



Let's Grow in Simcoe

Celebrate the role of
community gardens as
a community
engagement and well-
being strategy in your
municipality.



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About this document

This is a resource showcasing community gardens' potential as a community engagement and community food access strategy.

This toolkit is for community organizations, volunteer groups, and municipalities coordinating, supporting, or collaborating on community gardens in Simcoe County.

1

LEARN

Understand the role community gardens play in our community, review the findings from the 2021 Community Garden Survey in Simcoe County and use the resources included at the end of the toolkit.

2

SHARE

Talk to your team, colleagues, and neighbours about the role community gardens can have in your community.

3

CONNECT

Plan a meeting between your local municipality and community organizations to discuss your community gardens and explore opportunities for programming and citizen engagement. Reach out to the Simcoe County Food Council to join our quarterly community garden network to share program updates and exchange best practices.

4

EVALUATE

Measure the impact of your community garden and programming using the evaluation tool in this toolkit.

Our story so far

Simcoe County Food Council

The Simcoe County Food Council is a community-based network in Simcoe County, which believes that access to safe, nutritious, affordable, and culturally appropriate food through dignified means is not a privilege, but a right. We are committed to enhancing community food security and reducing household food insecurity in Simcoe County.

To learn more about the Simcoe County Food Council, you can:

Watch this short [video](#)

Visit our [website](#)

Sign-up for our [newsletter](#)

Follow us on [Instagram](#)

Community Garden Network

In 2021, we established the Community Garden Network of Simcoe County. The group is open to organizations, groups, or municipalities leading or supporting community gardens. We hold quarterly meetings and share updates, best practices, and resources.

Our conversations led us to create this document, celebrate the role of community gardens, and share research on community engagement.



Defining our work

There are four key terms that the Simcoe County Food Council uses that are important to define and differentiate. Clarifying these terms ensures that programs and initiatives are created purposefully, have clear and evidenced-based outcomes, and meet the needs of our community members.

1

POVERTY

Living on a low income is not a personal choice. Systems, structures, and policies can impact a person's income and earning potential starting from birth. While there are many definitions of poverty, [Canada's First Poverty Reduction Strategy](#) defines poverty as "the condition of a person who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain a basic level of living standards and to facilitate integration and participation in society."

2

HOUSEHOLD FOOD INSECURITY

Household food insecurity is experienced when an individual or household lacks the financial resources to access food. It can happen to any individual or family experiencing a financial crisis. When someone is experiencing food insecurity, they are likely struggling with other basic needs as well, for example, inadequate or insecure housing, lack of money for necessities such as prescription medications, dental care, telephone, transportation, clothing, and struggling with depression, anxiety, and social isolation.

Adapted from: [Household Food Insecurity in Canada - Proof](#)

3

FOOD SECURITY

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.¹

4

COMMUNITY FOOD ACCESS

Community food access relates to food access and availability at the community level. It studies the local food system as it relates to the production and provision of food available to the public through retailers, farmer's markets, and food access programs like community gardens, food programs, and temporary food relief programs.

Reflection

Community food access initiatives can address immediate food needs, support skill development, build community, and foster relationships. These programs can provide temporary food relief for some people but cannot address the root causes of poverty and household food insecurity.

Income security policies and programs are needed to solve household food insecurity and end poverty.

Do you use the terms above interchangeably?

Do you understand the difference?

Can you identify why community food access initiatives can't solve poverty and household food insecurity?

How can you make changes to ensure you use the best language for your work?



A deeper look

Community gardens can be a key tool in shaping our communities to improve the physical, mental, social, and spiritual health of our communities. Significant research reinforces the power of bringing people together in nature.

