

In designing community gardens, social design comes first

Story and photos by Russ Grayson

IT'S A COMMON BELIEF among people setting out to start a community garden that the first step is to find land, do a site analysis, do a design, build and start growing. Were it only so simple.

Developing a site plan might be the start of building the community garden, however, it is not a good place to start the community gardening process. Site planning, garden design, and construction deal with the landscaping side of community gardens—the land, the works we carry out on it, and the processes involved in growing food and other crops—the physical things. The real starting place, however, is dealing with the social and organisational side and it is here where we might best make a start in community gardening.

“Participatory processes, like this garden planning session, are necessary for the smooth functioning of community gardens.”

The reason? It is seldom design or horticultural factors that pose the greatest challenges to the success of community gardens. It is the organisational and social... the management side... and it is here that community gardens most commonly come to grief. Time spent in planning this side of community gardening, then, is unlikely to be time wasted.

It is relatively easy to grow fruit and vegetables but it can be a great deal harder to grow people and the social relations and decision-making processes that underpin successful community gardening. The realisation that the social/organisational side of community garden planning is where we need to apply creative thinking comes after more than four decades of community gardening in NSW.

At last, a process

Lately, we have developed a participatory workshop, carried out over two days of three and a half hours each, to assist new community garden core teams develop organisational and social management plans to manage their gardens. The aim is to set in place processes and to develop agreements that form the organisational starting conditions for new community gardens. Starting conditions are quite important because they influence how a garden develops and the social dynamics that evolve within it.

We have taken a number of community garden start-up teams through this process of what we might call ‘social design’ (‘site design’ consisting of the landscape design of the site itself), most recently working with Marrickville Council and the Denison Road Community Garden core group. A simplified approach has been used with community gardeners for the City of Sydney, working with City staff.

If the time taken to develop a set of agreements and practices for effective community gardening seems a little too much, consider the reality that any local government you approach for assistance in community gardening is more than likely to be impressed if you present them with a plan outlining how you make decisions, solve problems, resolve conflict, how you would manage a site and govern the group.

Councils are now developing policies and processes to assist community gardening and they need to see a community garden core group as capable, thoughtful and credible before they hand land over to their care and management. What is increasingly likely is that councils will ask for evidence of how groups make decisions and deal with other organisational matters before giving them land for community gardening. A few councils already do this.

The development of a simple organisational management plan, such as that developed by Australian City Farms & Community Gardens Network, will go a long way in convincing council staff that the group can be entrusted with managing an area of public land.

A useful sequence for starting a community garden might go like this:

1. defining the idea
2. working out the management plan
3. approaching the landholder to access land and coming to agreement on terms
4. a participatory design process for the garden that identifies, first, gardener needs and wants from the gardening experience, then developing a site design
5. construction of the garden
6. ongoing management.

What's in the social/organisational management plan?

We have already said that this group management plan is best developed before the site plan—social design precedes the site design as a people-led, not a designer-led process. It is good to have management details in place so that you can get on with the process of finding land and creating a community garden. Then, you can focus on site development in the knowledge that you already have sound management and decision making processes in place.

The community garden network's organisational management plan does not have site-specific content. If needed, that can be added after you obtain land. The management plan deals with the social design... topics like how you will:

- make decisions
- fund your garden
- structure it legally, such as an incorporated association with public liability insurance
- assess and manage risk
- resolve conflict
- plan and administer the garden through effective meetings
- recruit and orient new members
- garden the land—will yours' be an organic garden or not?
- manage drainage and runoff
- provide access for gardeners with limited mobility (if needed) and for the public
- deal with the question of dogs/drugs/smoking/alcohol on site
- deal with waste
- manage shared garden areas
- allocate plots
- communicate with members, the public, council and the media
- and the other things that go into decision making in community gardens.

These needs are what Bill Mollison, the co-developer of the permaculture design system, called the ‘invisible systems’ to distinguish them from the ‘visible systems’ of landscape design and garden site management. In doing this, Bill encouraged us to give these invisible systems as much attention and thought as we give to the hard, physical, visible systems in our gardens.

When Bill advised us to engage in “...protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless action”, he was warning against the natural and understandable tendency of community gardeners to get out there with a spade and start making a garden. Stop, he suggested, and think before you act by engaging in ‘observation’, whether that be of a garden site itself or of planning the organisational side of community gardening first—observation of the group.

The process of developing a simple organisational management plan ensures the group has thought through how it would manage the contingencies that emerge in community gardening. It is the basis of adopting governance processes that are fair, democratic and open and that care for people as much as the process of community gardening will care for the land.

More, developing a simple management plan can be a bonding experience for the community garden core team as it deliberates ideas and comes to an agreement on them.