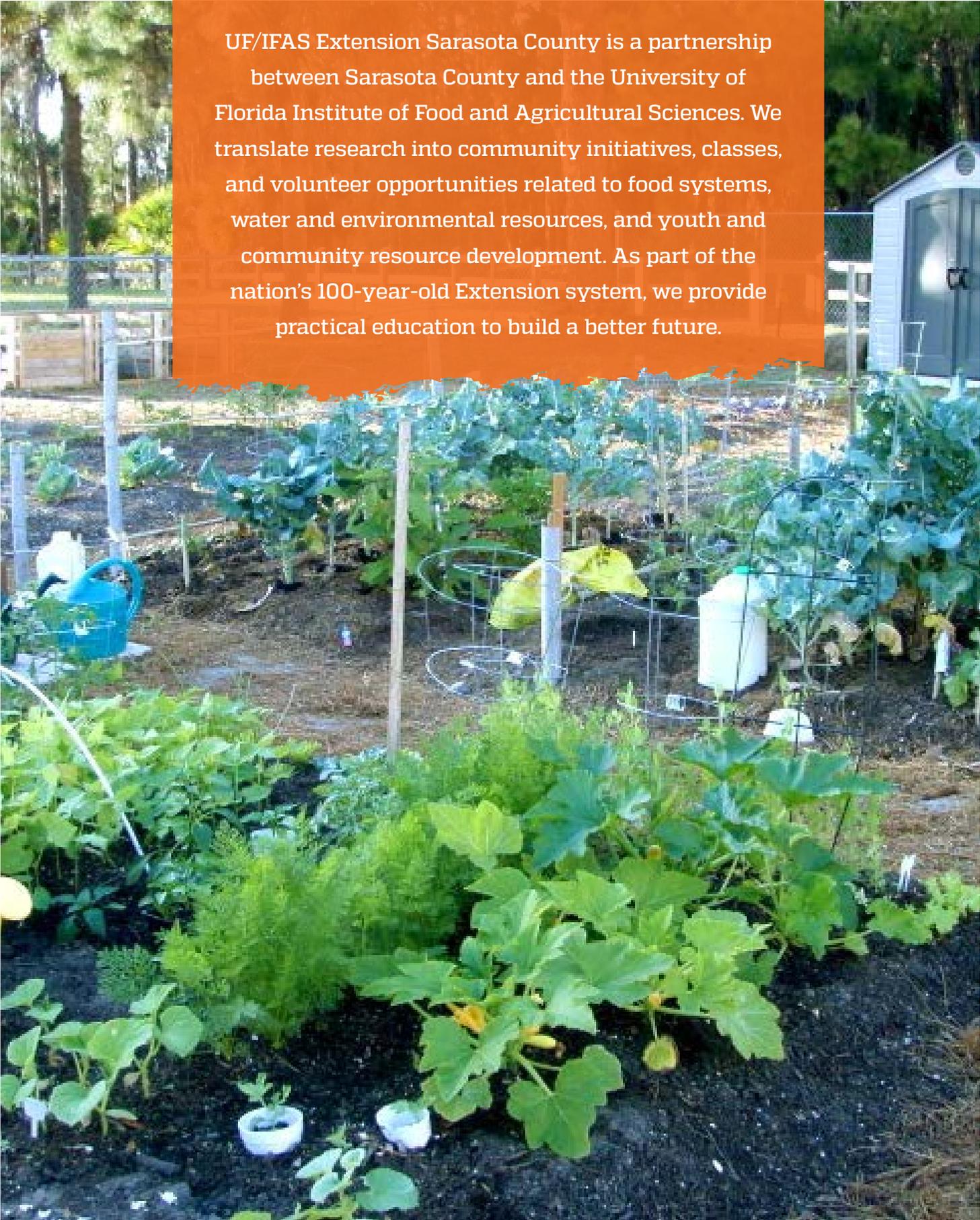

COMMUNITY GARDENS

PROGRAM HANDBOOK

A guide for community gardens operating in partnership with
UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County



A photograph of a community garden. In the foreground, there are several rows of plants, including leafy greens and a large bush of dill. A blue watering can is on the left. In the middle ground, there are metal cages for climbing plants, one with a yellow bag hanging from it. A white plastic jug is also visible. In the background, there is a wooden fence, trees, and a small white shed with a grey door. The text is overlaid on an orange rectangular background in the upper center of the image.

UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County is a partnership between Sarasota County and the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. We translate research into community initiatives, classes, and volunteer opportunities related to food systems, water and environmental resources, and youth and community resource development. As part of the nation's 100-year-old Extension system, we provide practical education to build a better future.

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ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook was created by UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County (UF/IFAS Extension) to provide a clear framework to support successful community gardens in Sarasota County. All content and supporting documents are subject to updates.

For more information about community gardens, contact UF/IFAS Extension at 941-861-5000, or visit sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu.

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SUMMARY

A community garden is a piece of land gardened by a group of people for the primary purpose of growing vegetables for consumption. Gardens consist of individual plots assigned to an individual, a family, or an organization.

The Community Gardens Program facilitates the creation and oversight of community gardens in Sarasota County. The program provides an efficient and consistent framework for the use of public and private lands as community gardens. Its framework supports simplified and coordinated management of the gardens by their members.

The program was created in recognition and support of [Sarasota County's Comprehensive Plan Policy 1.3.3](#), which states that the county will promote sustainable agricultural practices and encourage the use of county parks for community gardens.

Collaboration between Sarasota County, UF/IFAS Extension, Friends of Sarasota County Parks, and community gardeners was the starting point to gather input from stakeholders. UF/IFAS Extension staff identified best practices by researching successful community garden programs around the state

and country. Finally, governance experts from the University of Florida, legal counsel from Sarasota County government, and other subject-matter experts reviewed the program.

The program has many components that generally fall under the following areas:

- Program direction, including technical assistance and liaison services between landowners and garden managers;
- Governance structure, including issue prevention and resolution; and
- Community-based administration of plot assignments and garden expenditures.

As of December 2013, participation in the program is required for any gardens on county-owned land. To date, the program has seven official community gardens (see Table 1).

Table 1: Community Gardens Program Locations

Year Opened	Garden Name	Location	Number of Plots
1997	Bayou Oaks	Firehouse Park Old Bradenton Road	18
2000	Laurel	Laurel Park Collins Road	24
2001	Nokomis	Nokomis Park Nippino Trail	26
2011	North Port	Warm Mineral Springs San Servando Avenue	40
2012	Culverhouse	Culverhouse Nature Park McIntosh Road	69
2012	Englewood	Buchan Airport Park Old Englewood Road	18
2013	Bee Ridge	Bee Ridge Park Lockwood Ridge Road	31



ROLES

Garden Members

A garden member is a program participant who, in exchange for use of a community garden plot, must:

- Complete, submit, and abide by the **Community Garden Membership Agreement**.
- Pay applicable fees upon plot assignment or renewal.
- Obtain personal gardening supplies including seeds, soil amendments, and hand tools.
- Provide for supplies or improvements beyond basic garden infrastructure.
- Actively maintain assigned garden plot and adjacent communal garden areas, keeping them free of litter and weeds.
- Participate in workdays to ensure a tidy and aesthetically pleasing garden environment.

