



COVID-19 Best Practices for Community Gardens in Toronto

Community garden organizers recognize the grave, unprecedented challenge that the COVID-19 virus presents to the City of Toronto. Stringent containment measures are needed to stop the spread of the virus and protect many lives. At the same time, food production is an essential service for everyone. Community gardens provide fresh, nutritious produce to supplement household food needs for many, including low-income people and people from equity-seeking groups¹.

This document was developed in consultation with community garden coordinators across North America and with information from local and national public health authorities. It outlines some minimum standards to be followed. Suggestions on how to implement the standards are included in italics. Due to the diversity of gardens (such as size, governance, location, equipment needs and language) some of these suggestions will be modified to work in each garden.

Following these guidelines will be additional work for garden coordinators and committees at a busy time of year. Consider asking other garden members to help take on organizing tasks.

If a garden and its members cannot follow safety guidelines, the garden is strongly urged to stay closed. If gardeners do not follow the guidelines, *all* gardens may be closed by the City of Toronto and/or the Province of Ontario. We all need to keep safety a #1 concern.

- ➔ **Before opening, each garden must commit to the following health and safety protocols and must communicate these protocols to all garden members.**
- ➔ **If a garden does not have the capacity to follow the guidelines for whatever reasons, it must not open until emergency measures have been lifted.**
- ➔ **Due to the severity of the circumstances, if garden members disobey the guidelines they must be asked to leave for the day. If asked to leave a second time, their plots will be allocated to other gardeners. Garden members may also be warned or fined by bylaw enforcement officers.**
- ➔ **Gardens are to be accessed only for maintenance and planting, not for programming (events, training or work parties).**

¹ By equity-seeking groups we mean: Black, Indigenous, people of colour, people with low incomes, LGBTQ2S+ people, people with disabilities and newcomers.

Our understanding of the COVID-19 virus continues to change. Please check for updates regularly from reliable sources (see below) and www.torontourbangrowers.org

All gardens must follow the basic guidelines for controlling the spread of COVID-19, which are:

- Unless gardening with members of the same household, everyone in the garden must maintain physical distancing of 2 metres/6 feet at all times.
- Use cleaning and disinfecting practices recommended by public health, including the wearing of masks or cloths to prevent droplet spread.
- Anyone who has been exposed to COVID-19 or is exhibiting symptoms of the virus must stay at home for 14 days (self-isolation and quarantine).

Access to Gardens

- Gardens must only be open to gardeners, staff assigned to gardens and official garden volunteers. Gardens must be closed to the public.
 - *For gardens without lockable fences, post signs notifying that it is closed to the public and only registered garden members may enter.*
- All garden members who will be active in 2020 must sign an agreement to abide by COVID-19 measures and acknowledge they may be asked to leave or lose their plots if they do not. This agreement should be available in languages used in the garden.
 - *It is important to update your list of current garden members and track who has signed off on COVID guidelines.*
 - *Have a sign-in sheet at the garden and keep the sheets. This can help public health with tracking if anyone becomes infected and acts as a record in the case of a dispute over scheduling.*
 - *Consider using gate lock with changeable code. Give access only to gardeners who have signed the agreement. Change the code on a regular basis.*
- Postpone any events or gatherings (including work parties) until after physical distancing measures are lifted.
- Anyone displaying symptoms of COVID-19 or who has come into contact with someone who has shown symptoms should not come to the garden. See the COVID-19 Health Questionnaire for screening questions. Anyone displaying symptoms should be given public health contact information and asked to leave.
- People may be infected with COVID-19 and not show symptoms immediately. Even if gardeners appear to be healthy and have had no contact with someone who is at risk, it is still absolutely essential to follow physical distancing and sanitation practices.

