Developing Community Gardens for Alabama

Celebrating Alabama's Progress
Certified Public Manager® Program

CPM Solutions Alabama 2025

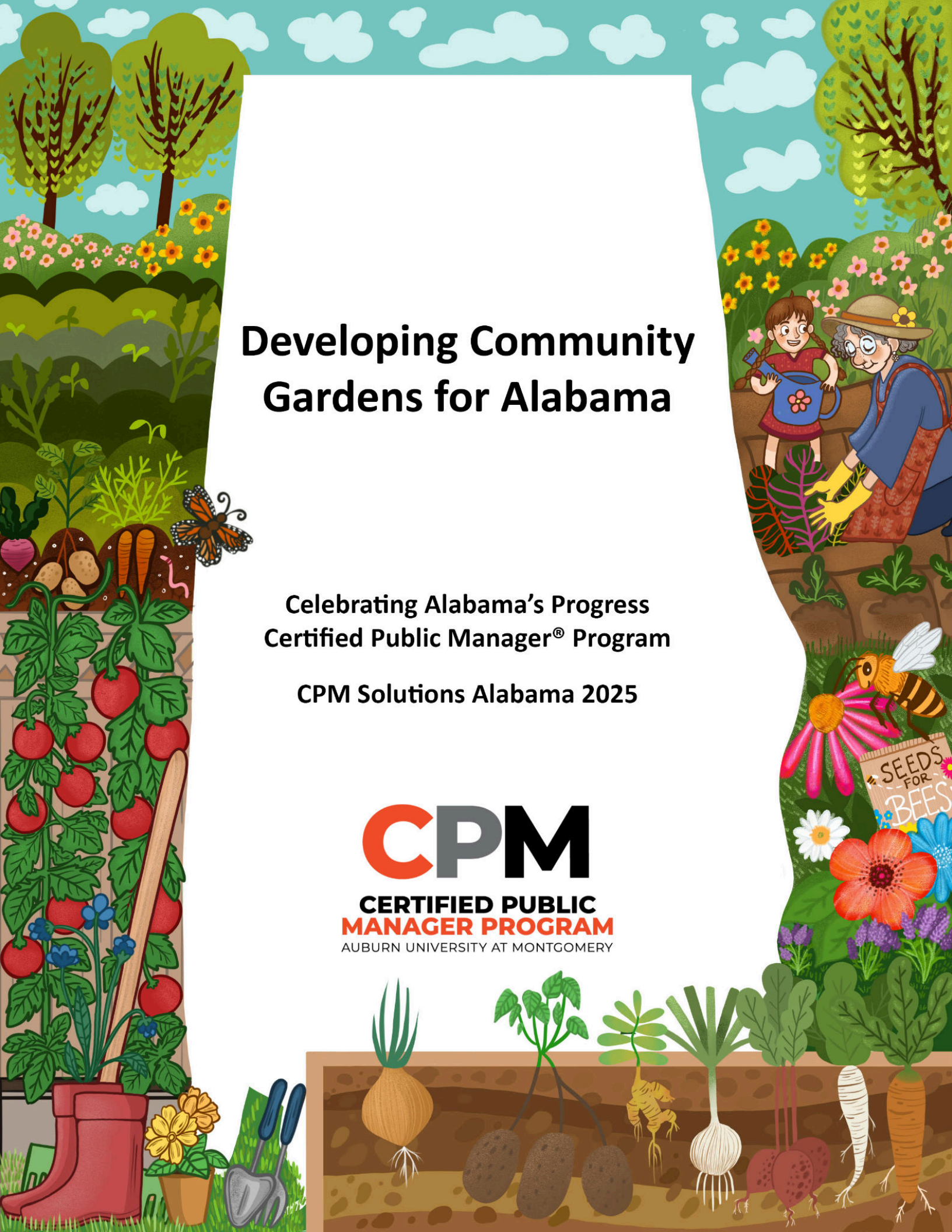

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Table of Contents

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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.

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Introduction

In Alabama, the development of community gardens has been closely linked to efforts aimed at mitigating food insecurity and fostering community well-being, reflecting historical and broader national trends in community garden initiatives. According to the Alabama Department of Public Health, “Alabama is the fifth poorest state in the nation, with 17% of adults and 23% of children (1 out of 4) facing food insecurity, or lack of regular access to enough nutritious food for an active, healthy life” (*Food Access*, 2025). Alabama had an 8% decline in farms from 2017 to 2022, making it more challenging for underserved communities to access fresh, locally grown food (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024). Food insecurity remains a pressing challenge for many Alabamians, and investing in sustainable solutions such as community gardens is essential to ensuring the long-term health and well-being of our communities.

Alabama is also experiencing high rates of obesity in both adults and children. According to Alabama Public Health, the 2023 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports Alabama’s rate of adult obesity at 39.2 percent, fifth highest in the nation (2024). The National Survey of Children’s Health data shows between 2022 and 2023 the national average of youth, ages 6-17, who were obese was 17%, with Alabama ranked higher than that at 22.8% (State of Childhood Obesity, 2024). Obesity can have significant negative impacts on physical and mental well-being. Although obesity may not seem related to food insecurity, inadequate access to affordable, nutritious options leaves higher-calorie, processed, and nutrition-poor foods to rely on. Whether obesity is linked to food insecurity or food preference, obesity is an urgent situation in Alabama and community gardens provide a solution for both.

Community gardens transform urban and rural areas, benefiting society, the environment, and the economy. In Alabama, they enhance food security, public well-being, and community participation while serving as educational resources that promote sustainable food cultivation and encourage a more conscientious relationship with the food we consume (Funderburk, 2024). Helping to reduce food insecurity, community gardens offer community members the chance to cultivate fresh fruits and vegetables locally, in their neighborhoods. Community gardens foster social connections across generations, helping communities connect

with each other and nature, and encouraging sustainable farming practices. Economically, they spur local entrepreneurship, lower food costs, and create job opportunities (Draper & Freedman, 2010). These benefits can be life-changing for the people they help, and they are often interconnected and build upon each other.

While there are many benefits to community gardens, challenges remain in ensuring their long-term sustainability. Challenges include a lack of space and infrastructure, retaining volunteers for the garden maintenance workload, access to funding, and technical knowledge.

