



Growing Connections

Guide to an inclusive and
welcoming community garden

Growing Connections is a project of Sustain, funded by the Centre for Ageing Better and DCMS through the Age-friendly and inclusive volunteering programme.

The project, delivered through Sustain's Capital Growth network of Community Food Gardens in London, was designed to facilitate, collate and share best practice across the network and beyond. To achieve this we connected gardens, buddied local projects together and recruited a team of community leaders to form a Community Garden Group. The group met through 2019 to explore; positive and negative volunteering experiences; the barriers to people getting involved and the principles to inclusive volunteering.

This guide outlines the principles to age-friendly and inclusive volunteering, shares best practice and provides a tool to self-review community food projects' inclusivity.

Capital Growth, established in 2009, is a network of over 3,000 Community Food Gardens in London. Capital Growth is an initiative of Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming.

To find out more or download the guide visit:
capitalgrowth.org/growingconnections

Growing Connections core values

Be **welcoming** in everything you do

Create a **culture of care & respect**

Recognise that **inclusivity does not mean your garden has to be perfect**

And **listen** and be open to feedback

“ *The most inspiring gardens are those which benefit from a wide diversity of people and plants.*

Nat Mady, Hackney Herbal

“ *Everyone belongs outside.*

Brigid Falconer, The Community Plot at Whetstone Allotments



Principle:

Flexible and responsive

Being **flexible**, especially at first point of contact. This could be seeking to accommodate children, offering a different time for an induction, or being relaxed about commitment.

Ensuring that there is **clear communication** of commitment and expectations. Clear (large font), concise, simple and easy to read instructions. Avoid 'gardening' jargon and language.

Encouraging feedback, being open, listening and responding with encouragement.

“ *I love meeting people, talking, having a laugh, touching the soil, digging and planting.* ”

Noelle, Sydenham Gardens



Using appropriate and **varied means of advertising and communication**. Don't rely on social media (it's not always age-friendly).

Thinking creatively about how to **accommodate people's needs** and giving people all the information required to make an informed decision:

- Allow for people to arrive and leave as they wish
- Support people to participate by observing, sitting and walking as needed
- Let people know about activities well in advance
- Offer a variety of tasks available to do within sessions



TIP!

Why not consider trialling shorter sessions at different times? Perhaps you could run in the late morning, early evening for 1.5-2 hours and call these Tasters, Drop-in's or Twilight sessions. Capital Growth have used these at the Allotments in The Regent's Park and Kensington Garden.

Principle:

Enabled and supported

Provide an accessible environment:

- **Accessible paths**, entrances and handrails
- **Raised beds** at a range of heights
- Consider **limiting length** of sessions to 3 hours or less if no toilets accessible
- Kneeling mats, seats, accessible working space
- **Inclusive paperwork** (e.g. concise, inclusive, clear with large type)

“ *It's not all my responsibility, we share tasks and if you need someone to help you with something you are doing, there is usually somebody about to do that.* ”

Angela Ratcliffe



Let volunteers know key **information in advance**:

- **Appropriate clothing to wear** e.g. sturdy footwear. Provide essentials (e.g. gloves and boots).
- **Information** e.g. timings, appropriate clothing, session leader, content, if there will be refreshments, toilet access. Good signage/big labels around garden.

Consider a **collaborative approach to setting tasks** (e.g. writing on a board and inviting group to contribute).

Draw out skills, talents and life experience and **empower volunteers** to lead and co-lead sessions.

Make it clear who volunteers can go to for **support on the day**:

- Nominated volunteer contact each day
- Opportunity to check in and out at beginning and end of sessions

“ You are getting your exercise, growing your vegetables and occasionally having a chat and a cup of tea as well.

Vivien Sheehan

TIP!

A sharing circle is a great way to check-in with a group. Why not try a checkout circle at the end of the session? Invite people to share one word on how they found the day?

Principle:

Sociable and connected

Encourage good neighbourliness and **garden as a community**.

Plan opportunities to **be sociable** at regular sessions and organise outings/events together.

Consider a **group 'warm-up' activity** to start each session.

Offer the option to work in a group, with a **buddy or alone** (group working, buddying and peer-peer support can be very effective).



Create the time and space for a **tea-break** or meal together.

Take time to **connect with, visit and learn** from other gardens and how they include volunteers.

Provide community building outreach opportunities:

- Consider sharing harvest
- Seed swap or plant swap
- Open days and outreach
- Discounted or free activities for people in immediate neighbourhood (e.g. similar post code)

“ *It's great having a community meal where you can use vegetables that you've grown yourself and have everybody really enjoy them and them be so fresh.*

Hilary Vernon-Smith

TIP!