- Suspend children’s programming. Do not bring children who are too young to understand physical distancing and hygiene practices to the garden (unless they remain confined in a stroller or carrier). Parents or guardians who bring children to the garden are responsible for following the guidelines and sanitizing any tools the children use.
- No pets are allowed, but garden members can bring service animals as permitted under the Access for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

Physical Distancing

- Unless gardening with members of the same household, garden members must maintain a distance of at least 2 metres/6 feet from other people at all times.
 - *Pay particular attention to high-traffic areas in the garden, such as sheds or water fixtures. These are good places to have physical distancing reminders.*
 - *Have physical reminders in the garden of what 2 metres looks like, such as a couple of swim noodles or sticks, or lay tape/markers to show the intervals.*
 - *If your garden normally sets up places for people to congregate such as seating areas, block them off or don’t put them out.*
- Each garden should determine the safe number of people in the garden at any one time so that people can stay 2 metres apart. Do not exceed this number at any time. Ensure all gardeners know the maximum number of people allowed. Currently the Ontario government prohibits gatherings of more than 5 people.
- Create a garden schedule so that spacing and maximum numbers can be maintained.
 - *If your garden has plots, you can ask people with odd/even numbered plots to come on particular days.*
 - *If garden members are online, use an online sign up sheet.*
 - *If garden members communicate by phone, set up a phone tree to establish the schedule.*
- Some gardeners or staff may not feel safe working alone in a garden space. If so, do not require them to work alone. Provide support such as phone contact if possible.

EQUITY AND GARDENS

Equity-seeking groups have traditionally faced greater barriers in accessing growing space to begin with based on the first-come-first-served system used by many community gardens. The COVID-19 crisis can amplify existing inequities.

Community gardens should seek ways to prioritize garden space access for people who are facing specific barriers to food and income access, whenever possible. With limited garden space available for the season, gardens can prioritize access for those who will potentially have the most benefit.

- *Gardens can maintain a separate, prioritized wait list for people facing barriers to food access.*
- *Offer volunteer and leadership roles to people from equity-seeking groups.*
- *Consider growing food to donate to community food programs.*
- *During crisis times, it is even more important to ensure that food is distributed equitably and reaching those who need it most.*

- People can wear face masks as they can *reduce* (not eliminate) the spread of droplets from people who are infected but aren't showing symptoms. Masks don't replace proper physical distancing.
- Garden members should bring their own food and drinks. Food and drinks should only be shared by members of the same household.

Cleaning and Disinfection

- It isn't currently known exactly how long the COVID-19 virus can live outside the body. It is possible it can live from a few hours to several days on various surfaces.
- Provide handwashing stations and/or hand sanitizer. Anyone entering the gardens should wash their hands before entering and upon leaving.
 - *Toronto Public Health has info on handwashing and hand sanitizer, plus posters in 20 languages <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/hand-hygiene/>*
 - *Plans for building a handwashing station https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/handwashing_station_instructions.pdf?fwd=no*
 - *Individuals can carry hot, soapy water and a washcloth in a thermos (keeps water hot)*
- Soap is very effective at killing the COVID-19 virus if proper handwashing procedure is followed.
- Avoid touching your face, particularly nose, mouth and eyes unless you have just washed your hands.
- Disinfect surfaces and points of contact before and after use, including: reusable bins and buckets, shared tools, railings, doorknobs, water spigots and tables. Non-porous plastic, metal and glass surfaces are best.
 - *Be sure to remove all dirt and other organic matter from the surface of tools before sanitizing. Make sure tools are dry before sanitizing or the sanitizer will be diluted.*
 - *On days when people are in the garden, have at least one person responsible for sanitizing surfaces. This doesn't replace people sanitizing tools before and after use!*
- For disinfecting, use a sanitizing solution of either 75% or higher alcohol based product or bleach at a concentration of 1 teaspoon (5 mL) per cup (250 mL) or 4 teaspoons (20 mL) per litre (1000 mL). Diluted bleach has a shelf life of 24 hours, mix a fresh batch every day.
 - *See Health Canada for a list of disinfecting products <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19.html>*
- Latex gloves do not replace proper sanitation practices.
- Gardeners should consider bringing their own tools and garden gloves to avoid sharing tools.
 - *If the number of gardeners is small, they can have dedicated bins and buckets.*
 - *Take garden gloves home to wash after every use.*

- Find ways to limit or eliminate touching of surfaces.
 - *A designated person can open the shed door or compost bin lid in the morning and it is left open as next person enters the garden. Another person closes and disinfects at end of day.*
 - *Garden members can focus on completing one task rather than doing many things in different spaces.*
- It is even more important at this time to keep garbage and clutter out of the garden to maintain sanitized surfaces.