Rooted in history, there are many aspects of community gardens that are still relevant today. Additionally, Alabama makes an impact through community gardening, as many organizations partner in collaborative efforts and local initiatives.

Throughout the project, the Solutions Alabama team engaged with a diverse group of experts, professionals, and experienced gardeners to better understand the successes, opportunities, and challenges facing community gardens. Key stakeholders such as the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and the Master Gardeners Program were researched and consulted for the immense resources they provide. In this white paper, the Solutions Alabama Team will further highlight the benefits and challenges of developing and sustaining community gardens, and offer research-based recommendations for the future development and sustainability of community gardens to benefit Alabama citizens.

History

Community gardens have been around for a few centuries, thought to be linked to the allotment gardens of Europe and in a more modern U.S. era, the victory garden movement during World Wars I and II (Henning et al., 2018). While gaining their start in World War I, their widespread adoption emerged as relief for food shortages during World War II, with the USDA campaign launch to make them more popular. The campaign encouraged victory gardens, claiming they enhanced urban beautification, promoted healthy habits, and boosted morale. Additionally, guides and training were developed to educate citizens on the benefits and practices of gardening (Hinnershitz, 2024). Having reached 20 million victory gardens in 1943, the gardens produced nearly 40% of the nation's fresh produce in 1944, according to archived USDA fact sheets (Kendall, n.d.). Today many Alabama community gardens continue to draw on these strategies for success.

Local Initiatives and Collaborative Efforts

A standout example of a local initiative is the Live Well Alabama initiative developed by Alabama Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed); The Alabama SNAP-Ed program is a part of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) at Auburn University. Live Well Alabama partners with community centers, early childhood centers, schools, limited resource or senior housing districts, and summer camps to establish, reinvigorate, or maintain gardens (Funderburk, 2024).

In the 2023 fiscal year, SNAP-Ed helped establish or sustain 38 school and community gardens, with fresh vegetables available to 10,640 residents across the state. These gardens yielded over 2,600 pounds of produce, which was enough to meet the USDA daily recommendations for 1,888 adults (Funderburk, 2024).

Another example of a collaborative Alabama initiative is the ALProHealth Initiative, which partners with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and community coalitions.

With CDC funding as well as funding and resources from the communities, ALProHealth and its partners are able to focus on a variety of strategies to improve healthy living. They were able to help establish more than 20 community gardens and 16 school gardens across Alabama. The Geiger Community Garden in Sumter County is one of those gardens, offering fresh produce to residents who would otherwise have to drive 20 miles (Sparks, 2018).

Harvest for Health, based at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and funded by the National Cancer Institute, Auburn University/Alabama Cooperative Extension, and the Webb Family of Birmingham, is one more example of a collaborative effort in Alabama. Harvest for Health is a free at-home gardening program for cancer survivors. The program provides gardening supplies and monthly mentorship with a Master Gardener from Alabama Cooperative Extension to help participants create a successful vegetable garden right in their yard. (University of Alabama at Birmingham, n.d.) Although this program is not a community garden in the traditional sense, it brings the benefits of a community garden right to the community members. It illustrates how community garden programs can be reimagined to serve a wide range of community members and bring together diverse stakeholders in meaningful collaboration.

Alabama's current initiatives have served our state in several impactful ways, laying the groundwork for healthier lifestyles and stronger communities. With continued collaboration and innovation, we look ahead with hope to a future where community gardens can continue to grow, nourish communities, and help create thriving neighborhoods.

Benefits of Community Gardens

While local initiatives and collaborative efforts are already working to increase access to fresh produce through community gardens across Alabama, community gardens offer many

additional benefits to local communities such as improved well-being, positive environmental impacts, and economic benefits.

Well-Being

One of the biggest positive impacts of community gardens is promoting the well-being of individuals and communities. They assist vulnerable populations such as youth, the elderly, the homeless, and food-insecure families by providing access to fresh produce, increased social interactions, increased physical activity, and agricultural and nutrition education (Twiss et al., 2003). According to the *Community Gardening Toolkit* from the University of Missouri Extension, interacting with plants and access to nature can reduce stress (McKelvey, 2015, p. 8). Further evidence of the physical benefits of community gardening can be found in the study conducted in Salt Lake City, Utah that examined the association of participation in a community garden with a healthy body weight. Comparing close to 200 community garden participants to three comparison groups consisting of neighbors, siblings and spouses with adjustments for gender, age, and year of measurement, the results showed a significant lower BMI for community garden participants than that of their comparison group (Zick et al., 2013).

Community gardening promotes well-being by fostering social inclusion, especially among marginalized groups like low-income families and the elderly, by creating shared spaces for connection. Old Cloverdale Community Garden (OCCG) in Montgomery, Alabama started from an abandoned, blighted lot and is now a vibrant example of interconnectivity and community

engagement, with garden members ranging from small children to retirees. The OCCG hosts potluck garden socials, creative activities, team building, and garden tours to connect with the community (L. Cortell, personal communication, April 10, 2025). The OCCG is an example of taking unused land and turning it into a lively garden that boosts community morale. They not only serve to improve the well-being of the individual, but also improve the well-being of their neighborhood through beautification. Community gardens help create a culture of engaged citizenship and community by uniting individuals from diverse backgrounds, providing spaces for cooperation, information exchange, and interdependence (Kwartnik-Pruc & Droj, 2023).

Education is another way gardens can support well-being. In an interview with the Solutions Alabama team, Ginger Eatman, the SNAP-Ed Extension Agent for Marian and Walker Counties, emphasized that SNAP-Ed gardens in schools enhance child nutrition by familiarizing students with a wider variety of fruits and vegetables. She stated students “are more likely to try something they’ve helped grow” (personal communication, May 12, 2025). She also highlighted the impact on children gaining practical life skills beyond the traditional classroom, such as understanding how food is grown (G. Eatman, personal communication, May 12, 2025). This is a skill they can take home with them as a resource for their families.

Environmental

Community gardening has the potential to have positive impacts on the environment. Organic farming, rainwater harvesting, and composting reduce waste and encourage effective land use, which minimizes the effects of climate change in the suburbs and cities of Alabama (Zhang et al., 2022). Organic gardening practices yield healthier produce and minimizes harm to local ecosystems. (Navigating Local Regulations, 2025). Additionally, composting to convert organic waste to fertilizer for the garden and using rain barrels and drip irrigation help to conserve water (Navigating Local Regulations, 2025). Many of the garden models introduced later utilize sustainable gardening practices, as protecting the environment has become more prioritized.

