

What does it take to make a good community garden?



Photo by Janet Piotrowski: The Fort Braden Community Garden is an excellent example of how a community worked together to establish a community vegetable garden.

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Citizens in the Ft. Braden area of Tallahassee have established a community vegetable garden. It serves as an excellent example for other groups that may wish to establish community gardens.

It all started a couple of years ago with a small group of citizens interested in a community garden in the area. Ft. Braden is by no means urban, so the motivation was not due to shortage of land but rather to a desire for building community. The group identified some county owned property at the library which was once used as a ball field and they approached their county commissioner, Jane Sauls, with the idea. After she presented the idea to the other commissioners, the Board was amenable to the idea. Eventually, after a public hearing, final approval was given.

The Leon County Commissioners also provided support for infrastructure upgrade at the site. They installed an eight foot high perimeter fence and upgraded the pump at the well to allow for the increased water usage from irrigation. They also installed a culvert in the ditch by the road to allow vehicular access to the garden area.

While the county was engaged in the upgrading of the facilities the garden group met often to try and establish rules and guidelines that would govern the garden. The group visited the Havana community garden, which has been in existence for at least five years and has been very successful. After the meeting they decided to adopt some of the guiding principles of the Havana garden and from that came the rules and guidelines of the Ft Braden Community Garden.

The group was still very small, and at times they wondered how they would ever fill all of the thirty-three plots that they decided on. Because of their small size, communication was quick and easy and words turned to action fast. When the entire infrastructure was in place they openly advertised the vacant plots and soon the numbers began to grow. An executive body was named and the group soon discovered the various talents of the individuals and had them working in areas of their strengths.

The group decided that they would allow individuals some freedom of choice in their gardening methods, but there were a few restrictions. Commercial fertilizers were allowed, but pesticides were limited to those that were organic and only those organics that did not harm beneficial insects. Initially it was a big challenge getting rid of the Bermuda grass that persisted from the ball field. Controlling such an aggressive weed without the use of herbicides was trying. Many strategies were used, ranging from solarization to heavy mulching with cardboard along with wood chips on top. Even though it was an arduous task the grass was eventually eliminated.

A website was set up to post the rules and regulations, meeting dates, pictures from previous activities, etc. Email was used to keep members abreast of day to day activities and circulate interesting or helpful gardening information.

In less than a year of operation, the Ft Braden Garden is filled to capacity and a waiting list established. The garden has been transformed into an attraction for the community. Schools have used it as destination for field trips and area citizens just stop by because of their fascination with all the activities taking place on the premises.

The garden now has two bat houses, a beehive, and four active compost piles. The city of Tallahassee has donated six “earth machine” composters and six rain barrels for rain water harvesting.

The members would love to accommodate all the residents wishing to join the group. There are talks of expansion, but it would be costly. The minimal dues paid by the members will not cover the cost for more fencing and another well or improvements of the current one. The leadership is looking at getting the organization registered as a 501c corporation, thus qualifying them for grant opportunities.

The garden might not have changed the world but it has certainly changed the Fort Braden community. It is a beacon in the community, shining brightly for others to see.

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