

## COMMUNITY GARDENS IN THE PARKS REFERENCE MANUAL

### INTRODUCTION

Chicago Park District's Community Gardens in the Parks program gives people an opportunity to build a meaningful connection with nature and our communities by supporting Park Advisory Councils and other community groups in establishing community gardens in their parks, and by encouraging the long term sustainability of their gardens by offering technical support, education and other resources.

Becoming a registered Community Garden Group is required to maintain a garden on park property. The Community Gardening group is solely responsible for all management, financing, and ongoing maintenance of the space. The purpose of this manual is to make clear the expectations that are involved with starting and managing a garden on park property.

This manual is divided into two main parts. Section 1 explains the policies that must be followed by all Chicago Park District Community Garden Groups. Section 2 is dedicated to groups seeking to start a new community garden in their park, and outlines the process for obtaining approval.

A Chicago Park District Community Garden is defined as an assigned space within a park that is used by an organized group of community members for the purpose of growing ornamental or edible plants, either for park beautification or home use. If you wish to grow any crops for sale or other business purposes, please contact us at [communitygardens@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:communitygardens@chicagoparkdistrict.com) before proceeding any further.

There are three types of community gardens in the parks:

1. **Ornamental Gardens:** Includes annuals, perennials, and small shrubs, with no plants intended for use as food. Ornamental gardens may be planted directly into existing soil. Native and drought-tolerant plants are encouraged, please see our native plant list for suggestions.
2. **Edible Gardens:** Includes plants for use as food, grown only in raised beds.  
\*Raised beds require new, clean soil as well as a liner to prevent roots from growing into the ground. We recommended they be at least 12 inches tall, and for accessibility no more than 4 feet wide.
3. **Combination Gardens:** Include ornamental plants and plants intended for use as food. Any plants grown for use as food are required to be planted in raised beds, per the specifications above.

### PART 1: COMMUNITY GARDEN GUIDELINES

The most important aspects of successful community gardening in a park are ongoing community support and communication between the community and the Chicago Park District. Below are the responsibilities and guidelines the Garden Group must follow.

**IMPORTANT:** Your Group is required to renew its Community Garden registration **every three years**. You will be asked for a short progress report on your garden, two recent photos, and a description or image showing your current garden boundaries. Your Group will also be required to submit a renewed Letter of Commitment.

## MANAGEMENT

Gardening in the parks is intended to be a community endeavor. Your group must include at least two people from separate households as active participants in the group and the garden. The group is entirely responsible for the organization and management of group members. You are free to manage in a style that works best for your group, provided the following guidelines are met:

**Inclusiveness:** The Group must follow a transparent membership process open to all. As a public agency, Park District policy requires inclusiveness; anyone interested in joining the Group is to be fairly considered.

**Membership:** Your Garden Group must have a stated plan for welcoming interested new members. The Group should communicate to the community and the public about ways to be involved in the garden. This can be through signage (such as those provided by the park district), online communication, open meetings, events, and public workdays. We strongly encourage active recruitment of new gardeners in communally managed spaces.

**Communication:** The Group's leadership is expected to maintain communication with the Park District. Your garden is important to us and we want to help! Please contact the Community Gardens in the Parks staff promptly with any concerns or questions about the maintenance or management of your garden. The Park Supervisor should be informed and involved in the resolution of any problems involving patrons of the garden or park.

We also like to hear good news, so please share any information about upcoming events or programs in the garden. Similarly, please let your group members know of Park District opportunities, events, or workshops that may be of interest.

**Fiscal responsibilities:** Your garden group may collect a nominal annual fee to help in the ongoing maintenance of your garden space, provided you can demonstrate that 100% of the funds collected are invested back into the garden and that you have obtained proper fiscal agency or individual non-profit status. Fees should be reflective of the actual cost of maintaining the garden. Funds may not be used to pay any group member for their work in or pertaining to the garden. For more information on fiscal agency please see the Appendix or contact the Community Gardens in the Parks staff for more information.