Economic

Some of the ways community gardens can impact the economy include reducing food cost, supporting entrepreneurship, and focusing on skills development which could lead to job opportunities. According to *Collard Greens and Common Ground: A North Carolina Community Food Gardening Handbook*, gardens can reduce food costs by lowering the grocery bill and supplement their incomes by selling part of what they grow (Boekelhide & Bradley, 2017, Introduction section).

The Solutions Alabama team met with Erica Washington from Fresh Greens Market, an urban farm and market in Montgomery, Alabama. The Fresh Greens Market is an example of how community gardening can lead to entrepreneurship. The farm was originally established to provide access to produce and charity to the community, during a time of limited access, and quickly evolved into a for-profit market (E. Washington, personal communication, May 6, 2025).

Community gardens can have significant positive impacts on the overall well-being of communities and individuals through physical activity, mental health, social connection, education, and increased access to fresh, nutritious produce. They can positively impact the environment through sustainable gardening practices and improve the economy by lowering food costs and creating avenues for individual income through gardening. As Alabama continues to expand and support these efforts, challenges to community gardens must be addressed to sow the seeds for a better tomorrow.

Challenges of Community Gardens

While there are many benefits, there are challenges and obstacles that can impede the development and sustainability of community gardens. These challenges fall into the categories of land, people, funding, and technical knowledge.

Land

Land challenges include lack of space for a garden, site permanency, location suitability, liability issues, and zoning restrictions.

Many people live in areas where they do not own the land or have very limited space, and therefore, a community garden may be their only option for growing their own produce. The Navigating Local Regulations article on the *Live To Plant* website claims, “securing a plot of land is often one of the most challenging aspects” (2025, Land Ownership section). Additionally, using public land may involve submitting a proposal, while privately owned land typically requires a lease agreement. Partnering with nonprofit organizations offers an alternative pathway (2025, Land Ownership section). Careful consideration of these options, as well as several other factors, should be addressed before committing to a garden site.

According to the *Community Gardening Toolkit* from the University of Missouri Extension, most community gardens are on borrowed land, limiting the infrastructure that can be added and creating an atmosphere of instability (McKelvey, 2015, p. 7). This instability can deter gardeners from ever getting started, or it can cause them to lose interest in continuing. In an interview with the Solutions Alabama team, Kerry Smith, the State Coordinator for the Alabama Master Gardener Program through ACES, emphasized that having agreements or leases that are not set up for long-term periods can lead to significant costs of time and money associated with having to move a garden (personal communication, February 25, 2025).

Finding land that meets the requirements for a garden is equally challenging. Some of the factors that might be considered in determining if the space is suitable for a garden are proximity to interested participants, soil conditions, sunlight exposure, and a dedicated water source.

Gardens that are too far away from where people live are at a disadvantage and can deter community members from participating, especially if they lack transportation (Wesener, A., et al, 2020).

Heavy metals can lead to health problems, and insufficient soil quality can lead to poor-quality produce. Both the NC State Extension and ACES recommend testing soil for heavy metals as well as for nutrients, pH, and soil class (Chaifetz et al. 2012; Pacumbaba 2023). According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension, “urban areas are widely contaminated with lead from historically used lead-based paints, fuels, and industrial processes” (Jadrnicek et al., 2022). A reason for raised bed construction is avoidance of soil contaminated with lead,

however, raised beds require more work to build and maintain so using them will add considerable time and expense to gardening, so it is important to consider if they are necessary and explore possible alternatives (Jadrnicek et al., 2022).

Committing to a garden site without evaluating the sun exposure, could lead to a garden that won't grow or heat stress. Having an available water source to irrigate plants, especially during the summer, is critical to the success of a garden, but can be costly to add and may not be feasible if on borrowed land (McKelvey, 2015, p. 8).

Liability can be an issue regardless of the land source. Liability issues that can occur include personal injury and property damage. Community members need to effectively evaluate whether they need to obtain insurance depending on if the landowner requires it for protection should an accident occur in the garden (Pacumbaba, 2023).

Zoning policies or restrictions can lead to challenges in developing a community garden and can play a big part in how the garden is allowed to operate. Local zoning laws can be different from one town to the next and can impact garden location, garden structures, signage, fencing regulations, garden activities, and the sale and distribution of produce (Public Health Law Center, 2017, pp. 8, 36).

People

People are necessary for the sustainability of a community garden. Challenges that fall under this category include a shortage of volunteers for program start-up and ongoing maintenance, burnout of existing volunteers and organizers, and inaccessibility for people with disabilities.

A study conducted by the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences at the University of Florida showed that a lack of volunteers and low community support were the most agreed-upon challenges to starting or sustaining community gardens throughout Florida (Webb & Diaz, 2018). Supporting this, a different study conducted by the University of North Carolina, found many community garden managers reported that they had difficulties recruiting enough volunteers, and that this was an impediment to their garden's productivity (Gilbert et al., 2020). This study also found that older volunteers often exhibited strong enthusiasm for community

gardening, largely due to personal histories with farming. Despite their valuable knowledge and experience, physical limitations and inaccessible facilities sometimes hindered their ability to contribute to labor-intensive tasks. While younger individuals brought physical capacity that supported garden maintenance, engaging this demographic proved challenging, as many were employed full-time and less inclined to volunteer without financial incentives (Gilbert et al., 2020)

In an interview between the Solutions Alabama team and Caylor Roling, Farm Director of EAT South in Montgomery, she stated that dedicated volunteers were crucial to the long-term success of a community garden, emphasizing the need to build volunteer leadership structures within gardens. She further explained that volunteer-led programs often unravel when they rely too heavily on a single individual, leading to volunteer burnout (personal communication, March 25, 2025).

Funding

Kerry Smith, the State Coordinator for the Alabama Master Gardener Program and Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES), addressed that funding is a major challenge for community gardens and that even when funding is secured for a startup, it is important to also secure additional funding or donations in advance to continue to support the garden. She also indicated that while grants may be an option, they may not be sustainable, and therefore, it is important to seek other avenues of funding (personal communication, February 25, 2025).

