

INTERBAY P-PATCH FOOD BANK GARDEN BEST PRACTICES

By Jude Berman and Deb Rock

Food bank gardening, also known as giving gardening, is a hugely gratifying process with multiple benefits for growers and recipients alike. It is a fabulous form of community building that brings people of all ages and backgrounds together. It teaches valuable skills and demonstrates the value and pleasure of volunteering in a very tangible way. A good program imbues volunteers with a vision and a mission, mentors them so that they can teach and lead others, and empowers them within the larger community. And, of course, it provides beautiful, healthy produce for people who are struggling to put food on the table.

These Best Practices were developed by Jude Berman and Deb Rock of the Interbay P-Patch Food Bank Garden, which has been donating fresh, organic veggies to those in need since 1988 and is the oldest continuously operating giving garden program in Seattle. In our opinion, food bank gardening is as much about the people as it is about the gardening. Build a strong team of volunteers inspired by a clear vision and you can do just about anything!

BASIC REQUIREMENTS

1. Leadership with vision and commitment

The volunteer leader must have a vision to inspire others and a commitment to stay with the program and see the vision fulfilled. People have to know who the leader is, when that person is available and how s/he can be reached.

Strong leadership is essential to building a good team. The leader has to “own” the giving garden program and be proud of it, so that others will feel the same. A good leader is a teacher, a manager, a relationship builder. S/he teaches basic skills, demonstrates proper techniques and practices, gives direction, makes people feel successful and helps everyone learn from their mistakes.

2. Consistency

Set a day and time for your work party and stick to it religiously. The day of the week could be coordinated with distribution day at the food bank that receives your donations, or, if that is not critical, it should be when volunteers are most likely to come.

(For well over a decade, Interbay food bank garden work parties have been held every Tuesday from 5:30 p.m. until dusk, from the season kickoff in mid-April until the end of October. We publicize this regularly in our garden e-newsletter and everyone knows that food bank gardening is on Tuesday evening. We never miss a Tuesday. Someone is always there to lead the work party, no matter who shows up. Sometimes we have 5 people, sometimes we have 20.)

3. A high fun quotient

All work and no play spell death for any volunteer program. If people aren't having fun, they won't come back, no matter how worthy the cause. Always mix business with pleasure as you tend your giving garden and you will reap a harvest beyond your wildest dreams.

GETTING STARTED

You need only a few basic things to run a giving garden: volunteers, seeds and starts, and tools.

VOLUNTEERS

1. Where to find volunteers

- **Start within your own P-Patch.** Make sure everyone knows where the food bank plots are, who is in charge of the program, when you meet, etc. Put signs and A-boards around the garden to remind people when your work party is, or to publicize an event like your kickoff. If you have a newsletter, put something about food bank gardening in each issue. Make a point of hanging out in the garden when people are most likely to be there, then walk around and introduce yourself. Talk about the food bank gardening program and how people can help. Not everyone can come to a work party, but many people are interested in growing a row for the hungry in their own plot. (See the section below on Gleaning.) Others might be available for spot weeding or extra watering during the hot summer months. Find a way for everyone who shows the least bit of interest to participate – and make sure everyone knows that the time they put in counts toward their P-Patch hours requirement!
- **Talk to anyone** who happens to be strolling through your garden, tell them about your giving garden and let them know volunteers are welcome.
- Put **calls for volunteers** in your local newspaper, blogs, etc. You can get free coverage from local media by sending press releases or making phone calls to publicize your kick-off or other events in your giving garden. Interbay program leader Deb Rock famously placed a notice in the Magnolia/Queen Anne News, advertising “free lessons in organic gardening.” One person showed up with a notepad and pencil, and was given a pair of gloves and a hoe instead. She’s been a regular volunteer for 10 years now.
- **Get your local schools involved.** High school students need service learning hours, middle and elementary schools always enjoy a hands-on field trip.
- **Churches and community groups** are always looking for interesting volunteer opportunities. Contact those in your neighborhood, or go through gardeners who are involved with them.
- **Contact Seattle Works** at www.seattleworks.org

2. Maintaining your volunteer team

- Make sure everyone wears a **name tag** at every work party (see Work Parties, below).
- Keep **contact info** on every volunteer and build an email list (see Communication, below).
- Keep an **hours logbook** with a sheet for each volunteer and make sure everyone enters the time they spend in the giving garden.
- **Get personal.** As you dig and weed and plant, ask people how their week is going so far. Show an interest in your volunteers and their lives and encourage everyone to develop personal relationships with each other. Volunteers show up because of the gardening, but they keep coming back because of the friendships and sense of community that develops over time when people work together consistently towards a common goal.
- **Eat and drink together** when you’ve finished working! After the seeds have been planted, the harvest tallied, the compost turned and the tools washed and put away, there’s nothing quite like breaking bread together as the sun goes down. Of course, what you do and how you do it will depend on the time of day, your picnic facilities, etc. The point is to make time for team-building. Spending time together as a group doing something other than working in the giving garden really helps cement your team. At Interbay, we even make an effort to get together during the winter for fun and games!