Garden Member Rules and Responsibilities

1. All park rules and local and state regulations must be followed. Garden hours are the same as park hours (sunrise to sunset). Pets are not allowed in community gardens.
2. Observe reasonable safety precautions. Gates and sheds should be kept locked to prevent access by unauthorized persons. Keys and lock combinations should not be shared with anyone except authorized garden members. Due to the potential for injuries inherent to gardening, and the remote nature of some sites, it is advised to keep a cell phone at all times. Report any suspicious persons or criminal activity to law enforcement immediately. Sarasota County and its partners assume no liability for losses resulting from theft or vandalism.
3. Maintain plot and adjacent communal areas, keeping them fully planted and free of weeds, litter, and debris. Begin actively gardening plot within 14 days of assignment. Exceptions may be made at the discretion of the garden manager. If the member is to be away for an extended period, they are responsible for appropriately covering the plot or ensuring that another garden member will tend the plot and adjacent communal areas. Equipment, supplies, and other materials must be properly stored. Pathways must be kept free from obstructions.
4. Participate in a minimum of two regularly scheduled workdays – or 16 hours – per year to help maintain common areas and vacant plots.
5. Remain responsible for all personal items brought into the garden. Lost or abandoned items will be held for 30 days and, if not claimed during that time, will be considered a donation to Sarasota County.
6. Keep sheds clean and orderly. Sheds are to be used specifically for storing garden supplies for the group as a whole and are not intended for personal use.
7. Vegetative waste should be disposed of in compost bins and not trash receptacles. Other waste should be removed for home pickup or proper disposal in dumpsters.
8. Harvest only from assigned garden plot. Communal beds may be harvested in moderation or as determined by the garden manager.
9. Produce grown in community gardens is for self-consumption only. Sale or donation to any third party is prohibited without prior written approval by the Program Coordinator.
10. Decorative plantings must follow Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles. Plant species listed as Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council Category I or II (see www.fleppc.org for more information) are prohibited in all garden areas. Tree installation within plots is prohibited, due to shading and complications with root systems. The property owner reserves the right to remove or prune any plant that is prohibited, dead, diseased, or creating a hazard or public safety issue. Individuals are responsible for any costs associated with removal of non-conforming plants that they install.
11. Permission must be obtained from the Program Coordinator prior to construction of any new structures or any activity that may affect existing structures or require contracted services or permitting.
12. Every effort should be made to conserve water resources. When rain barrels are accessible, they should be used as the first watering source. Use of water-saving methods, such as hand-watering, mulching, and micro or drip irrigation, is encouraged. Report any leaks or other observed problems to the garden manager immediately. Do not leave water turned on or in hoses. Garden hoses must be stored on racks when not in use to maintain a tidy appearance and help prevent injuries.



13. Prevent and manage pest problems per the **Community Gardens Program Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Plan**. IPM uses proper plant selection and maintenance and the least toxic method of pest control to encourage healthy plants that resist insect and disease infestations. Prior to applying chemicals within your plot, refer to the IPM plan for a list of approved chemicals that are consistent with organic gardening practices and rated safe for edibles. Acceptable pest control methods include, but are not limited to, hand picking, soil solarization, biological controls (e.g. *Bacillus thuringiensis*), and natural botanicals.
14. Complete UF/IFAS Extension's power tools training prior to using any power tools.
15. The use of tobacco products in the gardens is prohibited.
16. In no case shall materials that might be construed as offensive be allowed in gardens.
17. Any provocative, uncooperative, inflammatory or belligerent behavior is prohibited while at the garden site. Members must conduct themselves in a positive manner that contributes to an enjoyable community atmosphere while in the garden.
18. UF/IFAS Extension, Sarasota County, and all affiliated organizations that are partners with, or otherwise support, the Community Gardens Program assume no liability for injuries or accidents (see **Liability Release Statement** in the **Community Garden Membership Agreement**).
19. Report hazards or problems to the garden manager. If the manager is not available, report urgent issues to the Program Coordinator. For emergencies, call 911.

Garden Managers

A garden manager is an individual garden member who serves as the primary contact person and representative for a community garden. The garden manager is a well-organized individual who serves as the voice of the garden. The manager interacts with current and prospective garden members, the Program Coordinator, and other stakeholders, and must be able to maintain good working relationships.

Please see the **Processes, Garden Manager Nomination and Selection** section of this document for more information or visit sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu for the complete **Garden Manager Volunteer Job Description**.

Garden managers are expected to:

- Communicate with the Program Coordinator on needs, vacancies, and other pertinent items.
- Orient new garden members to the program.
- Coordinate garden workdays.
- Refer potential garden members to the Program Coordinator.

Garden Managers Group

The Community Gardens Managers Group consists of all current and alternate volunteer garden managers. The managers group provides input on program objectives, amendments to program rules and forms, budget priority setting, and other matters.

All issues require a simple majority vote by those group members present at a meeting, provided at least five current garden managers are present.

The managers group meets semi-annually, in October and March. Special meetings will be held as needed, with at least one-week advance notice. Manager group meetings will abide by Florida's Open Meetings law (Section 286.011, Florida Statutes), including public noticing through Sarasota County's weekly calendar, taking and retaining minutes, and holding meetings in a facility accommodating the public.

Sarasota County

UF/IFAS Extension and Sustainability

UF/IFAS Extension provides administrative support, training, and technical assistance to area gardeners. The Community Gardens Program Coordinator, a UF/IFAS Extension employee, is responsible for overseeing the Community Gardens Program by:

- Managing plot assignments, wait lists, annual renewals, and garden records.
- Collecting and managing member fees to support basic garden infrastructure, including perimeter fences, storage sheds, compost bins, standard signage, bulletin boards, and shared gardening tools. These items are Sarasota County property and do not belong to individual members.

