. Make sure tools are dry before sanitizing or the sanitizer will be diluted.
 - Ensure everyone is responsible for disinfecting all identified surfaces before and after each use.
- For disinfecting, use a sanitizing solution of either 75% or higher alcohol based product or bleach at a concentration of 20ml/4 teaspoons per litre. Diluted bleach has a shelf life of 24 hours, mix a fresh batch every day.
- Avoid touching your face, particularly nose, mouth and eyes unless you have just washed your hands.
- Latex gloves do not replace proper sanitation practices. It is encouraged to use gardening gloves and to wash them after each visit, along with disinfecting/washing hands each time.
- Find ways to limit or eliminate touching of surfaces.
 - A designated person can open the shed door or compost bin lid in the morning and it is left open as next person enters the garden. Another person closes and disinfects at end of day.
 - Garden members can focus on completing one task rather than doing many things in different spaces.
 - One person can manage the compost.
- It is even more important at this time to keep garbage and clutter out of the garden to maintain sanitized surfaces.
- If anyone displays symptoms (such as fever, coughs, muscle aches, tiredness or difficulty breathing) have resources ready and/or posted as to where they should call).

Communication

Community gardens have a strong role to play in educating people about safe practices and gaining compliance with public health COVID-19 measures.

Fight myth-information - go to trusted sources like your local public health unit or World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

- Use any communication methods that work to reach your gardeners to inform them about the new measures – email, phone, social media sites, bulletin boards, posters.
 - Use peer-to-peer translation when translated materials are not sufficient.
- Place posters with garden COVID-19 policies and recommended measures around the garden.
- Post a public notice outside garden entry points indicating the garden is closed to the public, only authorized garden members are permitted.
 - Include statement that garden members have been trained (through videos) in COVID-19 safety protocols and agree to abide by them (so public understands why some people are allowed in the garden)
 - If you are donating produce to community food programs, include a sign explaining this to reduce vandalism and theft.
- Crises like a pandemic increase tensions and anxiety can best respond with calmness and compassion.
 - Have a system in place to support mediating conflict in the garden.
 - Counter misinformation and racist or xenophobic remarks.

Planning

- It is very important to have a dedicated decision maker or team to hold responsibility for communicating with garden members, getting signed agreements and responding to garden members who do not comply with guidelines. The contact information for these people in each garden should be identified to the municipality and community network organizers in your region (if that exists).
- People who have been assigned tasks may fall ill or need to go into self-isolation. Have a back up plan for garden access (locks, keys, entry codes), organizing (contact lists, task allocations) and maintenance in case the person in charge of those things need to self-isolate.
- **Community gardens should seek ways to prioritize new garden space access for people who are facing specific barriers to food/income access, whenever possible.**
Equity-seeking groups have traditionally faced greater barriers in accessing growing space based on the first-come-first-served systems used by many community gardens. With limited garden space available for the season, gardens can prioritize access for those who will potentially have the most benefit.
 - Gardens can maintain a separate, prioritized wait list for people facing barriers to food access.
 - Offer volunteer and leadership roles to people from equity-seeking groups.

- Consider increasing food grown for donation to community food programs.
- During crisis times, it is even more important to ensure that food is distributed equitably and reaching those who need it most and community gardens play an important role within this.
- For gardens with allocated plots, some gardeners may choose not to use their plot this year, particularly people who are elderly or have compromised immune systems.
Options to deal with this:
 - Garden coordinators can ask them to give their plot to another person for this year, but both the current plot holder and the new gardener should be very clear that the allocation is temporary.
 - This could be an opportunity to open spaces for gardeners from equity-seeking groups who traditionally face barriers to accessing plots.
 - The garden may decide that open plots will be used to grow food to donate to community food programs, with some people in the garden agreeing to maintain them.
 - The garden may choose to continue to grow food and share food with the gardeners who cannot garden due to illness/compromised immune systems.
- Many gardens distribute seeds and seedlings and may need to develop a plan for distributing harvested produce if garden members are not taking it for themselves. A safety plan is needed to ensure transfer of seeds, seedlings and produce doesn't transfer the virus as well.
 - Arrange for contactless deliveries (leaving seedlings or food on a doorstep or curb, arranging a drop-off time for apartments), handwashing before and after handling deliveries, minimizing the number of people handling the deliveries.

Sources

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With content from community garden protocols from Wareham Community Garden, Durham Integrated Growers, City of Surrey, University of Florida IFAS Extension and Institute nationale de santé publique du Québec.

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