

Jack Hale, executive director of Knox Parks Education in Hartford, Connecticut, recommends these rules of thumb for starting any community garden group.

Jack's Rules of Thumb for Starting any Community Garden Project

- Staff members start working with a community after 10 gardeners are committed to the project. Jack says his organization uses this rule of thumb regardless of the size of the project, because in his experience at least half the initial group will fade away. He feels a project needs at least 5 dedicated leaders to be successful.
- The neighborhood people need to accomplish at least one piece of work before the first meeting, such as learning who owns the land, whether there is water on it, or how the land was previously used.
- During the first meeting, everyone gets a job to do before the second meeting, a coordinator is chosen for the second meeting, and a second meeting is scheduled.¹²

In general, organizations that work with neighborhood groups to start gardens can outline the following steps necessary to get started:

- I. Get a core group of people together who are committed to seeing the project through to completion.



2. Talk to as many people who live in the neighborhood as possible. (See previously described interviewing process.)
3. Conduct a basic investigation of community garden needs:
 - Find a site and get a lease or agreement from the owner. Get at a minimum 3-5 year use of the site.
 - Test the soil for nutrient contents and possible heavy metals and toxins such as lead.
 - Secure water for the site either from the public works agency or a friendly neighbor.
4. Hold a public meeting to recruit gardeners and begin to create the site plan and develop the site. (See Chapter 2 section on meetings beginning on page 73 and refer to the *Standard Agenda* handout in the Meeting Facilitation and Group Decision Making Workshop on page 151.)

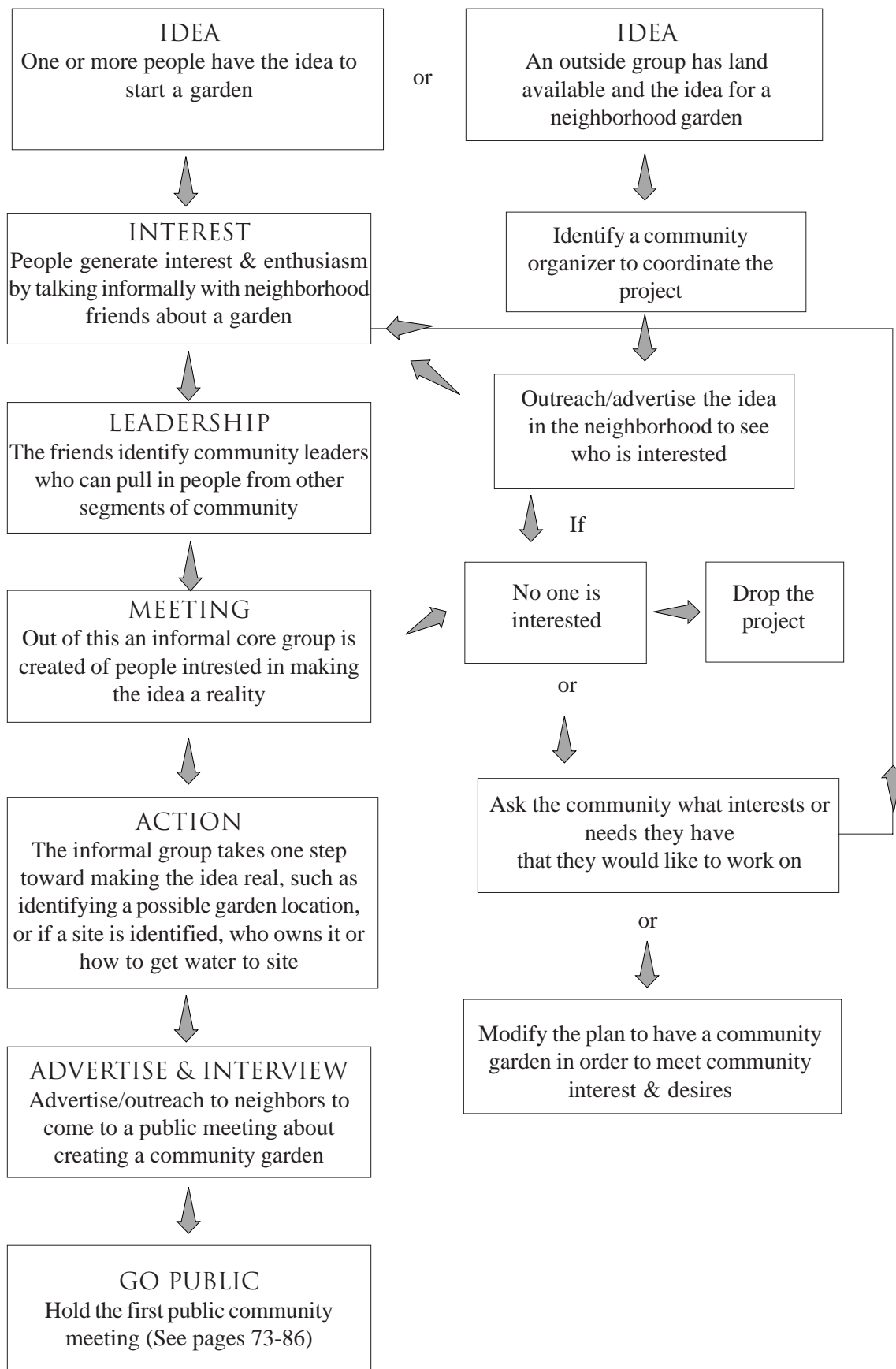
Asking for these small actions from the community before providing organizational support serves several functions. First, it requires the community to begin to identify their assets. Second, it sets up the dynamic in which the community takes the lead in making the project come to life, not the outside organization. And, third, it helps in assessing the community's readiness to undertake the project.

