

Community Donation Gardening Toolkit

Section 2: What to Grow

Before deciding what to plant in your donation garden, we recommend reaching out to the neighborhood organizations, food pantries, and other food recipient agencies in your community where you intend to donate. Learning about the needs and capacities of the donation site and donation recipients will guide your selection, as you also take into account the skills, resources, and environmental factors specific to your garden.



To assist in these efforts, in 2015, [Iowa State University SNAP-Ed](#) staff contacted food bank leadership across the state to determine priorities for produce donation. This resulted in a publication titled [Top 13 vegetables to donate to food pantries](#) (HORT 3068). The goal was to identify fruits and vegetables that can be grown in Iowa that are in high demand at pantries.

This list also takes into account ease of transport, storage, and preparation. Though this list is a good starting place, it does not replace the need to talk first with neighborhood organizations, local food pantries, and other food recipient agencies about the items most in demand and assess conditions at your garden.

Recommendation #1: Coordinate with the garden's recipient partners.

Develop a partnership with the applicable neighborhood organizations and food recipient agencies before planning the garden. See the **Where to Donate** section of the toolkit. When you have conversations with the organizations and agencies in your community, be prepared to ask questions, such as:

- What fruits and vegetables are needed, but rarely donated? Perhaps the food pantry already receives generous donations of tomatoes but would like additional greens.
- What types of vegetables do community members like to eat? What culturally appropriate fruits and vegetables are needed? Take into consideration who might be accessing the food donation site and what fresh fruits and vegetables they would appreciate by talking with the donation site.
- Are there any fruits and vegetables for which the community or the agency already receives enough or too much?

Garden Spotlight: Rita Schoeneman, Hardin County

"We do have a significant Hispanic community, locally, that do work in our [farms], you know, because this is largely a rural economy in Hardin County. I mean it's mostly corn and soybean and hogs. And so, we have a lot of Hispanic workers that come up to work the field. And so we kept that in mind as we were deciding what kinds of produce to put in the garden. [...] We want to make sure that like, tomatoes, onions, peppers, and green beans, and we also elected to put some potatoes in. And then, squash. Which were all on the list, and seemed to be something that maybe a Hispanic family would use..."

Ask questions related to the logistics of produce drop-off, storage, and distribution, including:

- If your garden is directly distributing produce to neighborhood members, how, when, and where should the distribution take place?
- For donations to food recipient agencies, how often does the agency distribute food?
- For donations to meal sites, schools, and other programs with food preparation on-site, how often are the meals served?
- Does the agency pick up deliveries or work with other partners to coordinate pick up?
- Is the agency in need of refrigeration, especially if distributions are less frequent?
- If the agency has refrigeration, is enough space is available? If not, consider produce options that have longer shelf lives.
- Are there any other potential challenges for the agency or for direct recipients who are receiving the fresh produce?
- Are there other logistics, guidelines, and procedures that the garden volunteers should be aware of, for example, packaging preferences, delivery sites, key contact person?
- What information about the produce does the recipient or agency partner need from the gardeners, such as labeling of produce items being donated, preparation information on how to cook with or use the produce, etc.?
- What other information might be helpful to the recipient or agency partner?
- When can garden volunteers harvest and deliver? How often, which days of the week, and what times of day? Before committing to a delivery time, make sure to consider when garden volunteers will be available for harvesting, packing, and delivering the produce.



Recommendation #2: Discuss available resources at the garden.

Discuss which factors at the garden will guide your crop selection. This includes environmental and human resources.

What are your human resources?

- What partners in your community could contribute to your success? Partners can be a strong source of audience insight, expertise, volunteer time, equipment and funding.
- Consider whether your planned growing system is compatible with the physical capabilities of garden volunteers. For example, consider whether raised beds or vertical gardening methods would be preferable to systems that require extensive kneeling.
- Consider which knowledges and experience garden volunteers already have, and what they like to grow. Would the gardeners like to experiment with new vegetables and growing techniques?
- Some fruits and vegetables require more frequent harvesting than others, especially during certain times of the season. Consider volunteer availability throughout the growing season.
- Enjoyment and learning opportunities can be important parts of sustaining a garden. Develop an understanding of what the garden volunteers like to grow but remember to prioritize the people who are accessing the food and what their food preferences are.

What tools and additional resources do you have available?

- For instance, do you already have nearby access to water? Do you have tools to easily harvest certain vegetables? Do you have indoor space to start seeds, or will you direct seed and/or transplant?
- Are grants or other funding sources available to acquire additional resources?

What are the environmental factors at the garden?

- Consider climate, soil types, pest pressures, water availability and other factors.
- Explore sustainable practices, including crop rotations. Rotating crops helps enhance yields and keep pest pressures at bay. Consult past years' records and maintain ongoing records with crop rotation information.

Getting started – Resources from ISU Extension and Outreach

[Top 13 vegetables to donate to food pantries](#). This publication provides an overview of 13 vegetable crops, along with tips for growing, harvesting, and cleaning. In addition, the article includes links to ISU Extension and Outreach publications on home vegetable gardening and guidance for specific crops. While this publication provides advice on potential crops to grow and donate, we always recommend communicating first with your local food recipient agencies. Because extension has not yet published recommendations on culturally appropriate or ethnic crops, please consult external resources, such as the [ethnic crops resource](#) from the USDA Agricultural Library (also listed below).



Recommended varieties

Where to find seeds and starters

[Planting a home vegetable garden](#). Provides basic how-to information, including seedbed preparation, seed selection and sowing, and using transplants. Chart gives planting guidelines for 37 vegetables.

[Planting and harvest times for garden vegetables](#). This guide can help northern, southern, and central Iowa vegetable growers schedule the planting of gardens, so space may be used efficiently. Includes a staggered planting and harvest chart for crops grown April through October. Detailed planting directions are given for more than 25 common garden crops, such as

radishes, lettuces, onions, peas, tomatoes, kale, peppers, squash, melons, and cucumbers.

[Garden tips: Guidelines to seasonal chores](#). Learn to properly maintain your garden all year round. Includes information on what steps to take with your lawn, fruits, trees and shrubs, flowers, herbs, houseplants, and/or vegetables in the early and late part of each season.

[Crop Rotation in the Vegetable Garden](#). This publication contains basic recommendations for maintaining crop rotations. For more in depth information on why crop rotations are important, as well as strategies for crop rotations and other organic practices, see [Crop Rotations](#), [Composting and Cover Crops for Organic Vegetable Production](#).

Additional resources

[Eat Greater Des Moines Community Garden Start-up Guide](#).

[Community garden guide: Vegetable garden planning and development](#). From USDA NRCS.

[Ethnic crops](#). Links to publications provided by the USDA National Agricultural Library. Includes information related to some specific Asian and Hispanic crops and their traditional uses.

[Vegetable gardening: A beginner's guide](#). From North Carolina State University Extension.

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