While grants represent a valuable funding avenue for community gardens, the grant-writing process itself poses a significant barrier. Grants demand a specialized skill set, including technical writing and in-depth research on funding opportunities. Organizations are also competing for limited funds (Grant Writing Academy, 2025). According to ACES' *A Guide to Starting a Community Garden*, the application process for obtaining grants is time-intensive, requires specialized knowledge on grant writing, and often involves a wait of six months or longer before hearing back from the funding agency (Pacumbaba, 2023). Cited from a Drake and Lawson survey, securing funding for ongoing costs such as maintenance, supplies, and utilities is

also more challenging for established gardens compared to initial funding for new gardens (Diaz et al., 2018).

Technical Knowledge

Community gardening can require a significant amount of technical knowledge to make a garden successful. Several challenges, identified in the Solutions Alabama team's interview with Master Gardener Elizabeth York, that would require technical knowledge include pests, weeds, pollination, and knowing what and when to plant (personal communication, March 28, 2025). University of Missouri Extension identified that new gardeners who may be initially excited to join a local community garden may lack gardening experience and skills and may be more likely to give up (McKelvey, 2015, p. 7). In an international study, a lack of interest and a lack of education for growers were cited as a top reason for garden failure, with 59% of respondents citing horticultural training and gardening education as an issue. (Drake and Lawson, 2015).

Working Models from Alabama and Other States

Across the country, people are digging into the soil, not just for the fresh produce, but for the connection it brings. According to the American Community Gardening Association, there are roughly 18,000 community gardens across the U.S. and Canada (Henning et al., 2018). Research and interviews conducted by the Solutions Alabama Team identified a wide range of community garden models taking root from school yards, vacant lots, botanical gardens, and even city parks. Many of the models are hybrid models, falling into more than one category. These models are not strict templates, but are flexible frameworks shaped by the people and needs of each place. While each garden is unique, these working models will help guide what a successful garden can look like.

Educational & Workforce Development Gardens

The SNAP-Ed School Gardens in Marion & Walker Counties of Alabama, led by Extension Agent Ginger Eatman, brings gardening into schools, with fifty percent or more of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The mission is to teach students about nutrition, sustainability, food systems, and gardening skills through hands-on experience. The gardens can also be used to supplement the academic curriculum. The garden relies mostly on grants, donations, and fundraisers. Eatman emphasized the importance of identifying supportive school staff to alternate overseeing the garden and of obtaining administrative buy-in for the long-term sustainability of educational gardens. The program has reached over 1,800 students. (personal communication, May 12, 2025).

The Demonstration Vegetable Garden at Huntsville Botanical Gardens in Huntsville, Alabama, is maintained by Extension Master Gardeners and volunteers. It's nearly three-quarters of an acre and showcases a wide range of sustainable growing practices, from raised beds and container gardens to rain barrels and composting systems. Each season, volunteers grow about 1,250 pounds of food, which is donated to local charities. (Madison County Master Gardeners, n.d.) This demonstration garden hosts field trips and workshops and is open to the public to educate the community on sustainable farming practices (S. Parker, personal communication, April 17, 2025).

Cul2vate, founded in 2016 in Nashville, Tennessee, is a hybrid model of charity, workforce development. The organization is a faith-based, nonprofit organization operating a working farm that grows fresh produce, which is then donated to families experiencing food insecurity. But the heart of Cul2vate's mission is in its people. Participants, called "Cul2vators," join the program to gain job readiness skills, emotional support, and part-time employment. Many have faced serious life challenges, such as incarceration, homelessness, or addiction. During their time on the farm, Cul2vators not only learn how to grow food, but also how to rebuild their lives and prepare for long-term employment. Cul2vate also helps local nonprofits and churches start their own gardens by offering planting assistance, volunteer training, and maintenance support. (Cul2vate, 2024).

Charitable & Donation-Based Gardens

The Escambia County Community Garden, in Brewton, Alabama, serves as both an educational and donation-based model. The garden is used to train local Master Gardeners. Produce is given to local food pantries, charities, and volunteers. The garden is supported by grants, donations, and local government ties with the help of volunteers and even inmates from the sheriff's department. The garden is located behind the Extension campus and has steadily grown under the leadership of Dr. Millie Murphree, Escambia County Extension Director (M. Murphree, personal communication, April 15, 2025).

The Fresh Greens Market, located in West Montgomery, Alabama, was founded in 2020 by sisters Erica and Erin Washington on inherited land. This organic, urban farm and market initially began as a way to provide access to fresh produce in their community and has since evolved into a market. In their first full year, they donated organic produce to nearly 100 families. While providing fresh produce access is the primary focus, the farm also focuses on educating community members on how to grow food, and they provide "young farmer training programs" (Freshgreens Market, n.d.). Managing the land sustainably and responsibly is their way of honoring the legacy of their great-grandfather and grandmother, who previously owned and managed a grocery store in the same location (E. Washington, personal communication, May 6, 2025).

Kodachrome Gardens, founded by Adam Morrow in Florence, Alabama, is a hybrid model of plot rental and charity. Morrow's vision was to provide access to fresh produce in his community, which he described as a food desert (Atkins, 2024). The land for the garden was provided by Morrow's friend. The garden operates as a non-profit market, featuring a pay-what-you-can produce stand and supplies local restaurants with fresh produce (Atkins, 2024). They also donate to nonprofits to support those in need and offer plot rentals for $10 a season, according to their website's "shop" link (Kodachrome, March 31, 2025). The garden employs two people, one of whom is Morrow himself. The garden practices no-till growing with only organic pesticides and fertilizers (Atkins, 2024).

Cooperative & Shared Gardens

E.A.T. South is an urban teaching farm in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, where volunteers and community members share responsibilities in both communal and individual plots. They also have a significant focus on education. Led by Caylor Roling and one other full-time staff member, the nonprofit farm offers workshops, composting programs, and seed swaps, with more than 900 seed packets exchanged in January 2023 alone. In that same year, the farm produced around 1,500 pounds of produce and welcomed over 4,000 visitors, including international guests. It's also a sustainability powerhouse, diverting thousands of tons of food waste through composting. Infrastructure includes raised beds built over capped contaminated soil, a greenhouse, chickens, bees, and even an outdoor classroom (C. Roling, personal communication, March 25, 2025).