SEEDS AND STARTS

- **Lettuce Link**, which is part of Solid Ground, receives large donations of seed, which it distributes to giving gardens across the city. Lettuce Link also coordinates the distribution of free plant starts grown by volunteers in backyard greenhouses that are springing up around the city. Contact Lettuce Link at (206) 694-6751 or <http://www.solid-ground.org/programs/nutrition/lettuce/pages/default.aspx>
- **Local hardware stores**, supermarkets and garden centers often give away unsold seeds at the end of the year. Make contact and let them know you're interested.
- **P-Patch gardeners** usually have extra seed to share. Spread the word and make sure people know exactly what type of seeds you're looking for. Also encourage gardeners to donate their extra starts. Everyone sows more seed than they need and it's nice when thinnings don't go to waste.
- **Blues for Food Fest** (www.bluesforfoodfest.org) raises money to support giving gardens in Seattle. If you can't get enough seed through donations, Blues for Food Fest can provide the funds to purchase some.

TOOLS

- Large tools, including wheelbarrows, are provided by your P-Patch. Some hand tools may be available, too. It's a good idea to ask volunteers to bring their own gloves and hand tools, if they have them. Over the years, at Interbay, we have collected a bag of assorted gloves, plus various hand tools, scissors and small knives (for harvesting). These are the kinds of items that people tend to have several of, so it's just a matter of keeping your eyes and ears open and not being afraid to ask.

WORK PARTIES

You've set your date, called for volunteers and people have shown up, ready to work. Now what?

- **Greet everyone and hand out name tags.** This is an incredibly important first step and we recommend doing it every single time. A lot of people may know you, the leader, but you may not know them, and they probably don't know each other. Also, people come and go, so a name tag is a very helpful reminder for everyone. Remember: you are growing a volunteer community, not just vegetables, and getting to know everyone's name is an absolute necessity.
- **Walk through your giving garden together.** The walk-through is the best way to determine what needs to be done that day. You may have a general idea of what you want to accomplish (plant a crop, turn the compost) but the garden will tell you what **MUST** be done. As you stroll through, focus on specifics, comment on what is happening and explain what needs to be done and why.

Another benefit of the group walk-through is that people get to see the whole process from one week to the next. It is very helpful – and exciting – for volunteers to see that the tiny little seed they planted a week or two ago is turning into an identifiable plant, or to realize that they planted some starts too close together (or too far apart), or to see the difference in growth between rows that got well watered and those that didn't. The walk-through is an incomparable teaching opportunity.

Also, as you identify specific tasks (harvesting, weeding, planting, compost turning) volunteers can choose which one suits them best, or which one they would like to learn. Some people are loners, others are more sociable. Some like to stay relatively clean, others love to get dirty. Never underestimate the value of pairing the right volunteer with the right job.

- **Each one teach one.** In the beginning, everyone turns to the leader asking "What should I do?" or "Did I do this right?" The leader is, in fact, "the boss," providing direction and supervising the work, but the smart leader delegates tasks to more experienced volunteers, and places them in charge of newer, less experienced ones. People learn by watching and doing, and a friendly, patient mentor is worth his/her weight in gold. As volunteers become more comfortable in the garden, they, in turn, teach others, and that's how you grow a competent, confident team.

GROWING

- Never stop building your soil. Use the all-purpose fertilizer provided by the P-Patch program, as well as any other soil amendments you can come up with. Make compost and use it throughout the season as a mulch between rows. Ask P-Patch gardeners to contribute a bucket or wheelbarrow of their own compost. Plant cover crops in the winter. The richer and healthier your soil, the more intensively you can plant.
- Plant intensively. If you keep enriching your soil, you can really pack in a lot of plants, which will produce higher yields.
- Water regularly. There is no substitution for a good, deep watering a few times a week during the hot, dry summer months.
- Weed ferociously and mulch between rows to suppress weed growth. Weeds rob valuable nutrients and moisture from your crops and can make a huge difference in yields.
- Rotate your crops to keep the soil healthy. Alternate leafy crops with root crops, brassicas with non-brassicas, nightshades with non-nightshades. This may not always be possible, but do the best you can to move things around.
- Use row markers to identify specific crops. If the marker is big enough, add the planting date and any special needs, such as extra watering for cucumbers.

