

Tips for starting a parish vegetable garden

Carol Meyer | Mar. 14, 2011 | Eco Catholic

We love our organic vegetable garden at St. Pius X church in Mission, Kansas. Here's why: 1) It is a great community-builder 2) We're pleased we can use some of our unused land for good purposes 3) It motivates people to grow their own food which is good for the Earth 4) It's a focal point for all our green efforts. Our garden has worked so well for us that I want to encourage you to consider it for your parish if you have the available land.

The first question is WHY you would want to put effort into this project. The two main reasons for me are because the pope and U.S. bishops have repeatedly urged Catholics to get more serious about caring for the Earth, and a garden is one good way to do this. Growing locally and organically saves energy by not having to truck food in from far distances and eliminates the toxins of pesticides and herbicides. The other reason is because a garden can bring new life to your parish. At St. Pius, our garden is a central point of interest where people gather and get to know one another. We share produce at church, have vegetarian potlucks, bless our garden, and educate church members about connections between food and Earth care. One person even joined our catechumenate because she saw the garden and figured this had to be a neat church.

I'll share how we've done our garden, and you can see if that would work for you. Our Green Team first got approval from our pastor and parish council, which wasn't hard because we have a big grassy, flat, sunny area next to our parking lot that is rarely used for anything. I think only two parishioners objected early on. In the fall of '08, we plowed five areas of 10 X 50 feet, and divided these into 10 X10 feet plots. For a fee of \$15 a year, individuals or families chose a plot or two and started growing things the next spring. Last year, we doubled the number of plots because of the demand, and opened it up to community participation.

Some churches do the gardening communally and give all the produce to food pantries. I'm sure this works well too, and I invite readers to share their experience with this model. However, we chose to let folks have their own plot and grow food for themselves and give away excess as they please. This gave people a sense of pride and ownership and gave them incentive to do a really good job.

One of our challenges was getting water to the garden. At first we had to unwind a long hose from the church, but we took turns and it worked. Then last year our men's club engineered a water source next to the garden. This year the Scouts are building composting bins to regenerate waste into organic matter. We are thrilled to keep getting more parish groups involved. We've talked about having a gazebo to provide shade and seating, but that is a future project. Volunteers put up fencing around the garden, but that isn't really necessary. People do companion planting and use other natural methods to discourage pests, so losing a lot of food to disease or insects/animals is not a problem. Someone made and painted signs for the plots with the family name on them. My granddaughter Taylor and I had fun making our own sign that said, "Taylor and Carol's godly garden."

We have periodic gardeners meetings where we talk about procedures and share ideas. Mostly we, and many parishioners and their children, saunter over after Sunday mass to see what's growing and converse. Most go away with some tomatoes or radishes in their hands. It's all fairly simple and very satisfying. And it's a visible,

hopeful sign that we can do something together to benefit the Earth. Jules Petty says in his book *Agri-Culture* that four out of five people who worked in an inner-city community garden project said their mental health improved. We can attest to that to, so for this and numerous other reasons, let's get those gardens going!

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