

Setting up a Community Allotment



**Based on 10 years of experience
at Lewes Organic Allotment Project**



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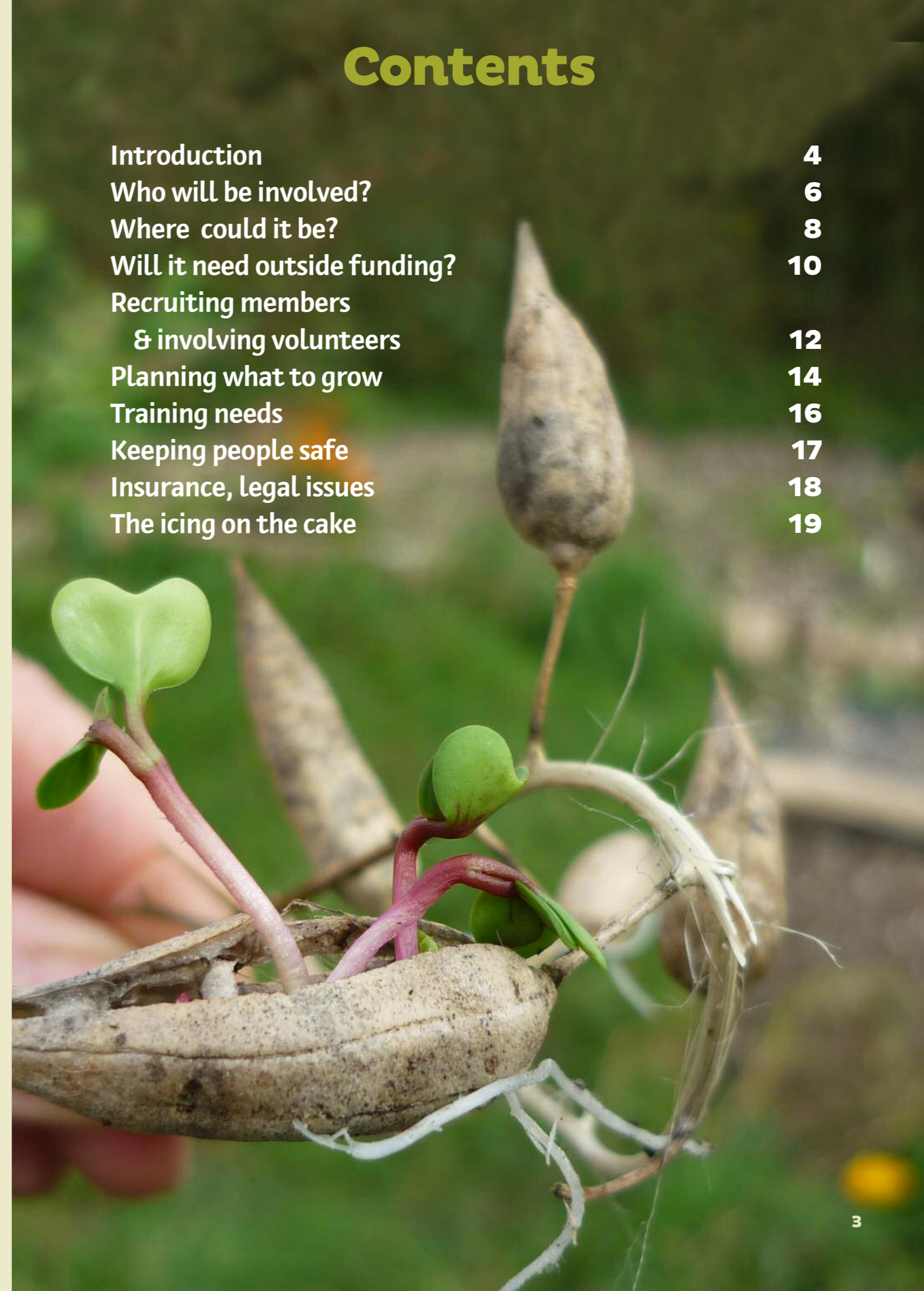
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Common Cause is a Lewes based, not for profit social enterprise, that promotes the local economy by supporting sustainable farming and facilitates wider access to local foods and involvement in growing food.