Community gardens are open spaces managed and operated by community members cultivating food and flowers.² Community gardens have been eloquently described as “[allowing] a diverse population to come together to practice something they are mutually interested in, in a meaningful way to enhance social ties, leadership, strengthen community, and promote better health by deepening the reciprocity between neighbours.”³

Community gardens aren't new. They date back thousands of years. For example, “Victory Gardens” gained popularity during the second world war as a form of community mobilization for vegetable production.⁴ Different styles of gardens meet different needs of the community, ranging from allotments, collective or cooperative gardens, healing gardens, institutional gardens and community orchards. The experience of urban gardening and farming offers a range of benefits to the gardener and the community.⁵

Deep Dive: Read about the role community gardens play in Poland through this [article](#) or this quick [video](#). Polish allotment gardeners who cultivate publicly-owned urban spaces represent Poland's largest land managers or users.

Community gardens do not address the root causes of poverty despite helping some individuals and families with supplemental produce during the gardening season.

PROOF defines household food insecurity as experienced when an individual or household lacks the financial resources to purchase food.⁶ When someone is experiencing household food insecurity, they are likely struggling with other basic needs. These may include inadequate or insecure housing, lack of money for necessities such as prescription medications, dental care, telephone, and transportation, and struggling with depression, anxiety, and social isolation.

Research has consistently shown that income-based interventions are needed to alleviate this problem.⁷ Despite the increase in vegetable and fruit availability during the growing season, research has also demonstrated that individuals who are most food insecure are less likely to garden for food⁸ or participate in community food programming to offset financial constraints.⁹ Poverty is a “wicked problem” that requires multi-level government interventions to support those who can't afford to put food on the table. Advocacy for income-based policies at all levels of government is crucial to reducing poverty.

When we talk about community gardens, let's ensure we focus on the benefits we know come from participating in local programs. If poverty reduction is a primary focus, advocate for income solutions so everyone can put food on the table.

Deep Dive: Read, review and listen to the [research](#) on food skills and those who are food insecure.

A deeper look

Despite not addressing poverty, community gardens and being in nature are helpful health promotion tools for our communities.

Significant research demonstrates the many benefits of gardening, ranging from improved physical health through increased movement and physical activity¹⁰ to increased fruit and vegetable intake,¹¹ which are linked to lower rates of chronic disease and depression¹² and improved food literacy skills, particularly among children and youth.¹³

Other benefits of community gardens are improved mental health and well-being, community engagement and social cohesion, and supporting marginalized and vulnerable populations.



Research has demonstrated that community gardens can uniquely improve their gardeners' mental health and well-being.

Mental health and well-being are complex and multi-faceted definitions. Mental health is a term to capture our emotional, psychological, and social well-being.¹⁴ The Center for Disease Control and Prevention defines well-being as:

“A positive outcome that is meaningful for people and for many sectors of society because it tells us that people perceive that their lives are going well. Good living conditions (e.g., housing, employment) are fundamental to well-being.”

Stress is a normal response to situational pressures and demands.¹⁵ Still, when experienced chronically (i.e. those who are homeless), stress is linked to higher chronic disease rates, depression and poor health outcomes.¹⁶

Spending time in nature (nature therapy or ecotherapy) and readily available green space in urban communities has been long shown to reduce stress,¹⁷ anxiety¹⁸ and depression among all ages and communities.¹⁹

A deeper look

In this detailed research paper, community gardens showed a:

- Positive influence on longevity for seniors
- Enhanced social connection and reduced loneliness
- Increased self-esteem amongst gardeners (which is linked to lower rates of depression)
- Enhanced sense of achievement and an opportunity to step away from everyday stressors (improving well-being)
- Improved mood
- Reduced stress in challenging settings like domestic violence shelters
- Reduced perceived stress

The article linked at the beginning of this section provides a detailed summary of the benefits and research in community gardening, nature, and well-being. Despite a direct causal relationship, community gardens demonstrate that being in nature, moving our bodies, and building connections are good for our well-being. Click [here](#) to read more about community gardens and their impact on self-perceived optimism, openness, and self-esteem as factors to resilience.



