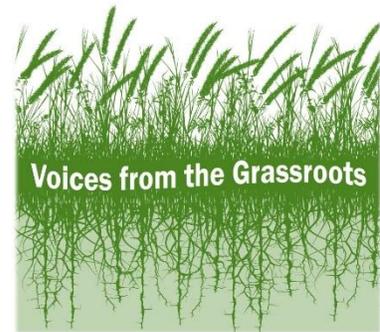


VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS COMMENTARY
**Building community through
 communal gardening**

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 Capitol View Communal Garden and Orchard



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Introduction

Capitol View Communal Garden and Orchard (CVCGO) is a communal garden founded in 2022 in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The garden sits on a previously unutilized one-third acre (.13 hectare) city park accessed through a lease agreement with the Saint Paul Parks Department. CVCGO was conceived as a means of strengthening connection and cooperative capacity in our community by satisfying the tangible need for fresh food.

In response to the Uprising after George Floyd’s murder, a small group of neighbors met to discuss strengthening the social fabric of our community. Personally, as a recently graduated engineer returning to the community I grew up in, I was seeking a way to connect with the neighborhood on new terms and live out my values through tangible action. We decided to explore a communal approach to community gardening.

After reaching out to the broader community,

an informal core group developed and influenced the social norms by agreeing on a few foundational elements:

- *Unconditional Sharing*: CVCGO crops can be harvested whenever, by whomever, without limitations.
- *Non-Coerced Labor*: All human labor at CVCGO is voluntary, meaning there are no work requirements or minimums for participation. There are no paid staff in our organization.
- *Anti-Hierarchy*: There are no parent organizations or managerial roles at CVCGO. We strive to make every decision at the garden democratically—using a consent system at general meetings for major decisions. At the garden itself, decisions can be made if two people agree with an idea, such as deciding where to plant corn or a honeyberry bush.

CVCGO distills these three elements into the slogan inscribed on the garden’s sign: *Take what you need; help if you want*. These concepts are likely antithetical to social practices in our home, workplaces,

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and community institutions, which may prompt some to dismiss this project as idealistic. On the contrary, these elements promote a practical way that all community institutions could operate. Furthermore, these principles create a space where many visions and ideas can coexist, so the assertions made here represent only one of these perspectives. By sharing my reflections on time spent at the garden, I hope to open up CVCGO to criticism and new ideas to continually learn, grow, and improve as a collective.

Simplified Administration

A typical community garden that rents out individual plots may require dues collection, an application process, a waitlist, formalized rules, and consequences for not maintaining plots. In the communal garden, there are no dues, no work requirements, no payroll, and no gatekeepers of participation such as applications and waitlists. The communal garden still requires administration, but CVCGO minimizes these tasks. Fundraising is only undertaken in response to the needs expressed by the community of gardeners. If cooking classes, specialized tools, or informational signage are requested by the community, the required materials are sourced through in-kind donations or fundraising.

We have received plants and seeds through the Minnesota Horticultural Society's MN Green program, the Youth Farm greenhouse, and the West Side Seed Library. Neighbors and local farmers have contributed beekeeping equipment, orchard tools, and plant starts. From the beginning, we did not want the garden's success to be dependent on funding or fundraising. We wanted any group of people to be able to launch a garden with only the financial resources that a few people might be able to contribute. So, we used bent fencing, tree-branch trellises, and rusty donated tools.

However, a number of neighbors were aware of some simple grants, and through these we received funding from the local government, the county public health agency, the Saint Paul Garden Club, and the USDA. Without paid staff, the majority of funds directly supports infrastructure that returns value year after year. In three years, the garden has raised US\$23,000 for a shed, tools,

cooking equipment, and informational signage, and to establish fruit and nut trees and bushes, native perennials, and permaculture plantings. Moving forward, our ongoing expenses are estimated to be around US\$1,500 a year for water and supplies for community events.

Improving Food Access

A farm that harvests food for sale must wash, preserve, and transport food. Produce from a communal garden is simply harvested by those who will eat it. This requires a greater understanding of food production on the part of the consumer, and CVCGO seeks to build this understanding. This is achieved through Thursday work nights at the garden—a weekly gathering where one may arrive to find a cooking demonstration, a medicinal plant class, tomato pruning lessons, or just manual labor spreading mulch. Community members build knowledge and skills on Thursdays so that they can feel comfortable harvesting whenever they want (if they don't feel comfortable already).