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Introduction

The aim of this guide is to sow a seed of thought and steer you towards more in-depth information that you will need to see your project take root.

Common Cause has been running the Lewes Organic Allotment Project (LOAP), a community allotment on the outskirts of Lewes in East Sussex, for more than ten years. We want to share our experiences and inspire others to set up similar community growing projects.

A place for people (and vegetables) to grow

Lewes Organic Allotment Project began in 1998 in response to public demand.

It has developed organically – in all senses of the word – and today hosts school groups, works with a self-help disability group and, more recently, a scheme helping ex-offenders to integrate back into the community.

The District and Town Councils were instrumental in setting up the project through Local Agenda 21 – a sustainable development policy agreed at the UN conference on the environment and development, held in Rio in 1992.

Why have a Community Allotment?

A community allotment offers a way for a broad mix of people to work together, sharing tasks and skills. It also creates opportunities for extra benefits such as educational workshops, social gatherings and enjoyment of landscape and nature. A priority for us has always been to make the allotment open and accessible to all regardless of age, background or ability.

Community allotments are set up for many different reasons, but producing vegetables, fruit, herbs and flowers can easily dovetail with social, educational and environmental ambitions and aspirations.

Where to start?

Contact your local council or councillors to find out if other like-minded people have registered interest. Try putting up notices or approaching a local newspaper to make contact with people who think they would like to join a community allotment. Build up a band of enthusiasts who are prepared to do some of the initial work – you could form a steering group at this stage. The council or a landowner are more likely to consider your request if you do some of the planning first, so decide basic objectives, and whether your garden will have a focus, such as working with a particular group of people.

It is a good idea to visit other projects early on to see how they work. You can get a sense of different scales and activities, and how you could apply their methods of working. Take notes and build up a picture of the best options. The clearer your aims, the more likely it will be that the relevant bodies will support you. It's really helpful to get an idea of how other groups got started and tackled problems, and how they keep going. Visits can be inspirational and encouraging and can offer practical solutions.



Sharing ideas for the allotment project among as many people as you can generates a wide range of creative possibilities



Firm foundations: support from a wide range of people, including members, volunteers and the sustainability team from Lewes District Council, has helped to ensure the success of the community allotment in Lewes

Who will be involved?

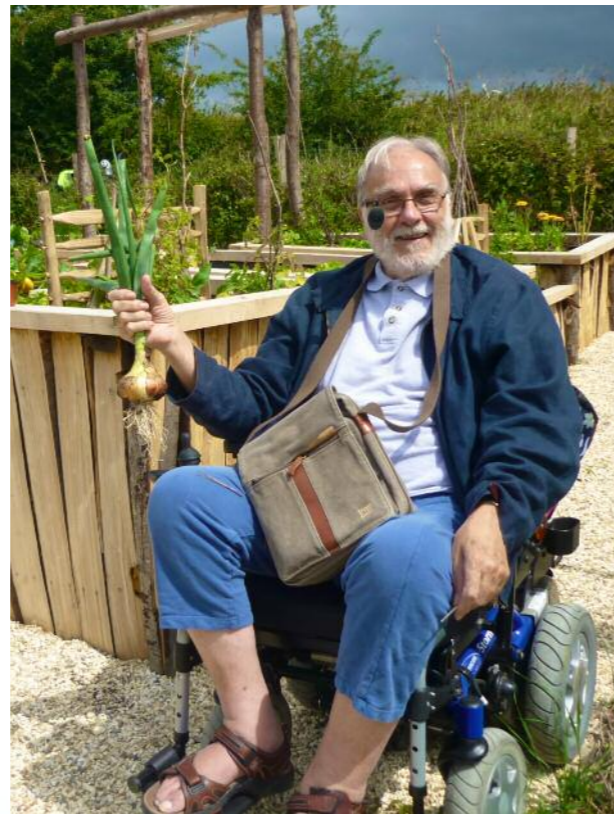
Spend some time thinking through questions that you may be asked by the council, landowner or funders.