**Liability:** The Park District is not responsible for the garden itself, or to anything in or pertaining to the garden. **Each member of the group must sign a [Waiver of Liability \[form 4b\]](#)**, which should be updated annually. Garden group leaders must keep all forms on file and be able to present upon request.

**Transfer of leadership:** Any transfer of leadership responsibilities or liaison contact information should be clearly communicated to the Community Gardens in the Parks staff. In the event the garden leader needs to step down, he or she is responsible for recruiting and facilitating new garden leadership.

**Garden termination:** If the Group can no longer maintain their space, they must immediately notify the Park District. The Group will be responsible for proposing a plan to restore the garden to parkland to the satisfaction of the Park District's Department of Cultural and Natural Resources (DCNR).

While unlikely, the Chicago Park District reserves the right to remove the garden at any time and will make every effort to provide notification prior to removal.

**Garden borders and type:** The garden boundaries and garden type must remain as submitted on the original design plans. Any proposed modification or expansion requests must be approved by DCNR BEFORE any changes are made. Please contact the Community Gardens in the Parks staff for further guidance and instructions.

**Quality assurance:** A Chicago Park District representative may attend a neighborhood association and/or Park Advisory Council meeting to review the successes or challenges experienced by the Community Gardeners. The Park District will take appropriate action based on that assessment. Failure by the Community Gardeners to provide the required operational and financial support will result in the removal of the garden by the Park District.

## **MAINTENANCE**

The Group is entirely responsible for the maintenance of the Community Garden. Keep in mind that the space allocated is on public land and must always be actively maintained.

**Garden maintenance and appearance:** The Park District will not do any maintenance within the Community Garden itself. Pathways and areas between garden beds must also be mulched and maintained by the Group. Through the Park District's independent observation, if the space is deemed unsightly, weedy or otherwise neglected, the group leadership will get two separate warning notices. If the problem continues thereafter, the agreement will be revoked and the Group will be responsible for proposing a plan to restore the garden to parkland to the satisfaction of the DCNR.

**Winterizing:** Gardens are expected to be cleaned up/put to bed by December 1<sup>st</sup> of each year. Any temporary structures or plant supports must be removed and stored off-site by this date.

**Water:** Please conserve water! The water supply is **ONLY** to be used by gardeners caring for their assigned areas. Washing of cars or other personal non-garden related activities is prohibited. Irrigation systems are discouraged. Drip hoses or other water conserving devices are encouraged.

**Organic practices:** In keeping with the Chicago Park District's commitment to sustainability, and for the health and safety of all park patrons, it is required that ALL gardening practices, including disease and pest control, be organic.

**Composting:** Composting of on-site garden waste is encouraged. Per the City of Chicago's Municipal Code, please do not bring material from outside sources, unless your system is registered with the city. The compost must be contained in a manner suitable under the [City of Chicago's Municipal Code](#). Avoid rodent-attracting foods such as meat, starches, and cheese. Also avoid large or thorny branches and diseased plant material.

An alternative to a compost bin is bagged plant material waste. Ask your Park Supervisor to contact his or her landscape crew for pickups as needed.

**Soil:** It is the responsibility of the Group to ensure that the soil used in the garden is clean. Groups working in vegetable gardens should take care to test your soil regularly to ensure it is safe enough to grow edible crops.

**Bird feeders:** Bird feeders are not allowed. Use of native plants will provide natural food sources such as berries and seeds without attracting rodents or pigeons. Please refer to and utilize our Native Plant List.

**Rodents:** Garden groups growing edible plants are expected to harvest regularly and properly support plants so as to keep excessive produce from rotting on the ground and attracting rodents.

**Vandalism:** Like drought, hail and freezing temperatures, theft and vandalism are among the assumed risks of gardening in the park. All gardens in the parks are and will continue to be public property. While the

Community Gardens in the Parks program continues to support efforts to reduce unnecessary vandalism or theft, we cannot guarantee that any garden is free from the risk.