The Old Cloverdale Community Garden in Montgomery, Alabama, led by volunteer co-managers Lois Cortell and Deborah Hall, is a plot rental garden and community gathering space. In 2015, the nonprofit, Old Cloverdale (neighborhood) Association 501(c)(3), signed a deed and took over an abandoned lot with the primary goal of blight removal and to create a community gathering space. They have since transformed the space from “blight to beauty,” featuring 19 raised beds, pollinator gardens, benches, picnic tables, play areas, and two little libraries. The garden features art murals by a local artist, Sunny Paulk, and this was possible due to leveraging grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Old Cloverdale Community Garden hosts a variety of community events, activities, and volunteer opportunities, which are communicated through their multiple social media accounts. The Association and a garden committee handle the legal and structural responsibilities, property insurance, and security. A water source and tool shed are available on site. The garden has agreed upon policies and procedures for the garden’s operations and maintenance, its participants, and anyone using the space for special events. The garden also partnered with AARP, whose grant made it possible to create an accessible entry point to the garden by way of a ramp. Early community involvement and input, planning, clear property ownership, board and fund management, and the committee were listed as a few of the many reasons for the garden’s success (L. Cortell, personal communication, April 10, 2025).

Aunt Katie's Community Garden in Dothan, Alabama, co-founded in 2010 by Michael Jackson and David Kirkland, is a non-profit garden and market with a focus on community development, education or training, and affordable access in a lower income community. Additionally, they offer individual plot rentals. Built across from the late Katie Kirkland's childcare center, the garden includes chemical-free produce beds, a pollinator habitat, and an on-site compost system. Programs include science lessons, food education, and training for new growers (Aunt Katie's Community Garden, n.d.). Aunt Katie's Garden expanded their operation with high tunnel farming houses, allowing year-round growing, on a nearby vacant lot. This expansion was made possible through partnership with the City of Dothan, Alabama Department of Environmental Management and the EPA with funding from a Brownfields Assessment Grant. (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2021) Today, Aunt Katie's Garden is a model for turning overlooked spaces into engines of growth, learning, and health.

Municipal & Regional Network Models

The Evergreen Community Garden Park in Evergreen, Alabama, was started in 2016 as a result of years of conversations between Anita Watson (coordinator), Conecuh County city leaders, and the Extension Service. Once a basic plot of land, it is now a designated city park with electricity, lights, fencing, and raised beds. Volunteers built much of the infrastructure, and the garden now serves as a place for growing food and building community. Children from nearby housing authorities come to play, socialize, and help in the garden. College students, school kids, and local groups all contribute. With fruit trees, pollinator beds, and even a chicken coop, the park brings people together and supports families in need (A. Watson, personal communication, June 1, 2025).

In 2012, the City of Mobile in Alabama partnered with nonprofits, schools, and businesses to create a pilot community garden on Whitley Street. The garden includes raised beds, a flower garden, and a shared seating area. What made this effort unique was the range of partners involved, from local government to corporate sponsors and alumni associations. The garden not only beautified the area but also became a symbol of collaboration and civic pride. It

laid the groundwork for future urban agriculture initiatives and highlighted how cross-sector partnerships can bring meaningful change to neighborhoods (City of Mobile, 2012).

The Healthy Life Community Garden (HLCG) in Griffin, Georgia, was launched in 2013 beside the historic Fairmont Rosenwald School to fight food insecurity in a USDA-identified food desert. It grew in popularity, with many educational programs and drew hundreds of participants each year. The garden was also part of a larger revitalization effort, sparking neighborhood upgrades, public art, and historical preservation projects (Bauske, E., et al., 2015). Due to another development project, the garden was set to close, but residents appealed to the Board of Commissioners on the garden's benefits and necessity. The UGA Extension, Spaulding County, and Spaulding County Parks and Recreation relocated the garden in 2020. The garden now sits on 1.5 acres with 36 raised beds, 6 standing beds, 4400 square feet of in-ground planting space, a pollinator garden, electricity, overhead irrigation, and a play area. The garden is estimated to have harvested 488 pounds of fresh produce with excess donated to food banks. It is in close proximity to an apartment complex, schools, and the Fairmont Parks and Recreation Center with walking paths. Many additional organizations collaborated in the development and offered services for enhancement and donations. This garden is a powerful model of how local governments and organizations can be part of a broader movement for social and environmental change through community gardening (University of Georgia Extension, n.d.).

Georgia's Food Well Alliance collaborates with cities to develop urban agriculture policies and support regional garden networks (Food Well Alliance, 2023). The Food Well Alliance has become a cornerstone of urban agriculture in the Atlanta metro area. Since its founding in 2015, the organization has supported more than 300 community gardens, urban farms, and orchards. What makes Food Well Alliance stand out is its comprehensive, community-focused approach. Through its Community Garden Grant Program, the organization provides funding, compost deliveries, volunteer assistance, and technical support to help local garden leaders succeed. It also offers coaching and hands-on workshops that focus on everything from garden planning and community engagement to long-term sustainability. Beyond individual gardens, Food Well Alliance works closely with city governments to develop urban agriculture plans that include zoning, land use, and food access policies. For example, in

East Point, Georgia, the alliance helped implement a city-wide agriculture plan supported by a $75,000 grant. In addition to gardening, the organization promotes composting infrastructure through initiatives like its Composting Working Table, which helps gardens close the loop and improve soil health. By working at both the grassroots and policy levels, Food Well Alliance provides a strong regional model for how coordinated planning and investment can strengthen local food systems and community resilience (Food Well Alliance, 2023).

Groundswell International's program, based in Polk County, NC, connects residents to land, training, and resources through county-level planning. Grow Food Where People Live (GFWPL) began in 2015 in affordable housing neighborhoods and has since spread through workshops, demonstration sites, and school meal programs. It connects families, farmers, and local officials to build resilient food systems right where people live and work (*Ryals-Hamilton, 2016)*. The program proves that gardening can be an engine for economic development, peer learning, and food security. Its countywide approach, grassroots leadership, and focus on real community needs show just how scalable and impactful community-based food programs can be.

Effective Strategies and Best Practices

The above-listed models exemplify many benefits of community gardening and provide evidence of the best practices and strategies that made their community gardens successful. Research and interviews conducted by this Solutions Alabama Team provided many additional best practices and strategies that could not be included in those models.