A deeper look

As our communities grow and change, community gardens can be a tool to build social cohesion amongst citizens.

Social cohesion can be defined as people in a society feeling and being connected.²⁰ In [this detailed paper](#), researchers discuss how gardens create social cohesion by:

1. Support networking and provide shared “third spaces” and joint activities
2. Gardens invite people to use beautiful public green spaces
3. Working community to beautiful green space
4. Social aspects of growing, cooking and eating amongst a diverse population

We know communal gardening spaces enhance our relationships and social connections.²¹ Community gardens can promote social connection, mutual trust, collective decision-making, and civic engagement, which is needed after more than two years of a pandemic.²² And to ensure the success of food access interventions, community engagement is critical to its sustainability.²³

Deep Dive: We are often quick to focus on individual behaviours such as eating the “right food” or doing the “right exercise” to improve our health. We often forget the power of close social ties on physical and mental well-being. Read the research about the Roseto Effect [here](#) or watch [this](#) short video.

With intention and thoughtfulness, community gardens can transform the lives of those who are most vulnerable.

Seniors have notably reported increased quality of life and social interactions with access to gardens in institutions or the community.²⁴ Refugees' and newcomers' participation in community gardening programs can increase individuals' self-worth, independence and sense of belonging.² Programs that directly serve Black People, Indigenous People, and People of Colour (BIPOC) can enhance physical and mental well-being, social connection, and access and knowledge of traditional foods.²

The language we use to describe the purpose and role of the garden can dictate if we meet the needs of our intended populations. Community gardens may intend to support vulnerable and marginalized people. Still, without input from these groups, we end up missing the mark. In one study, the community garden program was created without a diverse group providing input. The gardening program's framing and promotion did not resonate with the intended audience and resulted in low participation rates.

When we develop community garden programs, it is essential to work with organizations that are led by and support your intended population, especially those who are racialized, disabled, and LGBTQ2S+. In research like [here](#) and [here](#), community engagement was the determining factor of success with the different food access programs.

Important considerations

Libraries

Many libraries in the county already lead initiatives and programming around food literacy. We see libraries playing an important role in strengthening community garden programs in Simcoe County and building social capital. Seed libraries, tool lending and gardening workshops are important initiatives that can be run alone or in partnership with community organizations, and health professionals like Registered Dietitians can improve food literacy.

Schools

The benefits of garden-based, experiential learning in the classroom are well known.²⁵ These include improved academic performance,²⁶ increased fruit and vegetable intake,²⁷ and improved communication and relationship building.²⁸ Bringing local schools into the conversation to explore sharing resources is important in fostering the mental health and well-being of children and youth in the community.

Resource Management and Allocation

As partners in creating successful community gardens, citizens, community organizations and municipalities have different roles to play. Research has shown that community gardens thrive when significant "bottom-up" grassroots engagement exists in their organization. When citizens play a substantial role in planning and day-to-day operations, there is a higher likelihood that the community's specific food access needs can be met.

Community organizations, like food banks or schools, can help publicize garden activities or events or may be able to assist with administrative resources, like printing posters or providing an indoor meeting space for the organizing committee. Municipalities have access to resources like land in parks, undeveloped public lots, water from municipal irrigation, and compost from city-run waste facilities.

Community gardens flourish when individuals, community organizations and municipal actors play to their strengths by committing to provide the resources they are uniquely positioned to offer. Analyzing which assets each group can best contribute will allow gardeners to spend time digging in the soil instead of struggling with complex administrative tasks. Likewise, we want to respect municipalities' capacity and ensure there is a sustainable approach to program success.

The impact of community gardens in Simcoe County

In 2021, gardeners completed an anonymous survey to share their experience in community gardens in Simcoe County.

"The community garden is not always about growing vegetables, it is about community & making connections and friendships also"

87

% of participants said they met new neighbours and community members at their community garden.

69

% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their consumption of vegetables and fruits increased while using a community garden.

