

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

Daniel McIntyre / St. Matthew's Community Association (DMSMCA)

www.dmsmca.ca

ORIOLES COMMUNITY GARDEN

"Green space can really shift the energy of a place," says Kemlin Nembhard, Executive Director at DMSMCA. In the Daniel McIntyre and St. Matthew's neighbourhoods, community gardens really are a refreshing sight. But they are also much more than that.

For DMSMCA, gardening was a natural way to accomplish several neighbourhood renewal goals identified by the community in their comprehensive five-year neighbourhood plan, which was developed through extensive consultations. Some of these goals included: improving the physical environment, supporting recreational opportunities, increasing safety and food security, and fostering community involvement. According to Kemlin, the key to success for a garden strategy like DMSMCA's is simultaneous action on three interrelated challenges: location, funding, and community buy-in.

Location, Location, Location!

Finding the right space for community gardening will be a unique endeavour for every project. At the time, DMSMCA was located at the Orioles Community Centre - an older building with an unused set of concrete tennis and basketball courts. Gardens could help achieve the community plan, while also dealing with the Community Centre's "wasteland of con-

crete in a place that doesn't have enough green space."

Developing that first garden at Orioles Community Centre included a long process with the City of Winnipeg and the community centre. Building strong, long-term relationships with the owners of your potential locations is essential. In the case of municipalities or school divisions, the land-use process may take several months as your application will need to be detailed and must go through the bureaucratic process. Considerations might also be made for the sizes available, distance from the most interested community residents, and access to water.

Water is a central, essential concern for gardening, but is frequently overlooked when making initial plans. Find out where the nearest water source is, how you can connect to it, or if you can create a new water source. Using rain water is an environmentally friendly idea, but may not be enough for productive gardens on its own. Think about your potential water needs based on your location and type of plots. Most container gardens, for example, need extra water. If the garden is in a wide open space, it will likely get a lot of wind and sunlight, also increasing your water needs.

The type of land available for gardening is also incredibly important, particularly when determining

the type of gardens you will create. For DMSMCA, the Orioles site was covered in concrete, so in-ground gardening was not an option. They built raised bed gardens, high enough so that potential gardeners with mobility issues could still easily participate. If you are using raised beds in areas that may have contaminated soils, get the soil tested and seal the garden beds from the soil below. Alternatively, you can use container gardens, where the plot is fully separate from the ground (using raised boxes or planters). Check online, talk to local home gardeners for their experience, or head to the local library or bookstore for resources on garden designs and construction.

"If you're creating a raised bed over contaminated soil, you need to create a barrier between the toxins and the clean, new soil. Before filling, cover the bottom of the raised bed with landscape fabric that will allow air and water movement through the bed but prevent plant roots from reaching the tainted soil below."
(<http://landscapeforlife.org/soil/3f.php>)

Looking back on the DMSMCA process, Kemlin wishes she had negotiated longer-term land-use agreements with more secure conditions, in case the property owners want to change or terminate their ability to use the locations.

Finding Funding

One of the reasons Kemlin advises to take these first steps simultaneously, is that funders will often want specific details about the garden location. In particular, funders will want to know that you have access to land and that you have received written permission to use the land. Securing enough funds early in your planning is also important because the greatest costs of a community gardening program are the materials, labour, and facilitation needed to design, build, and start the gardens. Sustained funding for upkeep and organization as the program continues and grows is also essential, although the ongoing operation of the garden will cost less than the start-up phase.

Because gardening is a seasonal affair, a good source of funding for garden coordinators or assistants is the Manitoba Green Team program and other similar summer employment programs. These funding

sources can provide you with young workers to help for the key growing season, while also supporting an existing or part-time staff member to do any additional off-season work. As an added benefit, the Green Team program creates excellent entry level positions for local youth to gain important employment skills and income. Funding programs designated for health and nutrition, education, or community engagement may also present opportunities to support a workshop series or a community work event to build gardens together.

Gardening is one program area that may have some unconventional sources for funds and in-kind contributions. Many banks, credit unions and other businesses have community funding available for environmental, gardening, or greening initiatives. Hardware and gardening stores might also be willing to contribute in-kind labour or gardening materials. Given that materials are one of the biggest up-front costs for gardening, these donations can significantly improve your ability to mobilize and secure required resources.

Other cost-saving measures include using recycled materials to build container gardens, and building relationships with people or businesses that could provide soil or lumber. In Winnipeg, the Salvage Supermarket or Habitat for Humanity's RE-Store are valuable resources for affordable materials. Lastly, be sure to include a composting plan as part of the overall design, as this is an inexpensive way to keep your soil healthy year after year.

Community Engagement

It is virtually impossible to begin any community development project without first engaging local residents in the process. However, it is also difficult to hold community engagement events if you haven't identified potential locations and funding sources.

In the off-season, before the first garden opened, DMSMCA held a community meeting to ask local residents what they wanted from a gardening program, since gardening was not originally identified by the community as a strategic priority. The community was overwhelmingly supportive of the gardening program, and it has shown to meet several neighbourhood objectives. Kemlin suggests that going to the community with a tentative plan while being open to community suggestions is an effective process that will pay off down the road. Taking initiative, but remaining open-minded helps demonstrate the program's potential, while still allowing people to participate and take on leadership roles in making it happen.

Participants at the first DMSMCA garden meeting decided that community leadership could be developed through the creation of a Gardening Committee (now a broader Greening Committee), which met again within a few weeks of the initial meeting. Using templates and examples from other community gardens in Winnipeg, the committee developed Garden Agreements, made plans to build the gardens together, and decided on the gardens' governing structure.

Since those first planning meetings, there has been no shortage of interest, with a constant waiting list for new gardeners. While at first participating gardeners were mostly local homeowners, as time passed and the garden matured newcomers and renters in the neighbourhood also began participating.

Helpful Tips

Here are some hints Kemlin offered to help you manage the organizing and capacity building side of gardening:

- 1) Have clear and detailed garden applications and agreements

- 2) Use already established examples and frameworks to create community responsibility and leadership
- 3) Use the gardens as an educational opportunity to further increase capacity of gardeners and the community in general.

The garden agreements lay out everyone's responsibilities clearly. This will help increase coordination and efficiency, while decreasing the potential for conflict resulting from misunderstandings later on. You may need different agreements for each garden site, although DMSMCA has been able to use the same template for their current gardens.

Gardening and food processing workshops, which are available to all community members, have been a successful component of the garden program. These workshops cover a range of topics from seed starting to composting to cooking ideas. Learning events increase the capacity of local people and get the community engaged in gardening and active with the NRC.

Enjoy the Multiple Benefits of Gardens

Kemlin reminds anyone looking to develop a community gardening initiative to work simultaneously towards these first steps of finding locations, securing funding and other resources, and engaging the local community. If done well, everything will be in place and the community will be very involved when your garden opens. And finally, look forward to all the benefits of gardening! It is an effective way to bring the community together, achieve multiple community objectives, build trust and visibility in the community, and provide food and recreation opportunities to people.

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