- Offering community garden orientation and other educational courses.
- Providing networking opportunities for gardeners to share knowledge.
- Serving as the primary point of contact and as liaison between gardeners, county staff, and other stakeholders.
- Assisting with organizing special events, publicity, and media releases.

Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources

Sarasota County Parks, Recreation, and Natural Resources (Parks) partners with UF/IFAS Extension to support community gardens by:

- Reviewing and authorizing the use of park lands for community gardens, via an internal facility reservation permit.
- Working with Program Coordinator on maintenance and improvements, including repairs to county-owned assets.
- Maintaining grounds outside of the garden.
- Providing water for irrigation, on a case-by-case basis, typically through on-site wells.
- Inspecting grounds after hurricanes or other disasters and reporting damages to UF/IFAS Extension.

Neighborhood Services

Sarasota County Neighborhood Services offers grants to neighborhoods that are willing to match funding through cash, in-kind donations, professional labor, or volunteer hours. These grants have provided funding to support a number of community gardens. Visit www.scgov.net for more information about the Neighborhood Grant program.

Cities of Sarasota and North Port

The cities of Sarasota and North Port partner with UF/IFAS Extension to support community gardens by:

- Reviewing and authorizing the use of city-owned lands for community gardens.
- Maintaining grounds outside of the garden.
- Working with Program Coordinator on maintenance and improvements.
- Providing water, on a case-by-case basis.



Friends of Sarasota County Parks

Friends of Sarasota County Parks (Friends) is a non-profit organization that supports natural lands and recreational resources in Sarasota County. Friends processes monies received via fundraising efforts, tax-deductible donations, and grants that support garden development and improvements beyond basic infrastructure.

Volunteers

Individuals who are not community garden members are welcome to help maintain community gardens on a volunteer basis. Visit sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu for the **Community Garden Volunteer job description** and information on registering as a community garden volunteer. Volunteers must follow Sarasota County’s volunteerism guidelines, including having required forms and/or online documents in place.

Table 2: Summary of Role Requirements

	Garden Members	Garden Managers	External Volunteers
Status	Program Participants	Program Participants and County Volunteers	County Volunteer
Membership Agreement	Yes. Anyone participating in a community garden plot shall be listed as a primary or secondary member.		Not required.
Volunteer Registration	Not required.	Yes. Online registration required.	Yes. Volunteer Service Agreement required.
Background Check	Not required.	Yes. Local background check required.	No. Background check not required for one-time events.

PROCESSES

Initial Plot Applications and Assignments

New gardeners interested in obtaining a garden plot should take the following steps:

1. Contact UF/IFAS Extension at sarasota@ifas.ufl.edu or 941-861-5000 to obtain a plot assignment, or be added to the wait list if no plots are available. The Program Coordinator then notifies the garden manager of the interested new member(s).
2. Meet onsite with the garden manager to view the plot and learn about the garden.
3. Upon plot assignment, sign and submit the Community Garden Membership Agreement and annual fees, payable to Sarasota Board of County Commissioners. After completing registration, the garden manager provides gate access information.

Wait Lists

Plots are assigned by UF/IFAS Extension on a first-come, first-served basis. If no plot is available at the time of the request, the applicant will be placed on a wait list and notified when a plot becomes available. Gardeners may choose to be wait-listed at multiple garden locations.

Each garden member is entitled to one plot when there is a wait list for the garden. If there is no wait list and space remains, gardeners may secure additional plots on a first-come, first-served basis. Members are responsible for the annual fee on any additional plot assigned.

Members may not transfer their plot to another person. When a plot becomes available, UF/IFAS Extension will reassign it to the next person on the wait list.



Annual Plot Renewals

Membership agreements are valid from August 1 to July 31, to include both autumn and spring harvests. To renew plot assignments, garden members must submit, either online or as a hard copy, a signed membership agreement and payment to UF/IFAS Extension. Visit sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu for a [sample membership agreement](#).

Table 3: Important Dates

August 1	Start date for membership agreements.
July 1	Membership agreement renewal notifications sent.
July 31	Garden year ends, membership agreements for previous year expire, and new membership agreements are due. Termination notices are mailed.
January & July	Garden Member Orientation sessions offered by UF/IFAS Extension.

