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.

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?

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

- For donations to food recipient agencies, how often does the agency distribute food?
- Does the agency pick up deliveries or work with other partners to coordinate pick up?
- Is refrigeration available for delicate produce?
- If the agency has refrigeration, is enough space available? If not, consider produce options that have longer shelf lives.
- Are there 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?

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- When can garden volunteers harvest and deliver? How often, which days of the week, and what times of the day? Before committing to a delivery time, make sure to consider when garden volunteers will be available for harvesting, packing, and delivering 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?

- 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.
- 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 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 helping enhance yields and keep pest pressures at bay. Consult past years' records and maintain ongoing records with crop rotation information.

Getting Started – Resources from MSU Extension and Outreach

- Top 15 Veggies to Donate to Food Pantries – This publication provides an overview of 15 vegetable crops, along with tips for growing, harvesting, and cleaning. In addition, the article includes links to MSU 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 with your local food recipient agencies first. 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).
- [Successful Home Vegetable Gardening](#)
- [Can I Grow That Here? Vegetable Seed and Transplanting Schedules for Garden or Container](#)
- [Harvesting and Saving Garden Seeds](#)

- [Home Garden Soil Testing and Fertilizer Guidelines](#)
- [Home Composting](#)

Additional Resources

[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.

[Community Garden Guide: Vegetable Gardening Planning & Development](#) – From USDA NRCS.

[Vegetable Gardening: A Beginners Guide](#) – From North Carolina State University Extension.

This information has been modified from a document that was researched and written by Carrie Chennault. Reviewers and additional contributors: Laura Irish, Christine Hradek, Caitlin Szymanski, and Susan DeBlieck. Copyright 2018, Iowa State University SNAP-Ed and Master Gardener programs.

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