Land

Securing land early, that is well-suited for the garden's needs and for long-term periods is essential for success. Without addressing the potential challenges, gardens may face closures, wasting time, money and public trust. Partnerships with landowners, community land trusts, land banks, municipalities and organizations can help protect these spaces for a lasting impact (Public Health Law, 2017, p. 28).

Kerry Smith (ACES) noted that gardens will be more successful if people are closer to them, specifically within walking distance, because they can more easily access the garden and tend to it (personal communication, February 25, 2025).

The ACES website features *A Guide to Starting a Community Garden*, which recommends contacting a private landowner to obtain permission, explain the benefits, establish a term for the site, and negotiate an affordable lease. The guide also recommends purchasing liability insurance when leasing land to protect everyone should an accident occur, but mentions the garden may be able to use a hold harmless agreement or waiver (Pacumbaba, 2023).

It is important to determine if a potential garden area is designated as residential, commercial, or agricultural zoning. Additionally, it is important to research local zoning codes, and check with the local planning department on whether special use permits are required (Navigating Local Regulations, 2025). The City of Homewood added provisions for community gardens in the city ordinances, providing criteria for how community gardens can be established, certain standards that must be met, and other zoning criteria (Homewood, AL Municipal Code).

People

The ACES website features *A Guide to Starting a Community Garden*, which indicates an important step to establishing a garden includes surveying the neighborhood residents to find at least five dedicated families interested in committing to a garden. Other ideas for organizing the people include forming a committee for decisions on development and using social media to connect, share ideas, plan, and delegate. The committee might deal with major planning activities such as member roles, funding and operating costs, garden rules, garden applications, plot assignments, money handling, and resolving conflicts (Pacumbaba, 2023).

During the early stages of the Old Cloverdale Community Garden, an open forum was established to gather community feedback, revealing strong support for a gathering space. Draft site plans were shared, volunteer clean-up days were promoted, and progress was documented on Instagram beginning June 25, 2015, when the Old Cloverdale Association took ownership of the lot. Sharing the continual progress on the garden helped create community buy-in and

reinforced the garden's mission to grow good food and bring the community together (L. Cortell, personal communication, April 10, 2025).

Maintaining volunteer engagement is essential. Gardens need leadership teams and clear roles, so they aren't dependent on just one individual. Regular communication, volunteer appreciation, and flexible schedules help prevent burnout. As Caylor Roling of E.A.T. South aptly put it, gardens "are bigger than one person" and thrive with shared leadership and responsibility (personal communication, March 25, 2025).

Community gardens can be strengthened through partnerships with municipalities, nonprofits, schools, faith-based organizations, businesses, and neighborhood associations. These partnerships bring critical resources, expertise, support, and volunteers (Public Health Law Center, 2017).

Accessibility is also central to a community garden's success. Community gardens should be welcoming to people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. Infrastructure such as raised beds for easier access, wide pathways, and inclusive programming can ensure that everyone feels they belong. Master Gardener Elizabeth York highlighted the importance of making gardens accessible, suggesting raised beds and ergonomic tools for those with arthritis. (personal communication, March 28, 2025). The *Collard Greens and Common Ground* publication recommends special raised bed planters that are taller for people with wheelchairs to access or beds with a wider edge for gardeners to sit on (Boekelhide & Bradley, 2017, Food Garden Design section, p. 15).

Funding

Kerry Smith (ACES) recommended several options for funding: applying for grants; requesting supply donations from local businesses like feed and seed stores, and big box home improvement stores; workshops or lessons for a fee; market days; partnering with landowners or organizations for use of the land, water, and electricity for free or low fees (personal communication, February 25, 2025). Our Solutions Alabama Team uncovered several grant resources throughout our research and interviews that may be potential funding sources. A list of those resources has been included in an appendix to this paper.

The Navigating Local Regulations for Community Gardens in Alabama article indicates funding resources may include USDA Community Food Projects Grant Programs and fundraising events such as plant sales, workshops, and harvest festivals. Additionally, they indicated the Alabama Cooperative Extension System provides resources on grant opportunities, and the USDA has a Community Food Project Grant Program (April 2, 2025).

Funding can also come from plot rental fees such as those collected by the Old Cloverdale Community Garden (L. Cortell, personal communication, April 10, 2025).

Technical Knowledge

Throughout our interviews we found different gardeners had different things to say about the technical aspects of gardening practices. Susan Parker from the Huntsville Botanical Garden mentioned they plant sunflowers, marigolds, and radishes to deter pests (S. Parker, personal communication, April 17, 2025). This process is often referenced as companion planting or planting of trap crops. Elizabeth York with Shelby County Master Gardener's Association mentioned she makes her own insecticidal soap and also uses eggshells to deter slugs and snails (personal communication, March 28, 2025).

While a lack of technical knowledge is a challenge for the long-term sustainability of community gardens, there is a wide range of technical knowledge to be found in research. The methods preferred by one garden may not fit the needs of another. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) website offers a wealth of resourceful information for community gardens on their website, most of which is under the topics of Lawn & Garden, Food Safety, and Urban Extension. The search field for specific topics is also helpful. While not an exhaustive list, the resources include pest control, beneficial and harmful insects, weed control, mulching, fertilizers, food safety, soil nutrients and testing, and entire planning guides. They also have a Master Gardener helpline and web page to connect with a gardening expert.

Formalizing operations is vital for maintaining clarity, consistency, and accountability. Gardens benefit from written agreements, bylaws, and policies that spell out how decisions are made, who manages what responsibilities, and how conflicts will be resolved (Public Health Law

Center, 2017). Old Cloverdale Community Garden's success illustrates how strong governance can be the backbone of a lasting community resource.

Sustainability practices also help ensure long-term viability. Gardens that integrate composting, rainwater harvesting, pollinator habitats, organic growing methods, and vertical or raised-bed gardening can overcome urban challenges like poor soil or limited space. These practices not only support environmental health but also reduce costs over time (Zhang et al., 2022).

While many different sources offer planting guides and may recommend when to plant certain crops, Alabama Cooperative Extension Agency has the "SOW" application available for download on most smartphones. The application provides what to plant and when, estimated harvest days, spacing between plants, and is location specific to your desired garden area (ACES, 2019).

