

Start and Keep a Community Green Space

Advice for project leaders from **Baltimore Green Space**

Starting a community-managed open space can seem like a really big deal, and a lot of work. Well – it is! It can also be loads of fun and very satisfying. This handout aims to give you the advice of an experienced mentor.

Every green space needs a good team of community people. It also needs at least one leader who is committed to driving the project forward (in the perfect world that role is shared). This publication is for written for the leaders, and we hope it will be useful to the whole team.

This advice can help you no matter what kind of green space you want to create – a horseshoe pit, a vegetable garden, a community orchard, a place to relax, a flower garden, or some combination of all of these.

When you first get the idea for a greening project, there are three areas that you should work on:

- permission to use the land,
- finding the people and defining the vision, and
- getting resources

This publication gives general info; for particulars on any topic check out Citizens' Planning and Housing Association's (CPHA) fact sheet "How to Turn a Vacant Lot into a Garden or Pocket Park."^{*}

Permission

It's very important to get permission to use the land for three reasons. First, you are borrowing land, and it's just right to ask. (That argument may not seem convincing if the land is a community nuisance.) Second, you need this permission in order to get grant funds. Third, there are some very sad stories of greening projects that have ended prematurely because there was no permission. Please – don't forget to do this step *before* you make changes to the land.

City-owned Land: If the land is owned by the City, you use the Adopt-a-Lot process. One advantage of this is that the lot will be marked in the City's database as "in community use." This doesn't mean that they can't revoke permission – but it does mean that they won't sell it lightly.

^{*} Check out the Resources page at baltimoregreenspace.org. Or visit: http://www.cphabaltimore.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/HS-07_Convert_vacant_lots_to_gardens.pdf. Or call us for a paper copy.

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Privately owned Land: If the land is well-maintained, you must get permission from the owner. It's best to get a permission letter (you can prepare it) so you have something to show funders.

But what if the land is a mess? Say there are high weeds, or lots of trash, or drugs are stashed there, or there are rats. Take pictures *today*, and then use the self-help nuisance abatement procedure outlined in the CPHA handout. In this case, you are not really getting permission – you are giving the owner notice that you intend to remedy a nuisance. But for grant purposes it counts as permission. (Some people may say that you are “squatting.” You aren't. You are using the self-help nuisance abatement to establish your neighborhood's right to clean up a nuisance.)

Preservation in a Land Trust: In the long run, consider working with Baltimore Green Space to make sure that your neighborhood can enjoy its oasis forever. More on this later.

Who are the People? What is the Vision?

These two go together. The people who want to get involved should help develop the vision. At the same time, the “starter” vision will attract some people but not others.

So how to start? Think about the original inspiration: is it to replace blight on a specific lot with something nicer? Is it to grow vegetables? What will keep *you* involved for years?

Next, start talking to people. Show them the land (if you have a particular place in mind). Talk about the need. Go to the community association, but don't expect enormous enthusiasm (they see a lot of good ideas that never happen). Find ways to reach out to people who you don't know, or who don't look like you.

Once you have a few interested people, have a meeting. It can be inside or on the land. Talk about the vision, and get people's input – what they want and what concerns they have. If you have a mentor, try to have them at the meeting. This is a great opportunity to expand the vision beyond what you'd think of. Just make sure that you don't let the final design be driven by people who aren't going to help build or maintain the project – their ideas may be great, but it is a recipe for burnout.

Once the vision is more developed, it will help you attract more people. They'll bring their own thoughts, skills, and ideas about where to find resources. And so on... In a way, the work of creating the vision may never end – you might move from deciding what

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kind of green space you want, to designing it, to figuring out the best way to maintain it, to working to include more and more people through special events.

Resources

There are 3 kinds of resources you'll need: money, mentors, and materials.

Money You may start with little money, a generous grant, or just about no money. There will be ways to show that the neighborhood has made a commitment to a particular piece of land no matter what your budget. Still, it's always easier with money! The CPHA fact sheet has a good run-down of resources for fund-raising.

Mentors Unless you're an experienced gardener, community organizer, builder, and also great with paperwork, you'll want some advice. It's great to get some expert advice about your site and vision and to have somebody to call with questions. Also, having a mentor at a community meeting or early event is a great way to give other people more confidence in the project. Sometimes mentors can also help you find extra volunteers for the "strong back" work of building and tilling.

Materials You'll need stuff: seeds, plants, tools, maybe soil, building materials, etc. You can buy what you need, but you can also be resourceful:

- put out the word, and folks may respond with donations of materials.
- be creative. For example, use bricks or rubble left on-site for edging.
- join the Community Greening Resource Network (see the CPHA handout).

A Word on Design: Start with the End in Mind – but start!

It's easy to think that your green space needs to have everything at once. For example, if the lot you want to use is 5,000 square feet, you might think you need to put beds in the whole thing at once. If dumping is a problem now, you might think you need to put up a fence immediately. If you want your neighbors to learn how to eat more healthfully, you might think you need to locate a food educator before you start.

Well, no. In the first year, the goal should be to do something manageable with the group you have now. Sometimes, just showing a consistent presence solves a lot of issues. Plus, you'll be attracting (sometimes slowly) more people and more resources. All those garden beds? They'll be tended better once you've attracted more gardeners. That fence you thought would cost thousands? It's much less expensive once you meet somebody

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with carpentry skills. And that food educator? Maybe she'll be attracted by the sight of the veggies in the garden – or by somebody who has seen your garden and told a friend.

So don't feel that you need to have all the questions answered before you start.

Still, as you start: keep in mind where you want to end up. For example, don't plant a tree where you hope to install more garden beds down the road. You won't want to move or cut down the tree. Similarly, think about how your plantings will look in 10 years.

And remember that someday you will move on. What can you do, now, to build leadership and a sense of ownership of the project with a lot of people? This is one reason it is so important to involve other people in the visioning process and decision-making – and the work. It might not always be done your way, but it builds a foundation so that the green space can survive without you.

So, You Want Your Green Space to Last Forever...

Once you've gotten your green space started, you may discover that it becomes so important to the neighborhood that people want it to stick around forever. How can you do that?

1. Focus on good participation, a shared vision, and knowing how to find the resources you need. If you've followed the guidelines in this handout you should be heading in the right direction.
2. Make sure the land can't be taken away. For most neighborhoods, the simplest way to do this is to work with Baltimore Green Space. We handle the acquisition process and the headaches of ownership. We also provide liability insurance and technical assistance (we give advice and help you connect to resources).

If you think you may want to work with us, you'll probably have a lot of questions. Please give us a call! 443-695-7504, or write to info@baltimoregreenspace.org.

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