



# Tips for Starting Faith-Based Community Gardens

*from Montgomery Victory Gardens*

Starting a garden with your faith-based community is a deeply rewarding and satisfying experience. Current faith-based community gardens in Montgomery County include Northwood Presbyterian in Silver Spring, St. Luke's Episcopal in Bethesda, B'nai Israel in Rockville, Salem United Methodist in Brookeville, and Mt. Calvary Baptist in Rockville. All were established in the past 1-2 years. The following tips are offered to you from their experience:

## ***Why start a garden?***

The most important motivation for faith-based communities to start gardens is the opportunity to help those in need, especially during these difficult times, but other reasons include educating young people on healthy eating habits and where their food comes from, healing the earth, and providing a green space to benefit the local neighborhood.

## ***How many people does it take to start a garden?***

While you will want to involve as many of your congregation as possible, the effort usually starts with just one or two committed individuals.

## ***Is it easy to get others in the congregation involved?***

After moving it through the appropriate organizational process or structure, most found it easy, even "surprisingly easy," to get others to participate in the project, either with their time, money, or in-kind contributions. Fellow congregants can volunteer for a variety of reasons, including youth and memorial projects, and those with related businesses can make contributions of labor or materials, such as building raised beds or a deer fence. Everyone can play a role. Plan carefully on how to use your volunteers - one faith community divided their volunteers into different interest groups, including garden preparers, planters, weeders, and waterers/harvesters/distributors.

## ***Who else can help?***

Many businesses outside your faith-based community will be willing to contribute labor and materials to your garden, and such contributions at current gardens include plants, seeds, tools, soil, deer fencing and hardware. Always take your letterhead and a copy of your tax-exempt status with you when you visit merchants - at the very least you're likely to get a discount.

Foundations and civic organizations, whether Maryland-based or particular to your denomination, can provide grants to help with start-up costs.

The Master Gardeners of Montgomery County are committed to providing consultation for new community gardens, and many local groups, particularly youth groups, can volunteer in the garden. Girl and Boy Scout troops have been especially helpful to the existing faith-based community gardens in our county, and even neighbors, who are not part of the congregation but who live next door, have provided significant assistance. Local high school students can also volunteer as a way to earn their required Service Learning Credits.

## ***What can you grow?***

The current faith-based community gardens are growing virtually everything that can be grown in the mid-Atlantic region, including lettuce, radishes, carrots, beans, peppers, collards, tomatoes, zucchini, basil and other herbs, eggplant, peas, turnips, summer and winter squash, onions, spinach, cucumbers, and fruits such as strawberries and blueberries.

## ***What can you do with the produce you grow?***

Contribution of fresh produce to those in need was a primary motivation for all the faith-based community gardens. Food pantries such as Manna Food Center and Shepherd's Table will gladly distribute your produce to those in need, as will smaller, more local shelters, soup kitchens or community mental health facilities.

## ***What are the main challenges to overcome?***

Challenges reported by current faith-based community gardeners include keeping up with the weeds, keeping up with the harvest, and coordinating the volunteers.

## ***What benefits can you expect?***

Current faith-based community gardeners report a multitude of positive outcomes, including but not limited to: the sense of accomplishment from working together; community development, both inside and outside the congregation; cross-generational collaboration and learning; embracing religious traditions of healing and repairing the world; and being able to provide fresh nutritious food - often hundreds of pounds! - to those in need.

## ***What's the most important piece of advice you can follow?***

Current faith-based community gardeners offer these pieces of advice to anyone starting a community garden in their own house of worship: start with a small group of committed individuals, but work hard to involve the entire congregation in some way; look for ways to make the process educational, and to make connections to your faith tradition; enlist people, especially young people, from the community outside the congregation; start small and do realistic planning, especially when it comes to people's time and maintaining the garden over the summer and into the fall; choose hardy, generally easy crops in the beginning; keep a garden log and update the congregation throughout the process; expect surprises and have fun!

***All of the current faith-based community gardens in Montgomery County are planning to continue or expand their gardening in the coming year. We hope this tip sheet will help you join this rapidly growing group!***

*We welcome your inquiries:*



**Montgomery Victory Gardens**

**montgomeryvictorygardens.org**

**301.801.3406**

**822 Gist Avenue, Suite 100**

**Silver Spring, MD 20910**