Recommendations

Just as there is no one-size-fits-all model that will suit the needs and preferences of every single community, there also are no one-size-fits-all solutions to the challenges and obstacles that can impede the development and sustainability of community gardens. Research showed there are a variety of solutions. While implementing some of those solutions may help to make a garden successful, there are a few key areas our Solutions Alabama Team recommends that community members, local leaders, and organizations implement to help establish a successful foundation.

Engage the Community

Before the first shovel hits the soil, the most successful community gardens start with listening. Understanding the community's needs, interests, and hopes creates a solid foundation for a community garden that truly belongs to its people. Engaging the community can also serve to gain and maintain community awareness and support before and after the garden is established.

Surveying the community is a good first step to ensure the garden is relevant, sustainable, and embraced by those it's meant to serve. Just as the Old Cloverdale Community Garden began with an open forum feedback discussion, surveying the community could be accomplished through printed questionnaires or discussion meetings, facilitated at local meeting places such as churches, schools, community centers, and libraries. The survey should ask questions that help reveal what kind of garden the community wants. Are people most interested in growing vegetables for home consumption? Do they see the garden as a social gathering place? Are there groups, like seniors or youth, who could benefit from specialized programming? Surveys and discussions can also help to identify practical and logistical considerations, such as how far people are willing to travel to the garden, their availability for volunteering, and whether there's interest in educational workshops or skill-building activities. Understanding these preferences helps to ensure the garden's focus matches the needs of those who will use it and care for it.

Also, utilization of communication technology via social media or email lists are a productive means of gathering information. Social media has been an especially effective tool for engaging the community, offering a space to express gratitude, highlight volunteer efforts, share successes, and showcase ongoing progress. The Old Cloverdale Community Garden successfully uses multiple social media platforms for these very purposes.

Incorporating education and workforce development into the garden's mission further strengthens its value to the community and helps with volunteer retention. Gardens are uniquely positioned to teach practical skills, from planting techniques and pest management, to composting and water conservation. Partnerships with schools, as seen in SNAP-Ed's educational gardens, can weave gardening into science, health, and environmental studies, giving students hands-on experiences that connect classroom learning to real life. Workforce development is another promising aspect, particularly in communities facing economic challenges. Programs like E.A.T. South and Cul2Vate demonstrate how gardens can offer job training, leadership development, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Lobby for Positive Change with Government Agencies & Laws

Local governments play a crucial role in shaping the future of community gardening. Positive change starts with proactive engagement between community advocates and government agencies. Community garden organizers should consider building relationships with city councils, planning commissions, health departments, and parks and recreation departments. The Healthy Life Community Garden is a great example of engaging local governmental stakeholders for resources and support as seen with their appeal to the Board of Commissioners and assistance with relocation. Regular communication, public presentations, and participation in city meetings can help bring gardening needs and successes into the public spotlight, fostering greater understanding and support among local officials.

Involving local elected officials can connect the gardening group to vital resources such as securing land, funding, and other support for public projects. The *Community Gardening Policy Reference Guide* provides an extensive list of ways local laws and policies can support community gardens: providing land and water access; funding or in-kind supplies; technical

assistance and educational workshops; passing local resolutions in support of community gardening; incorporating support for community gardens into local planning documents; and ensuring zoning ordinances allow gardening activities and garden structures (Public Health Law Center, 2017, p. 8). Engaging with local governments ensures alignment with community development plans and access to broader networks.

Furthermore, integrating urban agriculture into comprehensive city master plans and municipal budgets is another step forward in the right direction, as seen with Georgia's Food Well Alliance. City officials plan decades into the future through these comprehensive documents, outlining land use, parks, transportation, housing, and environmental sustainability goals. Incorporating community gardens into these plans signals that gardening is not just a hobby but a valued community asset tied to public health, economic development, and food security. Budget allocations can follow, helping to fund infrastructure like water access, fencing, soil testing, and educational programming. When gardens are included in a city's official blueprint, they are more likely to thrive and be protected long-term.

Another promising avenue lies in integrating community gardens with public health and social programs. Gardens can be catalysts for improving physical health, mental well-being, and community resilience. Partnerships with local health departments, hospitals, and social service agencies can create innovative programs that link gardening to chronic disease prevention, nutritional education, stress reduction, and even job training. For example, gardens might be used as therapeutic spaces for cancer survivors, as with UAB's Harvest for Health program, or as community hubs for distributing fresh produce in food-insecure neighborhoods. When gardens are tied directly to public health outcomes, they can attract additional funding streams, build stronger community networks, and demonstrate measurable benefits that resonate with policymakers.

Utilize Available Resources

Whether incorporating one of the models, strategies and best practices, or conducting your own research, we recommend utilizing the available support and success of others as a guide for making your own community's garden a success.

Investing in the education and training of gardeners helps gardens to flourish. New gardeners often lack technical know-how, which can lead to frustration or dropout. Resources from the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) and local Master Gardeners can fill this gap, providing knowledge on soil testing, pest management, sustainable practices, innovative gardening techniques, garden guides and more. These resources are tailored to Alabama's unique growing conditions, making them especially valuable for local gardens. Demonstration gardens and public workshops, like those at Huntsville Botanical Garden, play a vital role in educating and inspiring community members.

Throughout our research, we have discovered many inspiring examples of how diverse garden models serve different communities. For instance, the Old Cloverdale Community Garden became not just a place to grow food but a lively hub for social gatherings, art projects, and intergenerational connection, while resolving a blight within the community.
Health-focused gardens such as Aunt Katie's Garden show how gardens can tackle broader public health challenges, like obesity and chronic illness, while creating safe and engaging community spaces.

Additionally, reaching out to and networking with other gardens in person or on social media to inquire about their best practices and experiences to arm yourself with knowledge will help determine what might be right for your garden.

Plan for Success

Developing a comprehensive plan before the garden is started can help to minimize some of the challenges. Several of the local gardeners and experts our team interviewed, including Lois Cortell, Caylor Roling, and Kerry Smith, recommended having a plan before starting.

After surveying for community needs, interest, and commitment, one of the first steps of a plan is to determine what space will be used for the garden, using some of the strategies for finding land, determining if it is the right space to support a long-term, healthy, affordable, and accessible garden.

