

Community Garden Security

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(Many of these ideas are from community gardeners of New York and Seattle.)

We will likely never completely cure the theft and vandalism problem, but there are lots of things we can do to decrease the incidents and make our gardens feel more secure and safe. There is a certain amount of letting go that must happen since some loss is inevitable. But the key is to find ways that the very people that could do the vandalism and theft are involved and work more toward protecting your resource. You want them to feel vested, not locked out.

Tips for every gardener:

- This is one of our favorite tips: Sprinkle white flour liberally over prized produce. People might think it's laden with pesticides and won't take it. Keep a stash of white flour in your garden (maybe in a sealed plastic container) and re-apply as soon as possible after a rain.
- If you're comfortable doing it, gently confront someone who appears to be stealing produce. An easy way to do this is to approach them, greet them, and ask how their garden is doing. If they act uncomfortable or don't give much of an answer, keep the conversation going. Many people who steal don't really understand what a community garden is... they maybe think it's "the city" growing food (and doesn't really belong to individual people), or one farmer who won't miss a few tomatoes. Once they understand that it's made up of many families working hard to grow their own food, and they themselves can get a plot, they just might join the next year.
- Find a volunteer to update the bulletin board.
- Greet and meet all of your fellow gardeners that you can.
- Harvest all your produce; leave nothing to temptation. If you are busy or going out of town and need help, ask a fellow gardener to harvest your ripe produce for you. A common excuse given by thieves is "there sure is a lot of food going to waste here". If someone's plot looks like it has not been harvested in a while, a simple reminder call could be in order; if they can't, offer to glean and take the fruit to the nearest food pantry.
- Fences can make it less convenient for someone to take things from your plot.
- Consider not growing popular & tempting things like watermelon.
- Greet the police officers when they come by, and thank them for being a presence and helping us to keep the garden safe and secure.
- Attend garden events whenever possible. The more gardeners you get to know, the more likely it will be that you can spot someone who is stealing from someone's plot. In addition, this is a great way to make new friends; you know you've got two things in common: a love of gardening, and you live (or work) in the same neighborhood.
- Do not send people in to harvest for you. If you wish to share your produce/flowers, please pick it and give it. Don't invite different people from the neighborhood (kids too) in to pick something when you aren't there. Several problems can arise from doing this. Other people may conclude they can pick too. People from outside the garden often don't understand that next year someone else might be gardening your plot and that person won't want uninvited picking. Misunderstandings occur about the boundaries of your plot and where it is or is not OK to pick. What may be a one time or limited offer from you is sometimes taken as an

open invitation. And finally, fellow gardeners may see a stranger in your plot and think that they are stealing your produce.

- Consider hiding vegetables by planting desirable plants in less visible location.
- Plant more vegetables than you need.
- If you observe theft or vandalism in the garden, call 911 right away. Get a good description of person or vehicle if possible. Get the incident report number and be sure to post information on the bulletin board for other gardeners to see.
- If you find vandalism and/or theft after the fact you can still report it to the police. It is good to let the police know you're having problems so they can visit the site more often.

Garden-wide strategies:

- Go door to door in the neighborhood to make sure that neighbors feel welcome at the garden and understand how it works. People who live close will come often and know who doesn't belong. This is also a chance to explain that individuals care for plots and then harvest the vegetables they grew, since some people assume that a community garden is a free resource for anyone to harvest from. Attend your community association meeting to keep them in the loop about this great neighborhood resource!
- Help organize a social or educational event for the garden.
- Make durable signs to place around the garden. Consider using easy-to-understand pictures or images to communicate. If possible, put words into English, Hmong & Spanish.
- Put out free bins near the entrance to the garden in the shade so that when gardeners have too much produce they can put it there for fellow gardeners or people in the community to use. Post a sign explaining this, and also letting folks know they can get their own affordable plot. Alternately, you can create a pickup schedule to gather and take excess to a food pantry, but free bins are less work and can be a nice way to reach out to the garden's neighbors.
- A fence around the garden's perimeter can help, even if gates are unlocked. Consider a "living" fence which is made up of immediately edible produce like grapes, raspberries, and currants. A living fence is more attractive, neighborly, and is a gift to the community at large.
- Work with local block watches and community police teams.
- Invite local nonprofits, senior centers, schools, summer camps, etc to get a plot. They can also take on tasks to help with ongoing garden maintenance or use the garden to hold meetings, parties, or benefits.
- Reach out to the community affairs office at your local hospitals. Diabetic support groups or other health promotion groups might want to meet at the garden or get a plot.