Communication

Community gardens have a strong role to play in educating people about safe practices and gaining compliance with public health COVID-19 measures.

Fight myth-information - go to trusted sources like Toronto Public Health:

<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/diseases-medications-vaccines/coronavirus/> or the World Health Organization:
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

- Use any communication methods that work to reach your gardeners to inform them about the new measures – email, phone, social media sites, bulletin boards, posters.
 - *Use peer-to-peer translation when translated materials are not sufficient.*
- Place posters with garden COVID-19 policies and recommended measures around the garden. Post a list of surfaces to be sanitized as a reminder.
- Post a public notice outside garden entry points indicating the garden is closed to the public, only authorized garden members are permitted.
 - *Include statement that garden members have been trained in COVID-19 safety protocols and agree to abide by them (so public understands why some people are allowed in the garden)*
 - *If you are donating produce to community food programs, include a sign explaining this to reduce vandalism and theft.*
- Counter misinformation and racist or xenophobic remarks.
- Crises like a pandemic can increase tensions and anxiety, we can best respond with calmness and compassion.
- If anyone displays symptoms (such as fever, coughs, muscle aches, tiredness or difficulty breathing) they can call Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000
- For questions about COVID-19 call Toronto Public Health Hotline 8:30 a.m. – 8 p.m.
 Telephone: 416-338-7600 TTY: 416-392-0658
- For bylaw enforcement, contact 311 Toronto.

- Toronto Public Health has posters on protecting yourself and information in Simplified Chinese, Farsi and French <https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-health-advice/>.

Planning

- It is very important to have a dedicated decision maker or team to hold responsibility for communicating with garden members, getting signed agreements and responding to garden members who do not comply with guidelines.
- Consider that you will have to start gardening later this year. Garden members should factor this into their planting plans.
- People who have been assigned tasks may fall ill or need to go into self-isolation. Have a back up plan for garden access (locks, keys, entry codes), organizing (contact lists, task allocations) and maintenance.
- For gardens with allocated plots, some gardeners may choose not to use their plot this year, particularly people who are elderly, have compromised immune systems or live with someone who is vulnerable. Those who can't walk or cycle to the garden may not want to take transit. You may ask them to give their plot to another person for this year, but both the current plot holder and the new gardener should be very clear that the allocation is temporary.
 - *This could be an opportunity to open spaces for gardeners from equity-seeking groups who traditionally face barriers to accessing plots.*
 - *The garden may decide that unused plots will grow food to donate to community food programs*
 - *The garden may choose to continue to grow food and share food with the gardeners who cannot garden due to illness/compromised immune systems.*
- Many gardens distribute seeds and seedlings and may need to develop a plan for distributing harvested produce if garden members are not taking it for themselves. A safety plan is needed to ensure transfer of seeds, seedlings and produce doesn't transfer the virus as well.
 - *Arrange for contactless deliveries (leaving seedlings or food on a doorstep or curb, arranging a drop-off time for apartments), handwashing before and after handling deliveries, minimizing the number of people handling the deliveries.*
- Garden members should plan to minimize trips to the garden. Use gardening techniques that will reduce labour.
 - *Use mulch to reduce the need for watering and weeding.*
 - *Row covers can control pest invasions when people are not in the garden as frequently to monitor pest activity.*

Sources

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With content from community garden protocols from Wareham Community Garden, Durham Integrated Growers, City of Surrey, University of Florida IFAS Extension and Institute nationale de santé publique du Québec.

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