- What are your reasons for wanting the shared site?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- How many members of the community do you hope to involve and how?
- Have you made sure your project is open to all? If it just involves a group of friends, it's not a community allotment.
- How are you planning to decide on how it is laid out, what gets planted and who will have overall responsibility?
- How are you planning to finance the allotment project?

This is the stage to let your imagination go. Record your ideas so that they can be presented in a development plan. You may not want to manage the project, but you could look for someone who would. You may not know how to build raised beds, but someone will! Some of the work could be done, for example, by an outside organisation such as The Conservation Volunteers (formally British Trust for Conservation Volunteers), which might use your project to train people in rural skills. Costs will vary, but your local council might help with expenses.

Membership

Having an "open to all" policy does not mean that anyone can just wander in and pick produce, unless that's what you want. It's important to be clear about this, especially if you host open days, to avoid confusion.



Open to all: the Lewes Organic Allotment is tended by both novice and keen gardeners including members of a self-help charity, the Oyster project, run by disabled people



You will need to decide whether you will have a paid membership scheme – which can promote a sense of ownership and give the project a steady income – and whether you will include supporters as members. It should be clear what the membership fee will be spent on – for example, tools, seeds and manure. Research membership rates charged by other community allotments and decide on the right amount for your group.

Tangmere community garden does not have a membership fee but has set up a "friends" membership for people who cannot commit to being involved on a regular basis but who want to attend occasionally and support the project. www.tangmerecommunitygarden.wordpress.com You could charge a small fee and offer regular newsletters, social days/evenings, and first dibs on any gluts of produce.

You will also need to keep records of members – with names and addresses as a minimum. But other information about members, such as age, ethnic group and any disabilities, will be useful for funders, and details of skills will help the project. Medical information in case of accident can be gathered on a separate form but all data should remain confidential and be stored as such (see *Record-keeping*, p 18)

Bringing in help: a hedge planted with native species at the Lewes Organic Allotment Project grew so well that it become difficult to manage. Asked to help, the Conservation Volunteers (formally British Trust for Conservation Volunteers) laid the hedge beautifully in a traditional style, and also made steps down to the hard-to-reach tap (above)



Growing diversity



Lewes Organic Allotment Project is open to anyone in the neighbourhood and beyond. In recent years it has been working with the Oyster project to increase access for disabled people. All members who take part have found that being out in the fresh air and in a beautiful location imparts a strong underlying feeling of wellbeing. There is great potential for sharing skills and discovering a wealth of knowledge and experience among members.

To reach a wide range of people, Petworth community garden contacted local groups which now take an active role in activities – including the Acorn project at the Aldingbourne Trust. The Petworth community gardeners are continuing to make their project as accessible as possible. They have created a children's growing area so that parents can bring children with them during the holidays, as well as a wildlife pond and sensory garden. www.petworthcommunitygarden.org.uk

Where could it be?

The site will most likely be on existing council allotments but may also be a “spare” piece of land which is not in use, such as common land, grounds within a housing estate, waste ground or within school or park grounds. Councils have an obligation to provide allotment space where there is demand, but will need to be convinced that the community allotment will be managed.

Survey any potential land and find out what happens at different times of the year. Something that looks great in the summer may be in a frost pocket for much of the winter, or have a pernicious weed problem that is not visible at the time of your first visit. Try and talk to neighbours of the plot to get as much information as possible. What is the soil type? Do a pH test, and hold a handful of soil to see if it stays loose (good) or sticks firmly together (which suggests challenging clay). What is the prevailing wind direction? What is the access like? All these things will have a bearing, and will help you decide where is best.

For more information about first steps, see www.permaculture.org.uk and www.brightonpermaculture.org.uk. Landshare www.landshare.net/community could be a good place to start to make connections. The organisation links people who want to grow food with those who have land.

You may also be able to make an arrangement with a local landowner, but clear agreements need to be drawn up defining how long and for what purpose the land can be used. Funders will be unwilling to give grants to sites with “loose” arrangements, so you will need written documents.