"My favorite parts are enjoying and sharing the yields. Love seeing what people are growing. Mainly though its the interaction with the garden and neighborhood community."

85

% of participants said they felt more connected to their community through their membership at a local garden.

"It helps to stay grounded in uncertain times."

69

% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they tried new foods, recipes and cooked more meals at home.

* based on 55 responses

** responses shared with permission

Reflective questions

Whether you are thinking about starting a community garden, are in your first year, or have 100 plots, it's always important to reflect on your work.

Take time with your staff, volunteers and garden members and have an open and honest conversation.

1. How do you ensure your staff supports your community gardens and your members?
2. In what ways do you support and nurture your volunteers? Do you celebrate them during the season?
3. How do you evaluate the impact of your community garden program?
4. How do gardeners provide feedback on their gardening experience throughout the season?
5. Who are your community partners? Who is missing from the conversation?
6. What steps are you taking to support marginalized communities in your gardening spaces intentionally?
7. What role does your library play in your community garden program?
8. What do you hope gardeners take away from being a member of your community garden program? Are there steps you need to take to make this happen?
9. How do you define success when it comes to your community garden program?
10. How are you working with local schools to help?
11. How could the local library take a lead role in food literacy?



Community Garden Survey Tool

It is essential to build evaluation into your community garden program to understand the experience of the gardeners and volunteers, successes, challenges, and opportunities for next year.

Below is an adaption of the [Adult Gardener Survey](#) that you can use with your community garden program. Consider offering this both electronically and in paper format. Get the PDF version [here](#).

Section 1

1. What community garden are you a member of?

2. How long have you been a member of your community garden?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- Greater than 5 years

3. How often do you usually participate in garden activities?

- Daily
- Most Days of the Week
- 1-2 days a week
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a month
- Not often

4. What do you like best about coming to the community garden?

5. In what ways do you think your life is different because of the community garden?

Section 2

Now that I am a member of a community garden...

6. I have a greater sense of well-being.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

7. I have learned more about gardening and growing my food.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. I know more about the environment.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Community Garden Survey Tool

Section 2

Now that I am a member of a community garden...

9. I eat more fruits and vegetables.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

10. I eat new kinds of food.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

11. I spend less money on food.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

12. I am cooking more meals from scratch

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

13. I am better able to provide food for my family and myself

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

14. I know my neighbours/ fellow community members better

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15. I feel more connected to my community

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

16. I am donating/ giving extra food to other people or organizations

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Section 3

17. Do you have other comments about the garden?

Community Garden Resources

Community Garden Toolkits

[Dig It! A Practical Toolkit: How local governments can support community gardens](#)

[Community Garden Best Practices Toolkit](#)
[Community Gardens Toolkit](#)

Community Garden Resources

[Community Gardens - 10 Steps to Start a Community Garden](#)

[Community Gardens - Community Gardening 101](#)

[Community Gardens - Frequently Asked Questions about Community Gardens](#)

[Community Gardens - Gardening with Children](#)

[Community Gardens - Gardening with People with Disabilities](#)

[Community Gardens - Month by Month](#)

[Community Gardens - Seed Saving](#)

[Community Gardens - Seed Starting](#)

[Community Gardens - Succession Planting](#)

[Community Gardens - What Makes a Successful Community Garden](#)

[Composting - Presentation](#)

[Compost Breakdown Manual](#)

[Growing Sprouts + Seedlings](#)

[How Does Our Garden Grow](#)

Seed Libraries

[Seed Lending Library Toolkit \(2012-formatting is older but still helpful\)](#)

Pollinator Groups

[Bee City Canada](#)

- [Simcoe County Honey Trail](#)
- [Bee Cities in Ontario \(7 in Simcoe County\)](#)

[Pollinator Partnership Canada](#)

Horticultural Societies in Simcoe County

[List of Horticultural Societies from Garden Ontario](#)

[Simcoe County Master Gardeners](#)



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