

Community gardens are well known for providing space for neighbors to grow fresh, healthy food close to home. But beyond improving food access, community gardens provide the space for powerful neighborhood-level social change. When a group of neighbors joins together to organize, build, and manage a community garden, they, bringing an impressive array of benefits to their community.

- **They are places to befriend your neighbors.** We live in an era in which, for many of us, our neighbors are strangers. Community gardens draw members who live nearby, so they provide the opportunity to meet, work beside, and even form friendships with people who might live down the street, but who you might never have encountered otherwise. Many an unlikely friendship has formed at a community garden, often across generational and cultural divides.
- **They are places to learn.** Participating at, or even visiting, a community garden provides the opportunity to learn from experienced gardeners. Walk through a community garden with someone who gardens there, and you'll likely end up full of questions for him or her ("What's that vegetable?" "How did you build that trellis for your cucumbers?"). Many community gardens include informational signage for visitors, and some host gardening classes or instructional tours, as well.
- **They are sites for restoring and building health.** A growing body of scholarly literature points to the health benefits of gardening and spending time in nature. Studies have shown therapeutic benefits for people recovering from psychological ailments such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; mental and emotional benefits for aging seniors; and improved attention in children with Attention Deficit Disorder. In fact, there is a [horticultural therapy](#) field dedicated to using gardening as a tool for healing. Gardening is also considered mild to moderate exercise.
- **They are a place for children (and adults!) to explore nature in the middle of urban areas.** Spend 5 minutes at a community garden, and you'll find birds, lizards, plants and insects at all stages of life--a vibrant ecosystem in action. Gardening has been shown to provide a plethora of benefits in children, including improved attitudes toward healthy food, improved understanding of life science concepts, and improved interpersonal skills. Growing evidence attests to our species' deep rooted need to connect with nature ([Richard Louv's *The Nature Principle*](#) is an informative and engaging read about this need for nature). Community gardens are also valuable to wildlife, creating habitat corridors throughout our city.
- **They are a place to practice teamwork.** Working effectively as a team on an ongoing basis, particularly in a context where participation is voluntary, can be enormously challenging--and rewarding. Personal growth, and invaluable skills, are gained along the way.
- **They empower us to organize and advocate for ourselves and for our communities.** The skills we gain practicing teamwork--how to hold constructive meetings, how to work with people from a variety of backgrounds and who have a variety of learning styles and personalities, how to resolve conflict peacefully, how to advocate for a particular outcome--are the same skills needed for broader

community advocacy. Community gardens teach us through our successes that we can make our community a better place.

- **They provide the opportunity for people in marginalized groups to fully participate and to take on leadership roles.** In our society, power is not distributed equally-- disparities exist between racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, and ability groups. In the context of a community garden, participants have the opportunity to place a high value on equity, diversity, and inclusion, and to learn how to work together in a way that truly reflects these values. This does not happen automatically. Without intentional, continuing efforts to practice equity, diversity, and inclusion, community gardens default toward replicating the same systems of exclusion and power difference that exist in broader society.
- **They create the opportunity to identify community assets and to build networks.** Successful community gardens are built and sustained through contributions of time, talent, and resources from the communities where they are located. Before these assets become available to the garden, its members first must find them. This is done by building relationships with individuals, associations, and businesses in the neighborhood. Tour a community garden, and you'll hear stories about this process--you might hear about a mini-library built by a troop of Girl Scouts, a fence designed and built by a group of university students, or a tool shed donated and constructed by a local branch of a hardware store where one of the gardeners works.
- **They provide space to carry on our food cultures.** Food is a powerful element of tradition. Community gardens provide the opportunity to grow, eat, share, and celebrate one's traditional foods--even far away from one's homeland, or when one has been disconnected from his or her heritage. This ability to produce and consume one's traditional foods, known as food sovereignty, is empowering and is important to our quality of life.
- **They provide a space to grow low-cost, fresh fruits and vegetables for people without space to garden at home.** Particularly for residents living in areas with limited access to sources of healthy food, this can make a significant difference in quality of life. Additionally, as Austin continues to urbanize, a higher percentage of people across income levels will live in apartments, making the access community gardens provide to gardening space all the more vital.

Community Gardens:

Growing food

Growing Relationships

Spiritually feeding

Nourishment for the body, mind & soul