What paperwork will be needed?

A constitution is a good idea and can be drawn up by the steering group. This ensures that the community allotment's aims and objectives are laid out and agreed by its members. As part of the constitution, your group will need to set up a management committee, and define ways of making decisions and settling disputes. If you apply for grants, funders will request a copy of your constitution. A draft constitution document is available from Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens www.farmgarden.org.uk

Think about who may use the site. Your local Council for Voluntary Service www.3va.org.uk and the Allotments Regeneration Initiative www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari/resources/resource-centre can both help with guidelines and model policies that will help keep people safe on the allotment including children and vulnerable adults (see Keeping people safe, p 17)

Fertile ground

The community allotment in Lewes was allocated a good amount of space – eight plots – but the soil quality was thin and poor. Over the years, compost made on site and brought in, together with manure, donated topsoil and leaf mould, have all helped to make the growing beds very productive. If possible, try to start with a more fertile plot as you will save hours of hard work.



Early days: weeds galore at the Lewes Organic Allotment Project (top and opposite). Above: Permaculture involves a design process to maximise yield



Will it need outside funding?

Whether you will want to seek extra funding beyond membership fees will depend entirely on the type of community allotment that you and your group are planning. It may be that with a lot of volunteer time and effort and contributed materials, you will be able to create a space which is accessible to as many people as possible and suitable for everyone's needs. However, if you are considering any major works such as constructing raised beds or a compost loo, a small grant would be helpful.

Draw up a budget, taking into account all of the things that you are likely to need to make the project succeed. How much can realistically be carried out by the group at low or no cost? Will you need to buy tools, seeds, compost, manure, wood for raised beds? How will you cover costs such as insurance? (see p 18). Who will oversee all the work? Do you need to factor in some paid time?

It may be possible to link with new businesses that would be interested in working on your project voluntarily to build up their portfolio. If you are a community group, local businesses may be prepared to provide advice and support in exchange for publicity. It is a good idea to have a clear written brief on what is agreed to be done, even if it is all offered voluntarily, so there is no confusion or disappointment.



Alitura landscape and garden design surveying the site

Local networks such as a volunteer bureau, university student opportunities or a national scheme such as TimeBank www.timebank.co.uk may also provide your project with a boost of extra muscle power.

Before you start thinking about applying for funding:

- Might local businesses be able to support/contribute/donate?
- Can you hold fundraising events such as an open day?
- Could future funds be raised by plant sales/workshops/training?
- Do you belong to a LETS scheme and make use of Freecycle/Freegle?
- Do you have a university or college nearby with a volunteer scheme?
- Would a skilled person such as a carpenter/horticulturist donate some time at no cost?

Explore every avenue. Fundraising is very time consuming and requires some experience.

For those bits that you really can't do without extra funding and if you have not completed a funding application before, get advice from someone who has.

Your County Council will have a funding officer who can give advice, or your local 3VA office, through its grant finder service. Sign up to any newsletters, make an appointment to talk through your ideas.

Organisations such as FCFCG, FACE and ARI (see p 20) list likely funders in their newsletters.

Chat to other community allotments to find out how they are funded.

The Department of the Environment has Local Agenda 21 funding suitable for setting up community allotments and gardens.

Awards for All Lottery funding is easy to apply for and is up to £10,000.

Always try to show evidence of match funding, which can include volunteer time, donations, and membership fees.



Opening of the Easy Access Area

Grand designs

Common Cause were approached by a newly qualified landscape gardening business with ideas on how to improve access and increase participation for disability groups and schools. The business offered its services for free in return for the experience gained and came up with a carefully thought-out design which has been an enormous success, and has led to further projects for the designers.

Local lads built a storage area using donated shed panels in an afternoon. Common Cause offers a volunteering certificate to help teenagers put together work experience details. A local joiner made some fantastic compost bays out of old pallets. And thanks to some determined networking on the part of its members, LOAP has also received donations of tools, compost bins, tree whips for hedging, pond liner, topsoil, compost, wood for raised beds, paving slabs and woodchips for pathways, plants, firebricks and more.