It is also important to plan for the funding. This includes determining what costs will be associated with the use of the space, which may include lease, water, electricity, or insurance fees. Additionally, plan for initial and long-term funding, to cover startup costs and ongoing maintenance. This can be accomplished using multiple strategies and partnering with municipal, civic, non-profit, corporate and academic stakeholders.

A successful plan should include creating a formal committee or leadership group that will decide on administrative or operating tasks with input from participating gardeners. It may be important to rotate leaders over time to prevent burnout, as suggested by Caylor Roling. The committee can consist of additional roles like who will handle money or bill paying as well as who will handle social media and other communication. If partnering with an organization or municipality, some of the decision making may come from them.

Once the leadership committee is decided upon, they can work to implement agreed upon rules or policies the garden and gardeners will follow. These rules or policies can include anything the gardening group determines are important to them, such as whether they will allow chemicals, who is allowed to use the garden, what is the cost of rental (if applicable), what requirements are there for volunteering or maintenance of the garden, and the layout of the garden.

A final step in planning for success is to determine how you will measure your success. This may not be the same for every garden, as every garden is not established for the same purpose. A garden established for education may measure success by how many participants they reach. A garden established for workforce development may measure success by how many participants join the workforce or are able to utilize their skills for self-sufficiency. Charity gardens may measure by how many pounds of produce they donate, while plot rental gardens may measure by continued involvement or by how many plots are vacant. Many of the garden models we featured are hybrid models, serving multiple purposes. Offering various benefits or opportunities, such as those offered by hybrid models, can increase the likelihood of success because you are able to attract a wider range of participants.

Conclusion

The staggering evidence shows that approximately 1 in 4 Alabamians faces food insecurity, and the number of farms supplying local produce is declining. At the same time, approximately 40% of adults and 23% of youth in the state are obese. While the ongoing initiatives and the collaborations in Alabama are strong, food insecurity and obesity rates demand immediate attention, so there's more work to do. The many benefits of community gardens offer a solution to these pressing issues. Community gardens can create real public health benefits that help combat these urgent issues affecting Alabama. Whether in a city center or a rural town, these gardens are helping Alabamians feed themselves, learn new skills, and build stronger, more connected communities. These skills and benefits can last a lifetime. Community gardens help bring education and awareness to community members that influence healthier living, and can improve the environment and the economy as well, things that are greatly valued by many residents. For anyone looking to improve the well-being of their neighborhood, community gardens are a good place to start.

While there are challenges to garden sustainability, there are an abundance of resources to help support new programs. There's no one-size-fits-all blueprint when it comes to community gardens. Instead, the most successful gardens grow by making the most of the people, resources, and energy already in place. In other words: grow where you're planted. Every community garden has its own story, but they all share one root idea: growing food grows people, too. This Solutions Alabama Team believes that the recommendations outlined within this paper provides resources for the development and ongoing support of community gardens.

Each and every member of every single community throughout Alabama is a stakeholder to impact change in their own community. Let's work together to ensure Alabama's community gardens keep growing, and in doing so, help cultivate a healthier, more resilient, and more vibrant Alabama for generations to come.

Let's get growing!

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Appendix

The following lists are websites, uncovered by research or through interviews, which may be helpful in finding grants to develop or support community gardens. These lists are not exhaustive. Additionally, some grants may no longer be available due to funding.

Alabama-Specific Grant Opportunities

https://www.instrumentl.com/browse-grants/alabama/community-and-school-garden-grants

https://alabamamga.org/amga-project-funding-program/

https://cawaco.org/rcd-grows-gardens/

https://alabamaaitc.org/app-mini-grant/

https://alaudubon.org/education-minigrants

https://alabamarcd.org/find-your-council/

https://alabamarcd.org/find-your-council/

https://www.aad.org/public/public-health/shade-structure-grants/shade-structure-grant-application

https://www.aaeteachers.org/index.php/classroom-grant-application

https://kidsgardening.org/2021-gromoregood-grassroots-grant/

https://alfafarmers.org/uploads/files/Garden_Grants_Updated_Nov_17.pdf

https://ruralschoolscollaborative.org/news/gardens-to-go-an-alabama-grants-in-place-project-builds-community

https://www.wholekidsfoundation.org/programs/school-gardens-grant

https://www.instrumentl.com/browse-grants/alabama/community-and-school-garden-grants

State & Federal Grant Programs Accessible in Alabama

https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/community-facilities/community-facilities-direct-loan-grant-program-24

https://agi.alabama.gov/2024/09/specialty-crop-block-grant-program-projects-announced/

https://adeca.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024-LWCF-Application-Workshop-Presentation.pdf

https://csr.honda.com/longform-content/honda-usa-foundation-funding/

National-Level Grants Useful for Alabama Projects

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_Agriculture_Research_and_Education

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_Food_Projects

https://gardenclub.org

https://thebeeconservancy.org/sponsor-a-hive-eligibility/

https://www.bonniecabbageprogram.com/participate/

https://kidsgardening.org/grant-opportunities/budding-botanist-24/

https://heroforthepplanet.org/#quests

https://caec.coop/community-enrichment/bright-ideas-grant/

https://cliffamilyfoundation.org/grants-program

https://www.costco.com/charitable-giving.html

https://www.dekkofoundation.org/how-to-apply/

https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/school-community-garden-sponsorship

https://www.gp.com/stewardship/

https://ruralschoolscollaborative.org/programs/grants-in-place

https://greenourplanet-21334876.hs-sites.com/gardenconnect-program-application

https://greenourplanet-21334876.hs-sites.com/hydroponics-program-application

https://greenourplanet-21334876.hs-sites.com/dual-program-application

https://kidsgardening.org/grant-opportunities/gromoregood-grassroots-grant-24/

https://nwafoundation.org/scholarships-grants/sol-hirsch-education-fund-grants/

https://stedtrain.org/showpage.php?pageId=47%0d

https://www.mginfo.org/grants/ https://karmaforcara.org/microgrant

https://legacyenved.org/legacy-grants/

https://wildones.org/seeds-for-education/

https://monarchwatch.org/bring-back-the-monarchs/milkweed/free-milkweeds-schools-non

profits/

https://nhsa.org/gromoregood-garden-grants/application/

https://ruralschoolscollaborative.org/programs/grants-in-place