### **PERMANENT STRUCTURES AND SIZEABLE LANDSCAPE MATERIAL**

Any permanent structures such as benches, planters, fences, or tool chests and any sizeable plant material such as trees must be specifically approved by DCNR and in some cases the Park Enhancement Committee (PEC) BEFORE placement in the garden. Sheds are not permitted. Only Park District staff may prune or remove established trees, including those within a garden site. If a tree in or near your garden needs attention, please contact Community Gardens in the Parks staff.

### **NON-PERMANENT STRUCTURES**

Small (4'x6' or less) trellises and plant supports are permitted. All non-permanent structures must be removed and stored offsite or in a tool chest by the Group by December 1<sup>st</sup> each year.

### **SIGNAGE**

Each Community Garden will be provided with a sign by the Park District upon request. Other signage, particularly sponsorship signage, must be approved by DCNR. Please contact Community Gardens in the Parks staff for further guidance and instructions.

### **VEHICLES**

Park patrons are permitted to use motorized vehicles within a park **ONLY** on designated roadways, driveways and parking facilities. The parking or driving of motorized vehicles by any park patron on walkways, restricted-access drives, lawn areas, under trees, or within landscaped areas is strictly forbidden.

### **PROHIBITED ACTIVITIES IN THE GARDEN**

- **Littering, dumping, grilling, alcohol consumption** and any otherwise unlawful activities.
- **Amplified sound.**
- **Pets** are not allowed in the garden per the Code of the Chicago Park District.
- **Ball playing** or other forms of active recreation.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHICAGO PARK DISTRICT**

The Community Gardens in the Parks staff and your Park Supervisor are your main contacts for all departments within the Park District.

Park District landscaping crews will be shown your garden space to assure that the boundaries are respected and to see where their maintenance responsibilities adjoin yours. Maintenance of plumbing features, when necessary, will remain the responsibility of the Park District.

## **PART 2: STARTING A NEW COMMUNITY GARDEN**

Outlined below is a step by step process for starting a new community garden. The Community Gardens in the Parks staff are happy to help guide you through this process and answer any questions you may have along the way. All necessary forms are available on our website. Note: there are two separate application stages, Location Request and Final Application, and it can take anywhere from 2 - 6 months to get your garden up and running. The timing depends in large part on the location you've selected and the time of year you wish to begin. We welcome your application any time, and encourage fall or winter as the best time for your group to get started in planning. If you have questions, please contact us at [communitygardens@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:communitygardens@chicagoparkdistrict.com).

**STEP 1: FORMING A GARDEN GROUP**

Gardening in the parks should be a community endeavor. Speak with neighbors, park visitors, and community members to find interested people who are excited to help with a garden. Form a Garden Group of people who will be involved with your garden and choose a name. Your Group is responsible for the total care of your garden, both financially and in garden maintenance and management, so enthusiasm is important. Each Group must include a minimum of two active members, at least one of which should serve as garden manager and liaison to the Chicago Park District. **As a public agency, Chicago Park District policy requires inclusiveness; anyone interested in joining the Group is to be fairly considered.**

We strongly encourage that at least one member of your Group serves a member of your Park Advisory Council (if one exists). Your Group should also take care to develop working relationships with the Park Supervisor and Area Manager. Support from all of these parties is crucial.

**STEP 2: SELECTING THE LOCATION**

When seeking a space to garden in your park, look for any underutilized sections of the park which will not interfere with park aesthetics or existing uses. Consider activity in and around the space. Will the proposed garden conflict with overall park usage? Is it a reasonable distance to restroom facilities? Consider sun exposure and shade from buildings, trees, etc. Full sun is best for edible gardens. No existing healthy trees will be removed to accommodate a garden. Gardens should be situated in areas that will NOT need a fence. Please keep in mind that not all parks are well-suited for community gardens. When possible, our staff will try to guide you through this site selection process.

