

Thinking about establishing a community garden in Canberra?

Introduction

Community gardening is more than simply growing food. It is also a way to grow a sense of place and community and makes it possible for many people to access and enjoy an area of land for gardening. This document provides an overview of issues involved in establishing a community garden in Canberra and identifies sources of further information.

The ACT Government defines a community garden as “the use of land for the cultivation of produce primarily for personal use by those people undertaking the gardening, including demonstration gardening or other environmental activities which encourage the involvement of schools, youth groups and citizens in gardening activities.”

Typical ACT community gardens provide individual plots for 20 or more gardeners together with communal areas. They are connected to a drinkable water supply, provide land to grow edible produce, have secure fencing and a lockable gate, and are for the exclusive use of garden members. Other community gardens can include those associated with apartment buildings, charitable organisations, churches and schools.

The ACT Government supports community gardens by providing licences for gardens on unleased land, gives policy guidance on site selection, and identifies sites for new gardens in new or infill developments. The government’s annual [Community Gardens Grants Program](#)¹ provides some funding (currently around \$40,000 per year spread across a number of projects/organisations) to support the development and expansion of community gardens across Canberra. The [Guide to Community Gardens in the ACT](#)² provides information on policies and site selection criteria.

ACT Government agencies responsible for community gardens include the Transport Canberra and City Services Directorate (TCCS), custodian of most of unleased Territory land and responsible for most community garden licences, and the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD). EPSDD provides policy guidance on site selection and identifies potential sites in new developments. Land such as school and sports grounds is managed by other ACT Government directorates which can also provide licences for community gardens.

Licences for community gardens are only issued to incorporated and suitably insured not-for-profit organisations, including community organisations. The licence typically identifies the affected land, outlines the purpose and term of the licence and the responsibilities of each party. In the ACT, community organisations must incorporate under the terms of the [Associations Incorporation Act 1991](#).³ Proposals for new community gardens need to be discussed with the relevant ACT Government directorate.

Developing a garden proposal

Community gardens involve substantial community participation in their planning, management and daily activities. Successful gardens are generally established by a committed group of residents and volunteers which may be sponsored by a community organisation. [A guide to community gardening](#)

¹ <https://www.environment.act.gov.au/cpr/grants/Community-Gardens-Grants>

² https://www.planning.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0009/898443/Guide_to_Community_Gardens_in_the_ACT_-_ACCESS.pdf

³ <https://www.accesscanberra.act.gov.au/ci/fattach/get/155992/1499312149/redirect/1/filename/Incorporated+associations+in+the+ACT+guide.pdf>

[in the City of Melbourne](#)⁴ is a useful overview of issues to be considered in developing a garden proposal (note that some comments are specific to the City of Melbourne).

Issues for early discussion within the proposing group include:

1. Location

Existing community gardens in the ACT are located on the edge of urban areas or in established neighbourhoods, sharing school or church grounds. In newly developed suburbs, sites for community gardens are being set aside in the planning process. In some cases, developers construct gardens as part of estate development.

Table 2 in the [Guide to Community Gardens in the ACT](#) publication outlines the site suitability criteria to be considered when assessing proposed sites for new community gardens. These include location, land characteristics, safety, accessibility, size, water availability, soil quality, fencing and links to other facilities. The ACT Government will work with applicants to identify sites that can meet as many of the requirements as possible. Within established urban areas, one of the most important considerations is the support of the local community. Consultation will be needed to demonstrate support from surrounding residents, businesses and other potential site users (see Table 3).

2. Establishment costs

The major costs involved in establishing a community garden in the ACT include accessing a potable water supply and distributing water to garden plots, fencing and provision of a secure store for shared garden tools. Most ACT community gardens are fenced to exclude dogs, kangaroos, possums and rabbits, with a lockable gate to discourage theft and vandalism. Establishment costs may be reduced if the proposed garden is co-located with other community facilities where water is available and fencing and storage facilities can be shared.

3. Garden management and operation

The proposal should also outline how the garden is to be organised and managed. Table 4 in the [ACT Guide to Community Gardens](#) report outlines expectations for the management of community gardens. This includes a stable membership base, with ongoing leadership capacity and a sustainable financial capacity. The garden needs to be incorporated and to acquire public liability insurance, or to be affiliated with an incorporated community organisation to be eligible for a licence.

Incorporated groups can open bank accounts, purchase insurance cover and apply for government grants. An incorporated organisation must adopt a constitution that sets out how members will be appointed, meetings conducted, decisions made, and how conflicts are resolved.

Other elements needed for a successful community garden include health and safety procedures, garden rules covering terms of use, fees, access and security procedures, water management, maintenance activities and a code of conduct that sets out participants' rights and responsibilities. For an example, see the [Canberra Organic Growers Society Incorporated's Constitution](#).⁵

⁴ <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/guide-community-gardening-city-of-melbourne.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.cogs.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/COGS-Constitution-2016.pdf>

Ongoing costs and resourcing

Within the ACT, after garden establishment, the main ongoing costs are for public liability insurance and water supply. [The Garden Clubs of Australia Inc.](https://gardenclubs.org.au/)⁶ is one source of public liability insurance. The ACT's dry climate means that water costs are significant. For example, the 2019 water bill for the Canberra Organic Garden Society's Cook Garden, which has 40 gardeners with 1890 square metres of vegetable gardens, was \$6200. In budgeting for ongoing garden costs, potential sources of funding include membership fees, fundraising through, for example open days, and business sponsorships (e.g. for gardening equipment) and the competitive annual ACT Government's [Community Gardens Grants Program](#).

⁶ <https://gardenclubs.org.au/>