Garden Manager Nomination and Selection

1. In July of each year, any member who wants to serve as a garden manager should indicate so on their membership agreement. Prerequisites include being an active member for a minimum of one year and having no membership agreement violation notices on record. Garden managers serve two-year terms – one year as an alternate, followed by

one year as a primary manager – and may serve any number of consecutive terms. The number of garden managers is based upon the number of plots in a garden, with one primary manager and one alternate for every 20 plots.

2. When there are more nominees than vacancies at a given garden, active members in good standing will vote to select the manager(s) at their garden. Voting will be open for a minimum of 15 calendar days. Late ballots will not be counted.
3. Any newly selected positions will become effective on October 1 of each year, with previous managers relinquishing their responsibilities at that time.

Garden Member Termination

Any member who chooses to stop gardening or not renew their membership agreement should notify the garden manager and UF/IFAS Extension. Members are responsible for removing all vegetation in the plot to prepare it for the next gardener.

Failure to abide by the rules stated within the membership agreement shall result in forfeiture of the participant's plot and associated fees. Sarasota County reserves the right to immediately terminate membership for any violation(s).

In the event of a membership agreement violation, the garden manager will attempt to resolve the matter by contacting the member directly. If no resolution occurs, UF/



IFAS Extension will send a warning letter to the member. The member then will have 14 calendar days to resolve the identified violation(s). If violations are not corrected, UF/IFAS Extension will send a final warning letter to the member. The member then will have seven calendar days to comply or they will forfeit their plot and membership fee.

Conflict Resolution and Grievance Procedure

In the true sense of a “community” garden, disagreements should be handled informally through discussion between the parties involved whenever practical. A member should first attempt to work out any issue directly and respectfully with the other party. If needed, collect the facts, including the date, time, place, and nature of the incident(s) and document any attempted resolution(s).

If members are unable to resolve concerns on their own, the next step is to ask a garden manager for help. If the

grievance is with a manager, the issue should be addressed with an alternate manager, when feasible.

On occasion, conflicts and complaints cannot be resolved informally. For these situations, the parties involved should complete a grievance form to notify the Program Coordinator. The Program Coordinator then will consult the parties involved to collect facts and follow the normal process for rule violations, if any have occurred. Grievances must be filed within two weeks following an incident to be reviewed.

Members may appeal a grievance-related decision/ termination within 14 calendar days of the outcome by requesting reconsideration by the County Extension Director. The Director will review the information and determine whether it warrants further consideration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following resources were referenced during the creation of Sarasota County's Community Gardens Program:

1. American Community Gardening Association
<https://communitygarden.org>
2. The City of Atlanta, Park Pride - Adopt a Community Gardens Program <http://www.parkpride.org/get-involved/community-programs/community-gardens>
3. Orange County (Florida) Community Gardeners Guide <http://orange.ifas.ufl.edu/mg/pdffiles/OrangeCtyComGdnGuide%2011-18-2010.pdf>
4. The City of San Francisco Community Garden Policies
<http://sfrecpark.org/park-improvements/urban-agriculture-program-citywide/community-gardens-program/policies/>
5. The City of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods P-Patch Community Gardening Program
<http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/p-patch-community-gardening>
6. The City of Vancouver, B.C. - Board of Parks and Recreation
<http://vancouver.ca/people-programs/community-gardens.aspx>
7. King County (Washington) Community Garden Program Implementation Plan
http://your.kingcounty.gov/dnrp/library/parks-and-recreation/documents/rentals_permits_fees/King_County_Gardens_Plan_Rev03.22.2011_Adopted.pdf
8. UF/IFAS Extension Duval County
http://duval.ifas.ufl.edu/lg_urban_gardening.shtml
9. UF/IFAS Extension Hillsborough County
http://hillsborough.ifas.ufl.edu/fyn/com_sch_grds.shtml

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Documents essential to the Community Gardens Program may be found online under the "Community Garden Resources" heading at <http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu/Hort/CommGarden.shtml#KeyDocuments>. To obtain a printed copy of any document listed, visit the UF/IFAS Extension office.

- Sample Membership Agreement
- Volunteer Opportunity Description
- Garden Manager Volunteer Opportunity Description
- Garden Walk-through Checklist
- Community Gardens Program Integrated Pest Management Plan
- Hurricane Preparedness for Your Garden Checklist
- Grievance Form

