

# COVID and Community Gardens Webinar and Workshop Notes

These notes are a collection of strategies to implement the COVID-19 safety protocols issued by the City of Toronto for community and allotment gardens. Some of these strategies were developed by the COVID Community Garden Collaborative, others were raised by webinar leaders and participants. They are only suggestions for how to apply the City’s guidelines to each garden context.

**Garden organizers should read and abide by the City’s guidelines and refer to Toronto Public Health for information on reducing the spread of the COVID-19 virus.**

See <https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-protect-yourself-others/community-settings-workplaces/>

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## Who are the guidelines for?

**Community gardens in City parks and City allotment gardens** are required to follow these guidelines. The City will provide resources such as handwashing stations and signage.

In **community gardens in City parks**, the garden coordinator must collect declarations from all gardeners that they agree to follow the guidelines. The coordinator submits a declaration on behalf of the garden to get a permit for the season. The garden coordinator will also keep an up to date list of garden members with full names and contact information and a schedule that shows when garden members were on site.

**City allotment garden** permit holders must submit a declaration agreeing to the guidelines when they apply for their allotment permit and must sign in at the garden every time they visit.

### Community gardens on private lands

- These are any gardens not in City of Toronto Parks – on grounds of universities, faith organizations, condo and apartment towers. Toronto Community Housing has not provided information at this time.
- These gardens are expected to follow the guidelines but do not need to submit declarations or obtain permits. The City will not provide resources such as signs or handwashing stations.
- It is a good idea to keep a list of garden members and a schedule of who has been in the garden so that Public Health can do contact tracing if anyone in the garden tests positive for COVID.

## Prepare your gardeners to follow the guidelines

### Communicating with garden members

- Encourage members to read guidelines before entering space and consult when clarification is needed.
- Gardeners should take self-assessment (online or go through questions on paper copy) before leaving for the garden [https://covid-19.ontario.ca/?\\_ga=2.57981480.369146347.1588192423-2067268684.1583164607](https://covid-19.ontario.ca/?_ga=2.57981480.369146347.1588192423-2067268684.1583164607)

Q: For garden members that do not have access to the internet or don't speak English, how is everyone else getting them to do the self-assessment and signatures?

Participant answers:

- Google sheets to sign up — those without internet access can have the coordinator complete the form on their behalf (communicating through phone, text, What's App)
- For Westlodge CG we are having a drop off day for forms in the park outside the garden (by appointment)
- Peer translation – if there is one person who speaks English in a group of non-English speakers, they can help ensure that group members understand the guidelines, particularly what is specific to your garden.

Q: Does each person really need to complete self assessment tool each time they come to the garden?

A: Yes. Toronto Public Health asked that people use the tool every time before they leave to go to the garden. People may not have symptoms or exposure one day and develop symptoms or be exposed to the virus a few days later.

Q: Is an email response enough or do we need a signed copy of the declaration for community gardens?

Participant answers:

- The City told us that you have to have a signed copy. It can be a scan or photo of the signed form but it must be signed. We are having people who do not have a scanner or camera or access to the internet sign a paper form and drop it in a box for our plots coordinator.
- We set up a web page that allows people to upload a photo of their signed form.
- We've been encouraging folks to provide declarations electronically and are considering having people "sign" via a reply email to minimize contacts
- Survey monkey for registration (with a checkbox as electronic signature for the agreement)
- Verbal confirmation over the phone, if garden members do not have access to internet

### Supporting your garden members to follow the guidelines

This is a lot of work for coordinators at a busy time of year. You may want to ask other garden members to take on some tasks.

**Support people to follow the protocols:** Make it easier for people who are in high-risk groups to stay home by finding ways to keep them connected. Provide tools (such as schedules and distance markers) and updated information.

**Messaging:** When you are explaining the protocols, emphasize that we are all looking after each other and we all need to work together to stop the spread of the virus and keep people from getting sick.

**Talk about the risks of not following safety practices:** If all of us don't follow these practices, there is a risk that people will get sick and die. There is also the risk that gardeners will face intervention from authorities: public health contact tracing, tickets from bylaw enforcement, potential police interactions (and what that means for BIPOC gardeners) and the closure of all community gardens.

As garden leaders we don't like doing this, but it may be necessary to ask people to leave for the day or for the season if they refuse to follow the guidelines.

If you ask people to help gain cooperation from others, they are more likely to follow the guidelines themselves.

## Decision-making & dispute resolution

This year your garden group will likely need to make decisions about operating differently, and questions may come up about how to handle people who don't follow the guidelines. Hopefully you already have some ways to make decisions and work through conflicts, such as a garden committee and garden agreements signed at the beginning of the season.

However your garden members choose to make decisions and respond to issues, it's best to come to an agreement early on what your process will be and communicate that to all gardeners. The more clear and transparent you are, the easier it will be.