A group warm-up and warm-down is a fun way to come together at the start and end of the day and is used by many projects as an ice-breaker and to frame a practical session. Why not give it a go? Form a circle and invite each person in turn to suggest a stretch or warm-up.

Principle:

Valued and appreciated

Create a culture of **reward** and **recognition** (e.g. saying **thank you**, share of harvest, celebrations, appreciation card, or awards).

Provide an appropriate **induction** (e.g. setting expectations, tool talk, tour of the garden, key health and safety information).



Create **volunteer role descriptions** and let people choose and change their role, defining:

- Responsibilities
- Training
- Development plan
- Progression

While responsibility can be **empowering** for some, for others it can be a barrier to engage, especially if too much is expected too soon.

Recognise and **celebrate all skills and abilities** and have a continued focus on **volunteer development** building confidence and progressions.

Offer a regular **opportunity for feedback** (face to face, anonymous and, or, with external party) and follow-up or respond.

“ *We all become stronger when we work together.*

Vicky Kirkham

TIP!

Why not start with creating 1 or 2 volunteer role descriptions for key roles in your garden. These could be a session leader, support volunteer, buddy for new volunteers, or a setup and take-down volunteer. Think of fun roles or titles that fit with your group and responsibilities that empower people. You might be surprised how many roles you come up with.

Principle:

Meaningful and purposeful

Define **structure** of the day, activity and programme, to empower and encourage volunteers to take **ownership** where appropriate.

Create a handbook, leaflet or card to **outline vision**.

Talk about the **climate, nature, food** sovereignty, **health** and **wellbeing** benefits (the difference you make).

“ *What i like about growing things is, it's not just an end product... it's the whole process of looking after them, seeing them flower, fruit, eating them and giving them away.*

Barbara Gough



Allow time to **reflect** and **observe** individually and as a group (to be mindful, relax and observe nature and the seasons).

Support people to map their **progression** to recognise and value learning.

Acknowledge and **celebrate achievements** as a group.

Reach out and **connect with local community**.

“ *I feel like I’m contributing to a sustainable future and it’s a great way to meet people.*

Edna Anderson, Maryon
Park Community
Garden



TIP!

Some gardens start each day by visiting their sit spot, or close by, reflecting by sharing achievements with the whole group.

A sit spot (or secret spot) is simply a favourite place in nature that you visit regularly to cultivate awareness as you expand your senses and study patterns of local plants, birds, trees, animals, etc.

<https://nature-mentor.com/sit-spot/>

Principle:

Makes good use of my strengths

Create a **space for people to grow**.

Encourage feedback, ideas and utilise skills.

Make use of individual skills, knowledge and expertise.
Recognise what individuals bring to the garden and what they have taken away.



Celebratory events can help acknowledge what's been achieved and help to **identify individual and group skills**.

Empower people to teach, to share and to learn. "You're never too old to learn".

Enable people to do what they enjoy.

Outline tasks and roles clearly so people can make **informed choices**.

Support and signpost people to other roles and opportunities.

“ *It's nice to meet people and exchange your recipes, your knowledge... just to meet people.* ”

Seetha, a volunteer at Bonny Downs Community Garden

TIP!

Never miss the opportunity to celebrate your achievements. This is a great way to acknowledge what you're great at and what you could teach others.



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- Sydenham Garden
- The Community Plot at Whetstone Allotments

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About Sustain

Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity. It represents around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.

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Growing Connections inclusivity self-review

You could use this as a self-reflective group activity with volunteers and garden leaders to baseline and progress your inclusivity. On a scale of 1 to 5, where

1 is **not at all** and 5 is **completely**, how would you rate your garden against achieving the following Age-Friendly and Inclusive Volunteering principles?

	1	2	3	4	5
Our garden has flexible volunteer opportunities to suit the different needs of volunteers					
Volunteers are welcomed and supported to get the most out of their experience					
We plan our activities so that our volunteers have time to chat and socialise					
Our volunteers know they are valued and appreciated					
Our volunteers are given meaningful and purposeful tasks and roles					
Volunteers are encouraged to make good use of their strengths					
We actively seek to engage people who face barriers to taking part					
We help people to stay volunteering with us, even when things change for them					
Our garden has been designed to be accessible and age-friendly					
Overall, our garden provides age-friendly and inclusive volunteering opportunities					