The chart on the following page, *Community Garden Organizing Process*, walks through the potential process of starting a community garden using two scenarios. The left column follows a neighborhood group which has generated the idea for a community garden internally. Ideally the group could follow the whole process and conduct their first open meeting before contacting a community garden organizer. At that time, the community organizer could help with discrete tasks and needs for the group. Often, however, neighborhood groups could benefit from the support of a community organizer at various stages in the process. The key is for the community organizer to continually focus the group back on their own resources, abilities and ideas.

The right column of the chart follows a scenario in which a community garden organization has resources and wants to start gardens in various neighborhoods. This is often the case and organizers are encouraged in this situation to reach out to the community members and listen to what their interests and self-defined needs are. Perhaps a neighborhood would rather have a basketball court or a park with playground equipment. The community organizer can work to see if the resources of their organization could enhance the neighbor's vision in a new and creative way. (Perhaps create a garden that has a side basketball court — or an area for children to play and garden.)

However the process unfolds, once a commitment has been made to work with a group, the community organizers must ask, at every step of the way, if the task they are doing could be more beneficial to the community if a community member led or implemented the activity. In most cases, the community member will be the best

COMMUNITY GARDEN ORGANIZING PROCESS



person to make decisions and take action on the community garden. The role of the community organizer is to help prepare and support the garden organization and leaders and to provide training, guidance and resources.

Community Organizing Guidelines

“Most people go through their lives using not more than a fraction of potentialities within them. The reservoir of unused human talent and energy is vast and learning to tap that reservoir more effectively is one of the exciting tasks ahead for humankind.”

John Gardner¹³

Many of the common guidelines used by community organizers today were defined by Saul Alinsky, founder of the Midwestern Organizing Academy. He developed guidelines that were drawn from his first-hand experience working to organize and, ultimately, unionize the meat-packing and other large industries in the mid-twentieth century. Reflective of the *Growing Communities Principles*, the Alinsky-adapted guidelines¹⁴ below focus on three core issues: relationship, power (and empowerment), and self-interest.

Organizers organize organizations, not people.

The community organizer’s goal is to work to create an organizational structure that exists beyond any one player. An effective structure has the following characteristics:

- Can out-live any one person.
- Has a clear and simple purpose that directly impacts the lives of people.
- Equitably distributes power and employs democratic decision-making processes.
- Is transparent (anyone can understand how it is put together).
- Has easy systems for information exchange and communication (a filing cabinet, monthly newsletter or garden billboard).
- Has feed-back loops to increase support, skill building and accountability (regular meetings can fulfill much of this need).

In a community garden project, the organizer’s focus is less on the actual building of the garden and more on the building of the organizational structure and capacity of the project team to be able to continue on beyond the involvement of the organizer.

People are motivated by their own self-interest, personalize the target.

The task in organizing a community garden project is to find ways to make the issues and benefits involved in community gardens relevant to the life and experience of each participant. A person must be able to see a potential benefit or harm



The Community Organizing 101 Workshop begins on page 108.

to themselves if the project succeeds or fails. One person may be interested in cleaning up the blighted lot because it is next door to him, another to give teenagers something constructive to do, and another to have fresh ingredients for her famous salsa. The simplest way to find out what matters to folks is by asking. Sitting down to talk with neighbors can be time consuming. However, knowing who people are, what they want and how they may wish to contribute will not only save time throughout the organizing process, but may determine whether the project succeeds at all.

Not everyone is alike.

Everyone learns and communicates differently. There are people who can learn through conversation and who communicate well through the spoken word. Others learn by doing and communicate more effectively through their actions. Using a method of learning or communication that a person cannot recognize may disable effective communication. Jack Hale recommends communicating with others using “the five languages of love,” which are:

- 1) **Touch**, e.g., Hug or handshake (whatever is culturally appropriate)
- 2) **Words of Affirmation** of one’s work by telling them.
- 3) **Quality time**, e.g., Spending time with the person and giving attention.
- 4) **Acts of Service**, e.g., Doing things for the person such as speaking up for them or giving them a ride.
- 5) **Gifts**, e.g., Rewarding a person with a special something.¹⁵

Recognizing the differences in people and creating multiple ways for people to contribute to the garden is a key skill for a community organizer to develop.