HARVESTING

- Try to harvest a clean product. Brush, shake or rinse off extra soil, remove yellowed leaves, trim roots and stems. Make your donations look attractive enough for a farm stand. Your recipients will be hugely appreciative!
- Weigh everything you harvest and arrange it attractively in bins, baskets or bags.
- If produce will not be delivered right away, be sure to store it in a shady place. Bunches of kale and chard can be left overnight in buckets of water to keep them fresh and crisp.

GLEANING

- Gleaning refers to the practice of harvesting produce from P-Patch plots, with the gardener's permission. Many gardeners love to "grow an extra row for the hungry" idea. The point is to encourage all gardeners to donate produce and to prevent good food from going to waste. But gleaning is a delicate matter that requires very clear communication.
- Different P-Patches have different policies. At Interbay, we ask gardeners to plant a brightly painted "gleaning stick" in their plot beside the crop they want gleaned, and then email the food bank garden coordinator specifying exactly what to take (e.g. half the chard, every other romaine, the specially marked row of beans, all the zucchini that mature while I'm on vacation, etc.). In other P-Patches, the giving garden has ongoing permission to harvest lightly wherever there is an abundance of produce. You will have to work out a system that works best in your garden.
- **Gleaning rule #1:** Never harvest produce from anyone's plot without explicit permission.

RECORD-KEEPING

- You will need to keep track of your harvest. A simple produce donation sheet is a table with 4 columns: Date, Type of Produce, Weight, Cumulative Total. At Interbay, we keep two clipboards by the scale – one for produce harvested from the dedicated food bank beds and one for produce donated by individual gardeners. Keeping the two separate makes it easier to calculate data at the end of the year. N.B. Everyone makes mistakes in addition, so check the cumulative total regularly. 😊
- Post the cumulative donation total (i.e. from food bank beds and individual gardeners) every week on a whiteboard, blackboard or other method of display for everyone in the garden to see. As the number increases over the season, it becomes a source of pride for all volunteers and inspires everyone to keep donating.
- Keep a record of each season in the giving garden. Ideally, you should keep track of what you plant, when and where you planted it, when you harvested it and how much it yielded. This gives you a better idea as to how many starts and seeds you need for the following year, and it allows you fine-tune which crops do best in which beds, how long crops take to reach harvest date, etc. Such information helps you make better decisions every year. Remember: Gardening is nothing if not a learning process...and an exercise in patience!

COMMUNICATING

- At the risk of repeating ourselves, use name tags!
- Establish some means for recording contact information for every person who shows up to volunteer in the giving garden. Keep a book in the garden shed, in your car, set up something in your smart phone...whatever method you use, you want a name, email address and phone number for each person, even those who come just once.
- Use the information to set up a group email list (e.g. “Giving Garden Volunteers”) and then make it your business to send out regular informational and motivational emails. Keep emails light and fun and not too long. The purpose is to make everyone feel included in the giving garden, even if they do not attend work parties regularly. Tell people what’s going on in the garden (what you’ve planted, what the total harvest is to date), highlight big news (somebody’s engagement or new grandchild), advertise special events (the season kickoff or harvest gathering, special post-work party potluck for someone’s birthday, additional work party for a specific task)... Contact your volunteers just often enough to keep them in the loop without overwhelming their inboxes. And make sure people know they can remove themselves from the list at any time.
- Set up a generic email account for the giving garden, e.g. upgardengg@gmail.com, and use it for all giving garden communications. A generic account makes things so much easier when you pass the torch to the next leader.
- Communicate with the recipients of the produce you donate. Meet with food bank managers, shelter cooks, etc., and coordinate what you grow with what they need. Huge squashes may add impressive pounds to your donation totals, but they are useless to the single food bank client who is travelling on foot or by bus. Also, make sure you are growing crops that are culturally appropriate for the clientele you serve.

DELEGATING

- Even the best, most dedicated giving garden coordinator will burn out in no time if s/he is responsible for EVERYTHING. Start early by keeping an eye open for likely candidates to take charge of particular duties, such as record-keeping, compost monitoring or additional watering. Avoid generalities: ask specific people to do specific things. It could be as simple as asking an artistic person to enter the weekly donation total on the whiteboard, or someone who always stays late to be in charge of seeing that all the tools are put away. Most importantly, be on the lookout for skilled volunteers who show up enthusiastically every week: they can be trained as deputies to competently lead work parties when you can’t, and even take over the program if and when you decide to move on.