

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE:

Encouraging Peer-to-Peer Learning through Gardening Support Groups



What are the benefits of gardening support groups?

Peer-to-peer learning and innovation

Gardening is a process of constant experimentation, observation, reflection, and learning. As gardeners, we are constantly using a process of 'trial and error' to learn what works best for our particular plot of land. This process is greatly enhanced by having a support group where gardeners can ask questions, exchange ideas, and share stories, a process known as peer-to-peer learning. Support groups allow both seasoned and new gardeners to continue to experiment with their garden practices in a safe and supported space.

Sharing the workload and physical resources

Being part of a gardening group also means opportunities to share workloads and items like seeds or tools. Groups can organize 'work parties' to help one homestead at a time to complete a bigger job, for example preparing a double dug bed, building an A-frame, or digging a ditch on contour to harvest water. Such arduous tasks are more enjoyable and faster to complete with many hands helping. Work parties can also be valuable learning opportunities if participants help with a process that is new to them or if conditions are different from their own. Support groups also allow members to more easily share seeds, tools, and other useful resources for their gardens. By working together, gardeners can achieve much more than they would have on their own.

Morale boosts

A gardener's morale can fall if she faces problems such as weather damage, theft, or an uncontrollable pest or disease. It can be helpful to discuss these disappointing events with other supportive individuals who can commiserate or offer assistance in regaining what was lost. This emotional support is important to regain the positive attitude needed to try again and support gardeners' overall mental health.

Empowerment of vulnerable individuals

Support groups can be particularly important for individuals who do not have equal access to the resources available in their community, such as water or land, extension advice, or easy access to transportation. Support groups can help individuals access more resources than they could on their own and broaden their network beyond their household.

How to set up a gardening support group

A gardening support group can either be newly formed or opportunities can be found to add gardening to already existing groups with an active membership.

Setting up a new group

The first step in setting up a new group is to identify interested individuals. A support group is a self-organizing structure that depends on the enthusiasm and commitment of its members for it to work. Ideally, the impetus for setting up a group should come from the potential members themselves. If there is not a strong desire for such a group, then the group will not last very long.

Once you have established that there is interest and need for a support group, then it is helpful to think about the following questions during the planning process.

1. What is the purpose of the group? Is the group for gardening only or will other needs arise? It is helpful to have early discussions with potential group members about this to avoid confusion later.
2. Who can participate in the group? For example, is the group exclusively for women or only for youth? Are group members allowed to invite others to join or do existing members need to agree first?
3. What should be the structure of the group? It is helpful to establish roles, such as facilitator and time keeper, early on to cover major responsibilities. Group members can take turns in some roles, like timekeeper, to keep everyone engaged equally.
4. What should be the structure of the meetings? Will meetings need an agenda or will they be free flowing discussions? Will certain topics be discussed every meeting or perhaps only once a month? Will meetings be focusing on a broad sharing of knowledge or will the group decide on specific topics to focus on?
5. What are the logistics of the meetings? How often will the group meet? At what time and for how long? Where? Are there any costs for holding meetings that need to be covered?

Building on already existing groups

It can sometimes be beneficial to fold gardening into other areas of people's lives where they have strong relationships and responsibilities. For example, participants may already be engaged in a religious, school, savings, women, or youth group or farmers' association that meets regularly. These groups often have common goals of income generation, household wellness, and community engagement. If gardening is seen as a potential way to achieve these common goals, then members will see it as an advantage to learn from and support one another in gardening.

Ensuring sustainability of a group

All strong support groups have as their foundation the dedication and commitment from a core group of people. This core keeps the group going through times of strife and change. Group members continue to attend because they receive one or more of the benefits listed earlier, and they have satisfying social interactions with other members of the group.

Establishing group agreements to create a supportive environment

It is important to have discussions in the very beginning within the group around what needs to be in place for all to feel welcomed, safe, and respected. These can be written into a group agreement or charter in the same way that ground rules are established at the beginning of the training program.

Some examples of what may be included in a group agreement include:

- Taking turns speaking
- Speaking without judgement of others
- Respecting others' choice not to speak
- Not using offensive language
- Respecting meeting times
- Turning off mobile phones and minimizing other disruptions during meetings
- What to do if there are difficulties that arise within the group

Process and structure for growing the group

It is also important for the group to discuss in the beginning what the process should be when other people are interested in joining the group. It may be that there is a lot of interest and the group grows quickly.

Some considerations around growing the group:

- Review the core values and intentions for the group. Make sure these are shared in an open forum with the prospective new members, along with the group agreement or charter.
- Discuss collectively what is a good size for the support group to work well. It may be that, rather than taking on too many new members, the group instead encourages a new support group to be set up and provides support for the process.

Dealing with difficulties

As the group grows it may also encounter difficulties. It is important to deal with difficulties as soon as possible. It can help to have a meeting where the group reconnects with the reasons they wanted to start the group in the first place. Identify the value that the group brings to their lives before trying to work out any difficulties. If the difficulties persist, it can be helpful to ask an outside mediator to come and facilitate discussions.

Support groups should be a rich and engaging way for gardeners to continue to innovate and learn while gardening. It may take someone a few attempts to find the right group, but individuals should be encouraged to learn from any failed attempts and continue to seek out the right support group for them.