Building Social Infrastructure

The goal of CVCGO is a more connected and organized community. When there is a defined need (e.g., a load of wood chips is delivered to be spread on paths) and labor available to meet it, we have developed the social relations to coordinate that labor. These social relations are part of the *social infrastructure* of our community. This social infrastructure reinforces connections in the community that improve our ability to react to changes and make decisions to meet our needs.

Workers at CVCGO have built a shed, tested soil, kept bees, obtained city permits, made medicinal remedies, cooked foods onsite, thrown parties, written grants, and grown an abundance of food. Each task has empowered community members to bring forward their unique skill sets. These challenges underscore how individuals are uniquely valuable to their community, and through their passion, they become leaders and community experts. Additionally, by facing challenges together, people build cooperative capacity. In putting together a tomato trellis, people learn how someone responds to frustration and how they like to communicate. These connections don't happen un-

less you are working side by side, and they increase the capacity of a community to face larger and more daunting challenges.

Cooperative capacity not only enables a community to undertake technical challenges, but also expands the ability to resolve conflict. It is inevitable that conflicts will arise due to the diverse needs and backgrounds of individuals. As disagreements arise, the care and high regard for one another that is built over time keep community members engaged in the conflict-resolution process, and experiences in making decisions collectively facilitate the resolution of the disagreement.

Gardens have the potential to meet a vast array of needs, and community issues such as commodified housing, institutional racism, and an opioid epidemic may be unresolvable within the confines of the garden. However, communal gardeners may be better equipped to address the root causes of these bigger crises and mitigate the impacts on the community because we have strengthened personal relationships at the garden.

Meeting Social Needs Through Increased Community Connection

In former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's letter introducing the report *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, he states, "The mortality impact of being socially disconnected is similar to that caused by smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day" (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, p. 4). The first of his six pillars to advance social connection is to *Strengthen Social Infrastructure in Local Communities*. Murthy says we must design the built environment to promote social connection, establish community connection programs, and invest in local institutions that bring people together. The workers of CVCGO are not agents of the surgeon general, but CVCGO is an example of this first pillar.

Someone may choose to connect at the garden by hosting cooking lessons, or they may choose to harvest alone; nevertheless, each person is engaging with the space on their own terms. Space and resources are communal regardless of how one wants to interact with the garden, and this builds connection to the physical space. This is a form of social connection that doesn't require you to enter into relationships. It instead builds an implicit

understanding that this community's members trust and care for one another, as demonstrated by their collective care for the garden. Through experience, we know this understanding has led to deeply meaningful interpersonal relationships across our community, and individually meaningful relationships with the land.

The foundations of the communal garden provide fertile ground for social connections. Unconditional sharing creates the opportunity to connect by offering people free food. Anti-hierarchy fosters relationships built on trust and a genuine desire to engage rather than on power dynamics. Non-coerced labor creates an environment where every single person engages by choice, and where everyone can disengage by choice. These foundations are the roots of a project that effectively address loneliness, and that have developed an inviting and open social dynamic in the community. In addition, they inform the practical recommendations detailed in the appendix, which address the day-to-day operation of CVCGO.

Conclusion

Workers at CVCGO recognize that we must devote ourselves to radically changing food systems, social relations, and economic structures. Urban food production capacity must grow to meet the needs of communities in a changing climate, and communal gardening can both grow food and grow the base of people engaged in food production. Communal gardens can serve as incubators, connectors, and producers that are replicable but not necessarily "scalable." Communal gardening fits into the urban agricultural ecosystem without competing for large amounts of grant money or market share, and instead meets needs exactly where they exist. We hope that CVCGO's exploration into new social and productive relationships can lead to new ideas, and new connections across communities, all pushing toward a brighter future and a more secure, connected, and liberated world. 

Acknowledgments

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Reference

Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. (2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Appendix. Practical Elements of Capitol View Communal Garden and Orchard

- Consistent community work night.
- Anyone can harvest, no limits.
- No coerced labor, including wage labor.
- No hierarchy, continued efforts to prevent establishment of hierarchy or power dynamics.
- Free food or music on days when a large labor force is needed.
- Welcome people into the space; talk to everyone.
- Start with a small group of committed people. Three friends can start a communal garden, but it is too much work to do alone.