Local lads built a storage area using donated shed panels in an afternoon.



Local joiner making pallet compost bays

Recruiting members and involving volunteers

Members of your core group can help to spread information about your project and invite others along to see if they want to become involved. Your local newspaper or radio station might run a feature on the project, particularly if there is an opening event or volunteer day to report. The local library, cafes, shops and farmers' market could all take flyers with information about how people can join or volunteer. You may have a local volunteer centre or service that could link your project with interested people.

Can you join with other groups who may want to make use of the site on a regular or occasional basis? For example, a local school, disability group or photography, painting or wildlife group may all be interested. Before sharing your community allotment in this way, make sure your health and safety and insurance is watertight (see p18).

Holding regular volunteer days as the project evolves helps to ensure that new people continue to be introduced. You may lose some members but gain new ones along the way, and it is important not to stagnate.

Another way of drawing new people in is to plan workshops on specific topics such as composting, bread-oven making or bee keeping. The workshops might be run by a member or you may need to get someone in from outside to lead the event and charge a small fee.

Go Team Green

At Lewes Organic Allotment Project, local people who are not regular members of the allotment volunteer at "Team Green" days. For instance, many volunteers came along to help plant a hedge as part of a BBC-sponsored "tree o'clock" challenge to plant trees within an hour. At the end, 35 edible hedge whips had been planted, and two years later, they have grown to be three feet high. Volunteers at Team Green days are rewarded with a campfire cook-up and hot drinks.

The 'Tree o'clock' planting



Delicious loaves from the on-site oven



A local beekeeper explains the life cycle of honey bees



Lottery funding made free workshops on composting methods possible

Creative ventures

At Lewes Organic Allotment Project, a local breadmaker ran workshops on how to build a bread oven and cook bread and pizzas. The workshops were great fun, well attended and introduced new people to the community allotment.

A percentage of the workshop fee went to support the project. The Oyster project holds regular watercolour workshops on site, giving participants time to really appreciate the range and colour of wild and cultivated plants, including old favourites such as borage, marigolds, courgettes and beans. A local beekeeper keeps bees on site which provide interest, help pollinate the crops and wildflowers and provide honey too.



Lots of inspiration with masses of flowers and unusual vegetables



Campfire cook-up

Planning what to grow

Time will be needed to discuss and plan what will be grown. If you do not have an experienced grower to call on, see if you can get another group to visit to make suggestions (see Training needs, p 16). Good planning will save time and mistakes later. Start with the basics – soil type, aspect (south facing?) wind direction, frost pockets, shade areas and so on. Such careful planning in advance will save costly errors and maximise the success of the plants.

If the council or landowner has not cleared the land for you, don't try and dig it all over at once. Areas can be strimmed and covered in any dense light-proof material. Thick sheets of newspaper and flattened cardboard boxes will work but will need weighting down. Ensure that the ground is damp under the cover – putting it down after a spell of rain is best. You can dig small holes through the cover and plant squashes or potatoes into a compost-filled hole. Within a few months the mulch of cardboard/paper will break down, but it will be easier to tackle the weeds. If you want to avoid weeds regrowing altogether, invest in a water-permeable weed membrane available at garden centres. Be warned, however, that strong weeds such as bindweed, hogweed and couch grass will usually find a way through, and will eventually need to be dug up and removed by hand.

Decide as a group what people enjoy eating and would like to grow. This planning is best done in the winter months so you have time to draw up a planting schedule and crop-rotation plan.

If you have a lot of space, you might consider growing extra of a crop to sell to a local cafe, such as coriander, unusual salads or herbs, or other high-value vegetables or fruit. If your space is on a council allotment, you are allowed to sell surplus produce from your plot, but not to intend to sell everything that you grow.



Role swapping
Tangmere Community garden is run entirely by volunteers. To spread the skill-sharing, people take turns to be a particular “captain” – Captain Fruity, Captain Roots, Captain Peace and Love (flowers) and Captain Windy (Brassicas!)