## Plan for all your gardeners

### Reducing barriers to equity-seeking groups

By equity-seeking groups we mean: Black, Indigenous, people of colour, people with low incomes, LGBTQ2S+ people, people with disabilities and newcomers. These are people who have traditionally faced barriers to food access.

How can you prioritize access for equity-seeking groups?

- Have a separate, prioritized wait list for people facing barriers to food access.
- Offer volunteer and leadership roles to people from equity-seeking groups.
- Consider growing food to donate to community food programs or Plant-A-Row, Grow-A-Community programs. Keep in mind that food banks usually can't deal with small

quantities of produce, meal programs are more likely to integrate bunches of herbs or a handful of carrots.

- Consider equity issues when making decisions about distributing food. Do equity-seeking community members have a strong voice in making decisions?

## People who may face challenges in the garden this year

### Children

There is some concern that children they may not be able to follow guidelines, but you may not want to exclude them from the experience of growing if possible. Excluding children may be difficult for single parents.

- Infants can be kept in carriers or strollers
- Buddy system, someone else watches children in another part of park
- We had a guardian sign for a minor (~8 years) - the minor has been participating in our garden for a while and will have to follow the space/hygiene regimen
- Explain to people that if they come with a family of 3-5 people, that doesn't leave room for other gardeners to be there with the 5 person limit.

### Seniors or people vulnerable because of medical conditions

We've heard from coordinators that it's very difficult to prevent seniors from coming to the garden, particularly if they've been involved for a long time, if they have an established routine of coming to the garden or if there are any communication barriers.

Another participant comment: The online self-assessment also leans into ableism - saying that anyone with any kind of chronic health condition should stay at home and self monitor.

Response:

The guidelines say that *it is not recommended* for people over 70 or those who are medically vulnerable to go to a community garden because they are part of an at-risk group. It doesn't say that they are prohibited or that community garden coordinators are responsible for barring people who are at risk. Coordinators are responsible for getting information out to people, but garden members make their own decisions about their safety.

Garden organizers and other members can take steps to make participation safer, or they can keep people who choose not to come still feel like connected, valuable members of the garden.

- Have special time slots for seniors or medically vulnerable people, ensure touch points and tools are sanitized beforehand
- Have compassion for our elders. Encourage others to give our elders space (both by offering special time slots and being aware of leaving physical space around elders).

- If seniors are in the garden, be aware that they might need water and a shady space to rest.

### **People taking transit**

Those who can't walk, drive or cycle to the garden may not feel safe riding on transit while the state of emergency continues.

### **What to do about gardeners who can't participate this year?**

- Plant a sharing plot tended by other gardeners
- Have volunteers plant and maintain a gardener's plot until it is safe for them to return. They can still be considered members for voting and planning purposes, but consider waiving fees. The original gardener should get their plot back the following year. This must be clear from the beginning to avoid conflict.

Q: How can you keep people engaged if they're not in the garden?

Participant answers:

- Encourage front yard gardening programs so people can garden closer to home
- One gardener who must stay home is growing seedlings for the garden
- Take photos of the garden at different points in the season and share so folks can see the growth from the safety of their homes.
- If seniors are not actively using technology, it may be an opportunity for youth to give them support - intergenerational learning.

## **Spacing and scheduling**

Even if your garden is usually not a busy place, we recommend scheduling to ensure you don't exceed the maximum number of people in the garden according to provincial rules. This is currently 5 people, but it may change.

- Use Google calendars or a sign up sheet filled in by email, phone, text, What's App.
- Setting up a schedule for one month is less work than doing it every week.
- If signing people up for a schedule is too much work, you can assign dates/times for people and have them verify afterwards by phone, text, message. Ask them to notify you of any changes.
- See the Google calendar tutorial

Community gardens don't have to keep a sign in sheet (as originally stated in the guidelines), but the garden coordinator should keep an up to date, accurate schedule of who has been in

the garden. This will help public health do contact tracing if anyone in the garden tests positive for COVID.

- This can be a tool for estimating how many hours of volunteer time when you're going for funding.
- You may need to pay particular attention to scheduling people who have special roles in the garden (such as spacing people who are key holders throughout the schedule).

Have strategies for areas of the garden where people tend to congregate.

- Put spacing markers at the shed or water tap. Either don't put out picnic tables or benches or rope them off. Tree stumps are good seats that can be moved around easily.
- To space people out and avoid many people handling the same set of tools, assign tasks to people and limit the number of people doing each task (such as one person working the compost, tending the pollinator garden or filling water barrels).

Q: May there really only be 5 people in a garden at any time, no matter how large it is? We wrote the City about the 5 people rule and were told that it truly meant 5 people total in the garden... not groups of five.

