

Making the Most of Meetings

A successful community garden is often the result of many factors, the most important of which may be effective, open communication among members. Whether an active member of the steering committee or a one hour a week gardener, everyone wants to feel that their voice is heard and that no important decisions are made in secret. The most effective way of ensuring this is to hold regularly scheduled meetings at which everyone's concerns can be addressed and all important decisions are openly discussed and voted upon by the general membership. However, unless they're well organized, regular meetings can be an onerous obligation that attracts fewer and fewer members as time goes on. Meetings that rehash the same old thing time after time can actually be an obstacle to open communication and can result in opposite of what was intended.

How to Conduct More Effective Meetings

Before the Meeting: Prepare

- The garden coordinator and/or the steering committee should write up an agenda and distribute it before the meeting.
- Arrange for a location that is accessible to everyone and, hopefully, can be used for every meeting. Make sure that the facility is accessible, that there is adequate seating for everyone, a black board or flip chart to write on, bathroom facilities, refreshments.
- The night before the meeting call to remind everyone.

The Agenda

- An agenda is a written plan for the meeting listing what you want to discuss and accomplish and how much time each item will take. It should be created before the meeting and is usually the task of the steering committee and the garden coordinator.
- Everyone should be invited to submit agenda items whether they are a part of the steering committee or not.
- In addition, time should be allotted for unexpected items, which may arise during the course of the meeting.

The Meeting

- Write the agenda on a black board or flip chart so that everyone can see it.
- Designate a facilitator or chair person whose job it is to see that all items are dealt with, the time schedule is followed, and that everyone is heard.
- Designate someone to record the minutes of every meeting. This job could be rotated among members or can be the responsibility of one person. Minutes of previous meetings can be kept in a binder so that they are easily available.
- Keep a record of attendance.
- Start on time and, unless the group agrees to stay longer, end on time. Everyone will appreciate this policy and habitual stragglers will soon realize that if they want to participate they will have to accommodate themselves to the group and not vice versa.
- Ask if there are any additions to the agenda.
- Acknowledge and thank people for what's been done since the last meeting.
- Be flexible about topics or time allotted. While every effort should be made to stick to the time schedule, some things may arise that are more complicated than was imagined when the agenda was devised.
- Before voting on any issue, the chair should summarize the issue and make sure that it's clear to everyone what the points, questions, concerns and viewpoints are. After a vote is taken, the chair should then state what was decided and who will do what.
- End the meeting with a review of what was decided, who is to do what, and set a date for the next meeting.
- If possible, call those not at the meeting to tell them what happened. If the budget allows, distribute minutes of the meeting to all members.