Training needs

If someone in your group has a horticultural background – such as formal training or substantial experience of growing vegetables – then you'll be off to a flying start. You can get training through the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) www.rhs.org.uk/courses or local organisations such as the Brighton Permaculture Trust www.brightonpermaculture.org.uk. Useful information can also be picked up from websites such as Garden Organic, RHS, BBC gardening and the Permaculture Association or through joining social networks such as UK vegetable growers. The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens can provide advice and support to member groups keen to find out more on particular topics or hone their gardening skills. Encourage those in your group with specialised knowledge to pass it on to other members or encourage members to research specific topics and share the information with others.

Useful tips can also be gleaned by visiting other gardens or asking for an experienced person to visit your site and give advice (take advantage of getting advice on financial, health and safety or practical tool use as well as growing fruit and vegetables). See "Keeping people safe" (overleaf) for more training information.

As the project progresses you may want to offer training sessions. If you do not have suitable qualifications, consider a City and Guilds course such as "Preparing to teach in the lifelong learning sector", which will give invaluable information on planning sessions, recording learning and evaluation. You may also be able to link into training schemes run by Garden Organic such as the master composter scheme www.homecomposting.org.uk.



Growing Workshops: LOAP secured funding from Big Lottery chances4change to run free mentored sessions once a week as well as special workshops on seasonal growing through the year. Or your group might decide to offer training courses for a small fee as a way of raising funds for your project



Keeping people safe

Your group will need to have a health and safety policy which is clearly visible on site and is also incorporated into the information given to new members, perhaps in an information pack. Advice can be given on best ways to lift, bend and dig or to push a loaded wheelbarrow. Your local council's Health and Safety officer should be happy to visit and advise.

Your community allotment will need at least one, preferably more, designated first aiders. Everyone should be told when they join who the first aiders are. A notice in the shed or in some other prominent place can also list first aiders. If you are a small group and a first aider cannot always be on site, also list where the nearest hospital is and what to do in case of an accident. Your first aid kit and accident book need to be clearly visible and updated regularly.

If children or vulnerable adults will be visiting your project, key workers or volunteers need to be CRB checked. More information is available from the Criminal Records Bureau. Checks can be arranged through FACE (Farming and Countryside Education) at a reasonable cost if you are a community group.

One of the first jobs that should be carried out – once you have found your site but before you start work – is to carry out a risk assessment. Find out all about risk assessments from the Allotment Regeneration Initiative www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari. A model risk assessment form can also be downloaded from its website.

The membership form can include a statement about areas to be particularly aware of – for example, a pond, or paths that are slippery when wet – and should point out that people are responsible for their own safety. But you will still need to have public liability insurance in place in case of an accident (see next section).

Handwashing facilities should be available, particularly if you have a toilet on site.

Toilets

At some point conversation will inevitably turn to toilets. To have any good length of time on site this really is a necessity unless you are lucky enough to have public toilets or arranged facilities nearby. The toilet on site doesn't need to be a mains flush or chemical facility – composting toilets are ideal for community allotments and there are many good examples. At the most basic level, a camping loo (a bucket with a loo seat!) and a bag of sawdust will suffice for pee only, but will need emptying onto a compost heap. Urine is sterile so this will not cause any health issues, but people on strong medication should use separate facilities which will need to be taken off-site to a flush toilet.

Handwashing can be provided next to a tap by providing a washing up bowl that people can fill and empty out after use. Soap, anti-bacterial wash and a towel or eco towels should also be provided. If you do not have running water, anti-bacterial gel can be provided.

Two compost loos: in Hove, the compost loo at Plot 22 is housed in a shed, whereas at Namayasai, a Sussex farm growing specialist Japanese vegetables, the loo has a woven hurdle surround. At the farm, the waste container has to be moved when full and replaced with another. It is then stored out of the way and allowed to break down before being used as a fertiliser on non food crops, in this case, willows



Insurance, legal issues

The minimum level of insurance that your group will need is public liability. Public liability insurance will indemnify you against being held responsible for injury, disability or death of people visiting or taking part in your activities. Insurance cover up to £2 million should be obtained as a minimum; most groups are now insured for £5 million.