A: If this is the City's interpretation of the rules, you need to work with it. One concern would be people wanting to use the shed or water hoses at the same time. Realistically a garden with people spaced out appropriately at all times is not going to be a target for bylaw enforcement, unless someone really wants to make a complaint.

## Sanitation

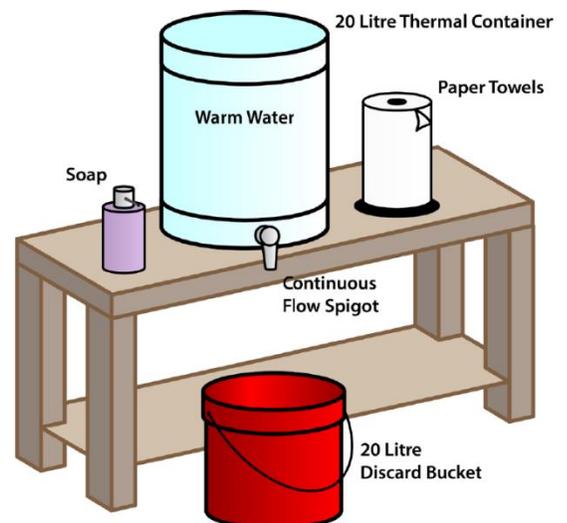
City-installed wash stations are supposed to be maintained by the contractor once per week.

Making your own handwashing station. Sample handwashing station plan:

[https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/handwashing\\_station\\_instructions.pdf?fwd=no](https://foodsafety.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/handwashing_station_instructions.pdf?fwd=no)

Cold water combined with soap will kill the virus as long as you are able to make a soapy lather and work it into your hands for 15 seconds. Public Health is concerned that people won't wash their hands long enough if they use cold water.

It's recommended for gardeners to bring their own tools and gloves and take them away after each use, but that's not feasible for all gardens. In that case the recommendation is to disinfect the contact surfaces of tools before and after using.



Participant answers:

- We have decided to do little garden kits for each of our gardeners so they have their own tools.
- Hard to carry your own tools when you're walking to the garden.
- You may want to re-allocate some of your garden budget to buy hand sanitizer, wipes, masks or other equipment.

Q: What disinfecting products work?

A: Some homemade remedies don't eliminate the virus, such as vinegar. Bleach and water solutions are only effective for 24 hours, so you need to mix them fresh every day. Be aware of how you're storing sanitizing products (particularly bleach) in a shed. They should be properly labelled and kept away from children.

Health Canada list of COVID-19 effective sanitizing products <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19/list.html>

Spirit of York in the Distillery District sells small or large quantities of hand sanitizer, proceeds to food banks. No delivery, contactless pickup at their window. They take requests for donations. <https://spiritofyork.com/spirit-of-york-re-dedicates-production-facilities-towards-producing-hand-sanitizer/#>

Q: Will washrooms be accessible or can the City provide portapotties?

A: Many of the washrooms that people would normally access, like community centres, libraries or fast food restaurants will be closed. The City will not likely be able to provide portable toilets, not to mention it would be difficult to keep them sanitized!  
Make sure that gardeners are aware of the limited facilities so they can plan accordingly. Schedule shorter gardening shifts as people may need to go home sooner.

## Other

### Signage

- Signs should say that only authorized gardeners are allowed in the space so that people who are not garden members will understand why there are people in the garden when they are not allowed.
- Ensure gardeners have language to explain why they are allowed access when general public isn't (training, signing agreements, garden open only for food production)



Toronto Public health has signs in multiple languages that can be posted:

<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/hand-hygiene/>

<https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-how-you-can-help/covid-19-spread-the-word/>

## Insurance and liability

Some boards are concerned that they will be held liable if they open a garden and some gets sick as a result.

It is a good idea to ask your insurance provider what their policy is around COVID. Gardens in City parks are covered by the City's liability insurance. More than half of the webinar participants didn't know if they had insurance.

While we can't provide legal advice, there are some considerations for managing risk.

Have garden organizers demonstrated due diligence? Have they taken reasonable precautions to avoid transmission of the virus?

If organizers follow the City's protocols, they can argue they've implemented safety measures developed by Toronto Public Health based on the most current information available. The agreement that gardeners sign with the City is designed to address the liability concern. Gardeners are made aware of the risks when they sign the agreement and they accept those risks. It may become more murky if garden organizers (not individual gardeners) don't follow the guidelines. We need to get a proper legal opinion on this.

## Questions & Answers

Q: Is public programming discouraged?

A: Public gatherings are not allowed under the city's current guidelines.

- Try holding programming and activities through webinars or photo workshops instead
- Tap into workshops happening online <http://torontourbangrowers.org/training-and-education>

Q: A question for smaller gardens, how do we contribute to food banks if we are still unsure of how well we will be able to produce?

