

Reading Community Garden Project Narrative

Background

Community gardens have been part of communities around the world for many years, including many communities in our area. Their size, location, and purposes vary somewhat depending on the community's needs, but they share a focus on community connections and a grow-your-own ethos.

The Reading Community Garden accomplishes several goals.

- Offers Reading residents space to raise vegetables, herbs, and flowers for their own use;
- Adds fresh produce to offerings at agencies such as the Reading Food Pantry;
- Provides an outdoor space for community members to interact;
- Preserves and enhances green spaces in Reading, an element of “liveability” in a warming world;
- Fulfills a component of Reading’s Sustainability Plan;
- Responds to priorities identified in the 2021 Open Space survey, where a garden ranked as one of the top 5 priorities;
- Provides opportunities to facilitate educational programs for residents of all ages in collaboration with Reading Public Library.

Proposed Location

To identify criteria for a community garden site, the exploratory group used online resources, conversations with established community gardens, and gardening experience of group members. We looked closely at town-owned sites, including Memorial Park, Hunt Park, Town Forest entry on Strout Avenue, Mattera Cabin area, and Symonds Way Field. Through conversations with Conservation, Planning, and DPW staff, the terraced slope south of the main parking lot at Mattera Cabin has emerged as the prime location. The site will be developed in phases, with phase 1 opening in 2022.

Ryan Percival with DPW has created a site plan for phase 1, showing 17 4'x8' garden plots, a pollinator garden, trees to be removed, and the location of the water line from the cabin to the garden. DPW will install the water line and grade the site, including the “cart paths” on the west side of the slope. We will collaborate on installing drip irrigation, timer for the watering system, raised beds, fill for the beds, and fences. These items will call for a mix of volunteers and professional installation. Phases 2 and 3 do not have dates or detailed plans at this point. However, each of those phases will have room for 18+ plots. As the garden expands, some possible enhancements include compost bin, storage shed, rainwater collection system, and greenhouse, although none of these is decided at this point. Donations of time and materials will also be solicited from Reading residents, businesses, community organizations, and university landscape architecture programs.

Garden Administration

Initially the garden will be administered by a committee composed of Reading residents, collaborating directly with the Town's Conservation Administrator and Conservation Commission. Within two years, the committee will be replaced by a formal structure. Suggestions include a 501c3 corporation (a common structure among neighboring gardens) and an LLC; the decision will be made with legal input.

The process for gardener applications and the agreement gardeners sign are laid out in the Reading Gardener Agreement. The process for assigning plots is also included in that document, as well as below. The fee for year 1 will be \$50, which is common among gardens in our area. To make the cost accessible, we propose to seek donations to subsidize the fee for low-income residents.

Process for assigning garden plots [dates are highly tentative; depend on approval and site prep]

Reading residents are invited to apply for a garden plot for the 2022 season. Applications will be available online (and at Town Hall?) no later than February 15. They must be signed and returned no later than March 1, either online (or hard copy at Town Hall?). If there are more applications than there are available plots, plots will be assigned by a drawing. Gardeners will be notified whether they've received a plot by email no later than March 15. They must remit the full annual fee no later than March 31 [\[insert link / process\]](#).

For remaining plots (if any), applications will be accepted from Reading-based community groups, non-resident Town employees, and non-residents who work in Reading. This process will be followed each year, with the following exception.

Returning gardeners will be able to "re-up" for up to 3 years. To provide ongoing opportunities for residents to participate, after 3 years, gardeners will only be able to reserve plots if there are fewer applications than plots.

Budget

Budget is detailed in a separate spreadsheet.

Appendix A.

Experiences of Established Community Gardens

We looked at a few established local gardens, as well as researching best practices online. We learned that, although gardens generally have some common characteristics, each one has evolved in a unique way.

Reading, First Baptist Church.

Established in 2018 as part of an Eagle Scout project, this garden includes 18 5' x 10' raised bed plots open to Reading residents. The original flyer describes the garden as “a space where people can come together and grow their own food. These garden spaces function as outdoor engagement centers that can improve people’s access to fresh food, physical activity, and connections with our neighbors.” The church considers the garden to be a service to the community, and there is no charge to gardeners for the plots or for water; gardeners are responsible for all supplies for their gardens. There is a small compost bin on the site, and gardeners are encouraged to contribute compostable plant materials from their plots. Returning gardeners are able to continue in the same plot each year, signing an agreement that covers key points. (The 2021 agreement is included in the Appendix.) The plots have been fully subscribed each year. In 2020, there were 4 people on the waiting list; currently 2 people are on the list. The church office manager manages the administrative side of the garden.

Salem Community Gardens

Salem offers 4 gardens in various locations around the city, providing over 150 plots for residents. Fees range from \$20 to \$40, depending on the size of the plot. The first garden developed in 2005 (?) as a grassroots effort. A 501(c)(3) corporation, organized in 2008, manages all of the gardens, coordinating with city departments and neighborhoods on regulations, needs, and priorities. Gardens are located in city-owned land, mostly in “underloved” parks.

Wakefield Garden

Wakefield’s garden was created in 2019 with the help of state funding as an arm of the town’s Recreation Department. It’s located in J.J. Round Park and includes 46 4' x 8' plots available to Wakefield residents.

Concord Community Gardens

Concord’s gardens are operated by the town’s Natural Resources Department. The 4 gardens provide 142 plots.