Employers' liability cover, by contrast, will indemnify you against being held responsible for accidents causing injury, disability or death of employees and volunteers.

It is advisable to have insurance in place before any work starts on site, including clearance work. Seek advice on the full level of cover that you require, through an insurance broker or with the Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens insurance scheme.

Record-keeping, monitoring and evaluation

All projects should keep records of accounts. If you are set up as a charity, company or co-operative, these accounts must be kept for a minimum of seven years and include a statement of income and expenditure. If you are paying staff, selling produce or planning to have a higher turnover, it would be advisable to employ an accountant.

All information held about members should be stored carefully and kept confidential (that is, on a computer with a locked password, or in a locked filing cabinet).

If you receive funding, funders often require feedback on how their grant has been spent and to what effect. It is therefore important to keep records that show who is using your project, how often, what activities take place and what feedback the project receives. Such documentation is also very useful when applying or reapplying for funds.

Good record-keeping will also help you to take stock of the project and to evaluate how well it is running. You can judge whether you are meeting your aims and objectives, or whether there are improvements you can make.

A photographic record will show how things were at the start and the work as it progresses, and give a clear sense of the steps that have been taken and the successes achieved. It can also help to encourage you if things get tough – seeing how far you have come will make you want to carry on.

The icing on the cake

Building for success

LOAP applied for an Awards for All grant which enabled the project to construct raised beds of different heights and a wonderful shelter where people can rest, chat and have a drink in the shade (or out of the rain). It has made an enormous difference to the number of people who can make use of the project, and the length of time that people can stay. LOAP has just secured further funding for canvas sides for the shelter to replace the flimsy tarpaulins currently used against the rain.

Time for a little something: on a visit from St Johns school, elderflower cordial and cake is enjoyed in the easy-access area

Raised beds built by Room Outside



Useful Organisations

Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI)

Aims to increase allotment uptake by individuals and community groups.

The GreenHouse, Hereford Street, Bristol BS3 4NA
Tel: 0117 9631 551

www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari

[www.farmgarden.org.uk admin@farmgarden.org.uk](mailto:admin@farmgarden.org.uk)

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG)

Promotes, supports and represents city farms, community gardens and school farms throughout the UK.

The GreenHouse, Hereford Street, Bristol BS3 4NA
Tel: 0117 923 1800

www.farmgarden.org.uk

National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners

Promotion, protection and preservation of allotment gardening.

Hunters Road, Corby NN17 1JE
Tel: 01536 266 576

www.nsalg.org.uk

Garden Organic

Coventry

Warwickshire

CV8 3LG

Tel: 024 7630 3517

Email: enquiry@gardenorganic.org.uk

www.gardenorganic.org.uk

FACE

Farming and Countryside Education

Arthur Rank Centre

Stoneleigh Park

Warwickshire

CV8 2LG

Tel: 0845 838 7192

www.face-online.org.uk

Permaculture Association (Britain)

Promotes an ecological approach to design of gardens and gardening activities

Permaculture Association (Britain), London, WC1N 3XX
Tel: 0845 458 1805

www.permaculture.org.uk

www.letslinkuk.net

Soil Association

Campaigning and certification organisation for organic food and farming.

Bristol House, 40 – 56 Victoria Street, Bristol BS1 6BY
Tel: 0117 9314 5000

www.soilassociation.org

Thrive

National charity whose aim is to enable positive change in the lives of disabled and disadvantaged people through the use of gardening and horticulture.

The Geoffrey Udall Centre, Beech Hill, Reading RG7 2AT
Tel: 0118 988 5688

www.thrive.org.uk

National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (NACVS)

Tel: 0114 278 6636

www.nacvs.org.uk

The Conservation Volunteers

www.tcv.org.uk

Criminal Records Bureau

www.direct.gov.uk/crb or tel. 0870 909 0811



chances4change
Improving health and well-being
for people in South East England

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