

# Donating surplus food from your community garden: a resource sheet

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Sustain is the alliance for better food and farming. We represent over 100 food and farming organisations. This resource sheet was compiled by London's food growing network, Capital Growth, to support more community gardens across London to donate their surplus produce successfully.

We know that growing food in community gardens doesn't solve the food insecurity that increasing numbers of Londoners are currently facing. However, with more households being plunged into poverty and people struggling to afford fresh fruit and vegetables, community food growers across London are rising to the challenge, donating fresh produce to foodbanks and other community groups to ensure fresh produce gets to the people who need it the most.

Community food growing initiatives are a way to actively involve people in healthier choices and social activities around food, food growing and eating.

Capital Growth hosted a **Community Food Growing Convo** on Wednesday 25 January 2023 to discuss challenges and opportunities around distributing surplus fresh food from community gardens to people who need it the most in their communities. We've compiled this resource sheet to make it easier for more community gardens across London to donate their surplus produce successfully.

## Questions and top tips to consider

### What should we grow?

Food banks and other groups are reporting they want more fresh produce. However, as a community garden with limited space, consider what is best to grow and donate. Potatoes and other root veg takes up a lot of space, so you may want to consider alternatives such as greens. Microgreens such as pea shoots are packed with nutrients and flavour which could be a great option as are salads. You may also want to incorporate perennials and small fruit trees

into your growing plan as these are wildlife-friendly (providing nectar for important pollinators) and creating a space for people to come harvest for themselves.

Talk to the group you're donating your produce to about what is needed when, and in what volumes. If possible, create a coordinated sowing plan for the year ahead. Eventually you may want to coordinate your planting plans with other gardens so there can be more consistency throughout the season and other tools to coordinate supply and demand.

If you can tell the foodbanks what's coming in advance, they'll have time to prepare instead of having to be reactive when the donation arrives. This gives them more time to prepare recipe cards, for example.

### **Is our food appropriate?**

Make sure you're thinking about the people who will be eating this food. Why might they not be take the donations? Talk to the group you're donating the food to, or talking to the recipients directly through a simple survey could be even better. Finding out who's eating the produce will enable you to invest in more culturally appropriate food growing, think about reasonable substitutes and how to communicate this with the community.

### **Should we be considering the cost of energy?**

Cooking equipment is not always available to everyone. As energy bills reach unprecedented heights, the cost of cooking up a meal is becoming too expensive for more and more people. Several places have responded by developing low- and no-energy recipes to distribute with their fresh produce donations. This is also something important to consider in sowing plans throughout the growing season. Are you growing lots of things that can't be eaten raw? In Derry and Strabane, the food network have been distributing slow cookers to the community as a low-cost solution to home-cooking for those struggling with energy bills.

### **How do we make sure our produce doesn't go to waste?**

Include recipes with your fresh food donations. Organising some preparation and cooking demos at the food bank can help further.

You may also want to consider drying herbs such as oregano, thyme, sage and bay leaves. It can be a lot of work but the results are fabulous and make cooked food so much tastier!

### **How do we provide people with inspiration and skills?**

Providing recipe cards can be a really effective way to improve uptake of fresh produce you donate. They can help with introducing unfamiliar vegetables,

upskilling the community, or simply to provide inspiration. Cookery classes have been found to be an even better solution.

## How can we help more people grow their own?

Gardens could grow pots of salads and pots of herbs for food banks which could also develop into an activity where people visiting the food bank sow their own seeds to take away. Empower people to grow their own, even on a windowsill by distributing seeds, small growing pots and compost to food bank users.

Do some local factfinding to understand what's happening near you. Are other gardens donating surplus in your community? Where is your local food bank or community groups providing food to the local community? Find out what your council is doing around this. Are there any more efficient ways to do delivery surplus food and join up with others?

Nurturing a good relationship with the people running and working in food banks can be a game-changer, anything to help strengthen that is very valuable. A common understanding between community gardens and foodbanks of their different ways of working, their different complexities and challenges, can help create opportunities to collaborate.

For example, in Eastbourne, food banks also had low uptake of fresh produce, but they were able to respond by distributing the fresh donations to community fridges, and they even started providing cookery classes. In other parts of the country, community growing networks have created opportunities for food banks to get more involved with food growing, and some food growers have volunteered at food banks.

## How do we get our community garden insured?

If your community garden isn't already insured but you feel that it would be wise to have some insurance on account of extending your activities to include more community engagement, growing to donate and cooking operations, consider getting insurance.

As a Capital Growth member, you can take advantage of a discounted insurance offer with our friends at [Social Farms & Gardens](#). [Find out more on your member dashboard](#). If you're not already a member of our network, sign up to [join for free here in minutes](#).

## How to maximise our yields in a small space?

If you're already donating produce, you may be considering how to scale up your production. [Check out useful resources from Mark Ridsdill Smith of Vertical Veg here](#).

You can also look into the use of plant gels and inoculants to make your plants more resilient which would help increase their yield.

## What health and safety requirements should we consider?

If you cook, store, sell, handle, prepare or distribute food for the public, your local authority will probably consider you as a food business. As such, we would advise:

- 1- You can register with your council as a food business. This might mean an inspection from your council's Environmental Health team.
- 2- You might also find the following resource about setting up a food business useful.
- 3- You might also be advised by your council to do a Level 2 Food Hygiene certificate which can cost as little as £10 or online for free via the Food Standards Agency.

## How to find your local food bank or local pantry?

Find your local food bank via the Trussell Trust [here](#).

Find your local pantry [here](#).

## How to link up with local coops?

The Women's Environment Network (Wen.) is currently supporting a number of London community groups to set up local coops on a pop-up basis. Find out more here.

You may want to find your closest Cooperation Town coop in London.

Check out Sustain's coop directory to find other local coops near your community garden.