

Community Donation Gardening Toolkit

Section 1: Where to Donate

Developing strong partnerships with community members and food recipient agencies is a key first step in donation gardening. When considering where to donate, your community may offer a wide range of opportunities. The three recommendations below are not meant to be sequential. Rather, they provide an iterative process of partnership development.

Recommendation #1: Consider possible models for the garden.

Understanding the various options for growing and distributing the produce will be an important consideration for the garden. A community donation garden may provide a direct model of access, in which the garden is located in the neighborhood where the food or gardening resources will be distributed, often either on site or nearby the garden.

The community members who receive the food or gardening resources in this model may have different levels of involvement and participation. They may direct the garden, participate in gardening, have direct access to the garden and gardening resources, utilize the garden as a learning space, coordinate distributions, receive food distributions directly from the garden, or participate in the garden in other ways.

Another model of donation gardening may be more indirect. Food may be grown at one site and then transported for delivery, often to a local food recipient agency such as a food pantry. Some community donation gardens may opt for a hybrid of the direct and indirect models, or they may allocate a portion of the garden or the produce grown for donation purposes.

Recommendation #2: Create a list of potential partners.

For gardens potentially interested in a **direct** model of donation gardening, begin by reaching out to neighborhood organizations and residents. For gardens opting for an **indirect or hybrid** model of donation gardening, recipient sites may include food pantries, food banks, meal programs, soup kitchens, senior centers, schools, daycare and after school centers, faith-based organizations, drop-off sites collecting food for delivery to pantries, and more.

If you are unsure where to donate in your community, begin by having a conversation among the garden volunteers and neighborhood members, contact your [County Extension office](#), and reach out to your network of community members to discuss ideas. Other community gardening organizations may recommend potential partners and may share other important insights and information.

[Growing Together Iowa](#), an ISU Extension and Outreach program working with community gardens to foster donation gardening across the state, maintains a directory of past garden sites and recipient agencies, which may be a helpful resource. Additionally, national food donation databases may help you identify nearby food recipient agencies. See below for more information.

Recommendation #3: Develop partnerships.

Set up an in-person meeting and/or phone call between the garden coordinators and potential partners. Make sure to include the gardeners who will primarily be responsible for produce donation. When you have conversations with the neighborhood organizations, members and/or food recipient agencies in your community, be prepared to ask questions about the partner's needs, interests, and expectations.

Example questions to consider include:

- What are the partner's needs related to food and/or gardening?
- What interests or potential interest does the partner have in this community garden?
- Is the partner interested in receiving fresh produce from this community garden?
- How else might they be interested in partnering?
- Beyond gardening and produce donation, are there other pressing needs in the community that are important to consider?
- What is the partner's experience with fresh produce and produce donations?
- What concerns might they have in partnering with the garden, or in receiving produce from the garden?
- How can the garden best meet the needs and expectations of the community members?
- What would the partner like the gardeners to know or understand about it (and for agencies, about the community members it serves)?
- What would the gardeners like the partner to know or understand about the garden?
- What level of involvement and partnership are the neighborhood members/agencies and the garden volunteers interested in? Produce donation only, or other opportunities for collaboration?
- Are the garden volunteers able to meet the needs of this partnership?
- What concerns or challenges might the garden volunteers have?

Before committing to a partnership, it is also important to discuss the logistics of produce donation and delivery. See the "What to Grow" section of the toolkit. Once you have developed a partnership, plan to regularly check-in with your partners and recipient agencies. Plan one or more conversations mid-growing season and at the end of the growing season.

Finally, remember that your partners, whether neighborhood members or food recipient agencies, are often constrained for resources, including time, financial, and other resources. It is important to develop partnerships that serve their needs. But you also need to be realistic about the level of commitment you can expect from garden volunteers.

Garden Spotlight: Ilsa DeWald, North Liberty Food Pantry

"Our slogan is, 'Neighbors Helping Neighbors.' One thing I point out is that neighbors is the same word on both sides and how we can interchange that, and we should be. . . . Through the experience of going through a couple growing seasons, it just became evident that what we really needed in the community was more of an education space, because we are fortunate to have a community where we were receiving donations and were able to gather produce from other sources in the community. We didn't need to focus in on the production side. With that education piece, then after doing some reflection on those power dynamics that do exist and having worked in the field for a couple years, realizing, okay, this is what I want to see. We're going to challenge ourselves to pursue this value and pursue that Neighbors Helping Neighbors slogan."

Getting started – Resources from ISU Extension and Outreach

The [map at this link](#) provides names and locations of community partner sites that received fresh produce donations through [Growing Together Iowa](#) the previous growing season. These partner sites provided emergency food access for individuals with low income in various settings including food pantries, meal sites, and care centers. *Map credit: Bailey Hansen.*

Additional resources

[MEANS](#) is an online website that helps connect growers with organizations receiving and distributing food.

[Ample Harvest](#) is an online directory of food banks and pantries. Note that the directory only contains food recipient agencies that have registered with Ample Harvest.

[Why Hunger](#) provides an online database of community-based organizations and emergency food providers. Interested organizations can [register](#) to join the network.

[Chowbank](#) is a real-time online and mobile app that connects donators with recipients. Local organizations, such as [Eat Greater Des Moines](#), are using Chowbank in their food recovery efforts.

Food recovery. For more information on food recovery, see Additional Resources in the [Gleaning](#) section of the toolkit.

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