A: Good question! Food banks often have difficulty with small donations of produce because it's not enough to distribute to everyone equally. Consider giving your donation to a community

meal program that can incorporate it, share the produce with gardeners who aren't able to participate this year or plant something that you can grow in larger quantities, such as greens. Communicate with your local food programs in advance so you know what they can use and when they can best use it. It's very sad to throw out produce because it went bad before it could be used!

Q: If a gardener's partner or child comes into the garden, do we also need them to sign the declaration? or are they considered 'visitors'?

A: If they are coming to work in the garden, they need to sign a declaration and be included in the garden schedule. If they're not doing garden work, they are considered visitors and should not be in the garden space. Family members and other visitors are welcome to be in the park space adjacent to the garden following the same safety guidelines as other park visitors.

Q: Our garden doesn't have fences, how do we keep people from entering?

A: People passing through are less of a concern. The goal is to keep people from congregating. Removing or taping off places where outside visitors would sit (such as benches and picnic tables) will help. If they feel comfortable doing so, gardeners can ask people who stop to talk to keep moving through the area as only registered garden members should be in the space. Trying to block existing pathways may result in people finding other, more destructive ways to move through the space.

Q: We have some larger maintenance projects that need to be completed in our garden for safety. They will require multiple people. Any suggestions on how to complete those?

A: Break up tasks so that they can be done by 5 people at a time, working in shifts. People should be wearing masks and washing hands frequently.

Q: We've had issues with "COVID police" ("concerned citizens" calling police) in our park, which has caused unwarranted police interactions. People are getting into violent arguments over physical distancing in places like grocery stores. How do we avoid this kind of conflict?

A: Put up signs explaining that only authorized gardeners are permitted, have a copy of the City's guidelines handy and post public health information signs. Gardeners can direct visitors to the signs and use them to back up explanations that the City has given permission for food production if safety protocols are followed. Ensuring that garden members are following spacing protocols and having visible spacing strategies (marked off areas, public health signage) gives people less grounds for arguments.

Encourage people to talk about incidents so the garden group can respond together. Dealing with hostility alone can be very stressful.

Q: Are gardeners allowed to grow flowers, or only food crops? The City document says: "Access to the garden is only permitted to plant, maintain and harvest food."

Parks staff have confirmed that gardens are only to open for the purpose of growing food. This doesn't prevent people from planting flowers or native plants in or around a food garden. Many non-food plants are grown as medicines, teas or for pollinators (which are essential for growing many food plants).

Q: Condo gardeners are not gardening for food security. Why should condo gardens be allowed to open?

A: Not all condo residents are wealthy and many do grow food because they can't afford fresh produce.

Q: Should we avoid communal plots to keep people distanced?

A: No, communally tended plots are actually a good strategy for sharing produce with gardeners who can't be in the garden this season. Spacing can be managed with proper scheduling.

Q: At what date is a garden not viable?

A: You can start growing very late in the season, you just have to adjust what crops you grow. Shorter season crops can still go in the ground in July, some people do a second planting of greens in August. Seed packages will tell you days to maturity.

## Next steps

- Notes, updates and a recorded version of the webinar will be posted on [www.torontourbangrowers.org](http://www.torontourbangrowers.org)
- You can join a Google group specifically for COVID and community gardens – Pandemic Gardens T.O. – by sending a request to [info@torontourbangrowers.org](mailto:info@torontourbangrowers.org)
- There is also a larger TUG google group that you can join by clicking on Get Connected at [www.torontourbangrowers.org](http://www.torontourbangrowers.org)
- If you're on Facebook, you can join Grow Food Toronto or Toronto Community Gardens.
- With permission to contact participants, we'll follow up over the summer to see how the guidelines are working and identify any further needs.
- Stay in touch!  
[info@torontourbangrowers.org](mailto:info@torontourbangrowers.org)  
FB/Twitter/Instagram: @TOurbangrowers, @FoodShareTO, @GardenJane, @andrea.boucaud (Peachtree)

**Thank you! Natalie, Jane, Peachtree, Randy, Aysha and Rhonda**



healthy food programming, gardens + community development

## Links

Guidelines for Community and Allotment Gardens established by the City of Toronto.

<https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-protect-yourself-others/community-settings-workplaces/>

COVID self-assessment tool [https://covid-](https://covid-19.ontario.ca/?_ga=2.57981480.369146347.1588192423-2067268684.1583164607)

[19.ontario.ca/?\\_ga=2.57981480.369146347.1588192423-2067268684.1583164607](https://covid-19.ontario.ca/?_ga=2.57981480.369146347.1588192423-2067268684.1583164607)

Health Canada list of COVID sanitizers [https://www.canada.ca/en/health-](https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19/list.html)

[canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19/list.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19/list.html)

Ontario COVID updates <https://covid-19.ontario.ca/index.html>