When you have identified a location you think would be appropriate for your garden, please take the following steps to ensure its availability:

1. First, check with the Park Supervisor to ensure the land you seek is on park property, and does not interfere with other park activities. If there is no field house near the location you are considering you may call 312-742-PLAY (7529) to get this information, or search the Chicago Park District website at [chicagoparkdistrict.com](http://chicagoparkdistrict.com).
2. **A FUNCTIONING WATER SOURCE WITHIN THE PARK IS MANDATORY.** The garden must be located within 100 feet of a working water source. Using fire hydrants or water fountains is usually not an option. The Park District does not have a map or list of functioning water sources, your group is responsible for locating these on your own. In some cases, water fountains also have hose connections but in many cases they do not. Please check carefully.

**STEP 3: SUBMIT YOUR LOCATION REQUEST**

Once you have identified a suitable space for your garden, submit the [Location Request Form](#) along with **overhead** photos identifying the proposed garden boundaries to [communitygardens@chicagoparkdistrict.com](mailto:communitygardens@chicagoparkdistrict.com) or by mail to:

(for Edible or Combination Gardens)

**Kristin Brock**  
Chicago Park District  
Dept. of Cultural & Natural Resources  
7059 S. South Shore Drive  
Chicago, IL 60649

(for Ornamental Gardens)

**Sarah Dugan**  
Chicago Park District  
Dept. of Cultural & Natural Resources  
7059 S. South Shore Drive  
Chicago, IL 60649

Requests will be reviewed as soon as possible. The Group will then receive either a Location Approval Letter directing you to proceed to Step 4 **OR** a request for more information. In some circumstances, the requested location may be denied.

#### **STEP 4: COMPILE A FINAL APPLICATION**

After you have received the initial approval for your garden's location, you should begin to prepare a final proposal. This proposal should provide evidence of community and financial support, your management plan, and other related items. This proposal must include all of the elements listed below. Please wait until all elements are complete and submit your proposal in its entirety.

**1. Site & Usage Surveys.** Using the [Site & Usage Survey Form](#) found on our website, **three** separate site visits are to be conducted over a period of one to two weeks. Survey visits determine what's going on in the area of the park surrounding your proposed garden site by identifying who's there, times of heaviest usage, any type of nearby sporting activities, etc. The Park Supervisor must accompany you on your first visit. Your remaining visits should occur during peak usage times, once on a weekday and once on a weekend. Your Park Supervisor can help you determine when to schedule your visits to satisfy this requirement.

**2. Garden Design and Funding Plan.** Your garden design should be detailed and to scale, and include:

- The garden layout with dimensions of the beds or plots, dimensions of the garden as a whole, the location of the water source, nearby streets, buildings, and trees.
- Installation, labor & supply plan - how and by whom will your garden be installed? What is the source for materials such as lumber and soil?
- A list of plants to be used in the garden. We strongly encourage native and drought tolerant plants in our Ornamental gardens. For Edible gardens an exact list is not required, but an effort in this area is encouraged.
- A report of anticipated expenses and how your Group intends to meet them. Please note that your group will need to cover the cost of building raised beds and filling them with new, clean soil if you are starting a vegetable garden. Please refer to the fiscal responsibility section of the guidelines for more details about our fundraising policies (fiscal agency, plot fees etc). Remember, Community Gardens do not have to be expensive to be successful.

**3. Letter of Support.** Your group must meet with your Park Advisory Council to share your plans and obtain a letter of support. If your park does not have an Advisory Council, continue to maintain communication with your Park Supervisor and seek a letter of support from a neighborhood association or your Alderman.

**4. Public Meeting.** A public meeting is required and serves to ensure any concerns from neighbors or other community members are heard and addressed. This meeting can be held in conjunction with a Park Advisory Council, CAPS or Neighborhood Association meeting, so long as the gathering is open to the public. Both the Park Supervisor and a Community Gardens in the Parks staff member should be notified in advance of the time, date and location of this meeting. Your final proposal should describe any questions and concerns raised and how they were addressed.