Don’t do for others what they can do for themselves.

It may be tempting for a community organization to “go into” a low income neighborhood and “set up” a garden “for” residents. This can look wonderfully successful on paper, and give organizers and volunteers the understandable satisfaction of helping the ‘needy’ through hard work and generous contributions. Such gardens, however, build dependency, not community. When support is withdrawn, these gardens often disappear.¹⁶ Employ strategies such as ABCD to develop community strength “from the inside out.” Strategies that strive for long-term success take a long time to implement. Remember the old adage – Go slow to go fast!

People need to experience a sense of their own power.

In order to feel that one can bring about change, a person needs to see that her or his personal involvement has had an impact on a broader effort. Contributions of work enable a person to realize their ability to affect the world around them. Thus, in a community organizing project, everyone works. Meaningful participation by all people involved is more likely when there are clear, understandable systems; for example, regular workdays (Saturdays) at regular times (9 AM-Noon), or, workday coordinators who have thought about what needs to be done and asked other members to bring supplies. Everyone can have at least one area of responsibility



Sometimes people who get even a taste of their own power will run with it. It can be an exhilarating sensation to make things happen in the world! With these folks, the job is to channel that new exuberance into ways that help them to become leaders who share leadership and encourage it in others. These people can take on a lot of responsibility and be challenged to coordinate areas that develop leadership in others.



and should have at least one associated task that they are working on (the compost crew, the potluck team, the art committee). Successful systems include *mechanisms that continually impart skills* (classes or mentors), *promote support and accountability* (regular meetings, regular work days, informed team coordinators), and include *continual leadership and decision-making opportunities for everyone* (leading a meeting, giving a tour, coordinating a committee, digging the first garden bed).

Over time, the community organizer can try to challenge everyone to take on something different. Challenging does not mean pushing. Support may be given by creating opportunities for everyone to learn and take on different tasks. Sometimes just letting someone know that they are believed in can inspire them to try to do it.

Power must be taken, not given.

Individuals need support to be empowered, but no one can actually empower another. People must decide on their own that they are an important, contributing member who can make a difference. As mentioned above, leaders can provide the “space” in structures and opportunities that allow individuals to experience their worth and abilities.

🌱 Utilizing the community organizing guidelines to cultivate empowerment of individuals for all facets of their life reinforces the seventh *Growing Communities Principle*: Promote active citizenship and political empowerment.

The second part of this guideline is about community power. Intentionally or not, communities are at times dissuaded and even impeded from taking responsibility for themselves and designing their own future. Those who benefit from our society’s class and race structures are deeply invested in maintaining the status quo. Only a group of empowered individuals who are united in their vision and action can challenge the status quo, make their power known and move toward a future they desire.

People need to know what they are up against when they attempt to change old structures or patterns. Organizing efforts that incorporate a socio-economic analysis on race, class and power dynamics can help community members hone their strategic thinking. Young adults (ages 12-25) who are in the process of defining themselves as persons in society may be inspired to become change agents when they become literate in an analysis that helps them make sense of the injustice they witness in the world around them.

Community gardens are fertile ground for discussions about social and economic justice. Topics of hunger (*Why are so many people hungry when there is so much food in the stores?*), immigrants rights (*Who grows our food?*), fair labor practices (*How is our food grown?*), environmental justice (*What are the impacts of pesticides?*), fair pricing of products (*Why is food so cheap?*), racism (*I don’t like or am afraid of those particular people*) all can easily come up while gardening together.

(See the resources section for a list of groups who offer training and free curriculum on these topics. Also see the Diversity Workshop starting on page 38 for ways to discuss race issues in groups.)

General education is the key to long-term success.

For a group to run its own project, two factors must be in place. First, a community needs the skills to undertake the project. In a garden project, this means everything from project planning to meeting facilitation, from irrigation installation to harvesting practices. Also a community needs to believe that they *can* accomplish the project. *Si se puede*. (Yes, it can!) Constant learning opportunities give folks the skills they need, while structures that encourage participation enable people to use those skills and gain the confidence needed to do it on their own.

Paper doesn't organize, people do.

A million announcements via the mail will never substitute for a single direct contact. Asking a neighbor about his or her skills, interests and views, serves several purposes. It provides the information needed to build a strong and relevant project. It strengthens your relationship with the person and that person's with the project. It gives that person a sense of power in the project and thus greater connection. A personal invitation to a meeting is about 10 times more likely to get the person to the meeting. When people are asked why they don't participate in community projects, many people say it is because nobody has asked them to participate.¹⁷

✱ A note about e-mail: The use of e-mail has become prevalent in our society. While it has its value and convenience, remember that it can have an exclusionary effect; not everyone has an e-mail account or access to computers.