**5. Petition.** A [New Community Garden Petition Form](#) must be circulated within the neighborhood surrounding the proposed site. It is recommended petitioning at least 3 blocks in each direction. A minimum of 15 signatures is needed, with only one signature per household allowed. Members of the Garden Group and members of their household are not permitted to sign.

**6. Membership/Group Information.** Your Garden Group must have a stated plan for welcoming interested new members. Provide a roster of current group members, public contact information, and information on how future members will be included. (For allotment plot gardens, describe how your application

process/wait list will be managed or how you plan to assign plots; for communal/shared spaces outline open volunteer days or other membership information.)

**7. Maintenance plan.** Provide a detailed maintenance plan, indicating how the garden will be cared for on a daily and seasonal basis, including watering, weeding, mulching, spring prepping and winterizing.

#### **STEP 5: REGISTRATION ACCEPTANCE**

After the Park District has received all of the required documents, they will be reviewed and your Group will be notified of your registration status. Please allow at least two weeks for final approval notification.

If your Garden Group is approved to proceed, two members of your group will be asked to sign a [Letter of Commitment](#), acknowledging responsibility for the maintenance and management of the garden. Your Group will be asked to renew this agreement every 3 years or whenever there is a change in leadership.

## APPENDIX: FUNDING IDEAS, RESOURCES and CLASSES

### FUNDING IDEAS AND FISCAL AGENCY

Here are a few ideas for locating funds and acquiring fiscal agency:

- **Friends of the Parks** may have seed grants available for registered Community Gardens and also supports gardens through Fiscal Agency.
- **The Chicago Parks Foundation** also provides fiscal agency to garden and park groups.
- Your **Park Advisory Council** may be able to work with your Group to hold fundraising events.
- **Local businesses** may be interested in donating materials or may have funds available to support your project.
- **Local officials**, including your Alderman, may have funds available to support such a community improvement project.

### GARDEN RESOURCES AND CLASSES

Here are some resources for horticulture advice and classes:

- **Chicago Community Gardening Association** is a coalition of garden groups and non-profit organizations committed to supporting community greening in Chicago. Working together, they aim to support establishing new community gardens and the sharing of ideas & resources: <http://chicagocommunitygardens.org/>
- **Kilbourn Park Organic Greenhouse** offers workshops and lectures, as well as their annual plant sale and Harvest Festival. They provide horticultural ideas, resources, and programs: [www.kilbournpark.org](http://www.kilbournpark.org)
- **Garfield Park Conservatory** holds workshops and lectures. They provide a wealth of information, ideas and resources for horticulture: <http://www.garfield-conservatory.org/>
- **Wicker Park Garden Club** oversees a highly successful Community Garden that provides many resources, workshops, lectures and events: <http://www.wpgarden.org/>
- **Openlands** supports Community Gardens in their Urban Greening program, and offers training courses such as *Building Urban Gardens* and *GardenKeepers*: <http://www.openlands.org/>
- **Chicago Botanic Garden** has an extensive line of lectures, classes and workshops available. They also have wonderful demonstration gardens of various types and designs: <http://www.chicagobotanic.org/>
- **University of Illinois Extension** website supplies a wealth of resources: [web.extension.illinois.edu](http://web.extension.illinois.edu) They also have a plant clinic based at the Garfield Park Conservatory where they can troubleshoot many individual plant and gardening problems. Soil testing, Master Gardener, and Master Composter certification classes are also available.
- **American Community Garden Association** works to create new resources for Community Gardens, coordinates an annual conference, and has online resources and informative lists of all topics involving community gardens: [www.communitygarden.org](http://www.communitygarden.org)



- **National Gardening Association** promotes the environment, is a resource of plant information, has a free newsletter, and provides links for gardeners. Periodically, they provide information about grants and other funds available: [www.garden.org](http://www.garden.org)