

# Common objections to community gardens

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...and how to frame your plans to address them

## Why people object to community gardens...

### THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY GARDENING

has come far in Australia in the close to 35 years since the first community garden team turned the first community garden sod of earth in Melbourne.

Slowly, local government has come to accept the practice as its social and nutritional benefits become clear and an increasing number have adopted policies to enable community gardening.

Community gardening is now accepted as an important component of sustainable urbanism in which it is linked to urban food security and food sovereignty—the freedom to choose the type of food preferred by eaters—and with demonstrated civic values.

Yet, there persists pockets of opposition to the construction of community gardens. These are sometimes not outright opposition to the idea of communities growing food in cities and can be more to do

with wanting a community garden sited elsewhere than where it is proposed. Sometimes, this reflects the competition for public space in our cities, something set to increase in parallel with rising urban populations. At other times it is an expression of the NIMBYism that seeks to prevent development of all kinds.

### Motivation

My motivation in producing this booklet comes in part from seeing community groups disappointed as their apparently good idea is opposed and blocked.

Uncompromising opposition encourages an adversarial mindset rather one that would seek solutions to accommodating the needs of both proponents and opponents of community gardening through design thinking. It brings opportunity costs in terms of blocking community enterprise, access to fresh food and the creation of a sense of place and community.

My other motivations include the role of community gardens as a component in sustainable urbanism. They provide an additional recreational resource of the type needed if our cities really are to be places of opportunity.

Cities are places of constant change and this includes changes in urban landuse such as allocating land to community gardens. It means that the Nineteenth/Twentieth Century model of city parks as woodland landscapes with extensive areas of lawn is changing. Increasing urban populations bring new demands on landuse.

The content of this publication comes from the experience of community gardeners and my own experience as someone who has worked with community gardeners so they could get started, as well as with councils to develop enabling policy for community gardens and as a coordinator of a local government community garden program.

## Reframe your argument...

### Reframing casts your argument in a positive light

1. Opponent arguments are often based on assumptions

Opponents of community gardens frequently voice their fears rather than potential reality.

It would be better for them to ask the community garden team how they would address the objections in their planned garden.

2. Respond creatively

Do not respond directly to opponent's claims as this validates their opposition.

First, respond by positioning community gardening as a socially desirable landuse that is open to all and that creates new opportunities for community building and engagement. Then, respond to their opposition within this context.

3. Ask for evidence for opponent claims

Ask opponents for evidence proving their assertions about community gardens. Where have they seen it?

While there may be individual incidences of the objections in this publication, they are insufficient to be regarded as typical and as a sound basis for refusing the go-ahead for a community garden.

When researching your idea to start a community garden, ask other community garden teams about the objections listed here. If they did occur, how did they successfully deal with them?

4. Always retain a reasonable tone in arguing disagreement with opponent of a community garden

This creates the impression that you are reasonable people rather than reacting emotionally.

Hopefully, opponents of a garden would be similarly reasonable and open to exploring solutions that would be acceptable to both groups.

**Constructing a community garden can bring people together in community effort.**



## Opposition has common themes

There are a number of reasons that people may oppose the repurposing of public land for community garden development. Those that follow have come up repeatedly in deliberations around proposals for new community gardens.

In some cases these objections have been resolved through discussion with opponents, however sometimes opponents will not amend their opposition and community garden development has gone ahead despite this. Seldom, if ever, have the objections of opponents proven to be real.

### Legacy of the past

One of the reasons that people might object to the development of a community garden is because of the historic residue attributable to the way urban development has been done in the past.

This may include development that has been locally inappropriate and that contributed to undesirable changes such as local traffic congestion and perceived impacts on land values. Local people might not have been consulted about developments or the developments might have been pushed through regardless of local opinion.

### Loss of local parkland

Opposition to the creation of new community gardens frequently comes from people fearful of losing access to public land.

Sometimes, a park proposed to accommodate a community garden might have been created as a result of lobbying by local people. The possibility of a community garden can seem to them to be a loss of part of the park even though it can equally be seen as creating the opportunity for an additional recreational resource in the area and increasing its use and social value. This objection is encountered even when the entirety of the park will not be taken up by the community garden.

Exacerbating this fear over the loss of public parkland can be the lack of sufficient public open space in an area. This leads to opposition to proposed changes to landuse in general, including the development of even small community gardens. In these situations people want to keep parks as a lawn area as they believe that this caters for the needs of most people.

## False sense of possession

Opponents are often people living close to a public park or other area where construction of a community garden is proposed.

They regard the public land as an extension of their backyard and may have made use of it in this way for some time.

This sense of local ownership or possession over public land is misplaced as it is unrepresentative.

## Specific sources of opposition

Over the decades of community gardening in Australia, a number of points commonly raised in opposition to the development of community gardens have emerged.

These can be addressed through gardener education and competent community garden design. It is for this reason that people starting community gardens should get good design assistance from someone qualified to provide it. Likewise, finding education in skills in horticulture, compost making and other community garden operations from qualified people is necessary.

Let's explore the common objections.

### 1. ODOUR—community gardens will become a source of unpleasant smells

The fear that community gardens will become the source of unpleasant smells can become reality when gardeners fail to maintain compost and the compost turns anaerobic and smelly.

This is an uncommon occurrence as compost production is a basic practice in community gardens and gardeners quickly build expertise in it.

It is avoided through gardener education in effective compost management and by siting compost bins so they are away from residences and neighbouring buildings.

Gardeners making liquid compost should do so in a container that has a lid that seals well, so that the odour from this anaerobic process does not create a nuisance.



**Rodentproof compost bins with instructions for use.**

### 2. RODENTS —community gardens will attract rats and mice

The concern is mainly about rats, around which there is both fear and misunderstanding in the community.

Rats are found throughout our cities where they are part of our urban ecology. Where there is a community garden nearby or where a rat is noticed in a community garden, people can sometimes make a false association between the two, blaming the community garden for the presence of the rodents.

There are simple precautions that community gardeners can take to discourage rodents. These are especially important where community gardens occupy areas of city parks and where the public can wander through the community garden.

#### Reduce breeding opportunity

Rats can breed and give birth to young in the warm environment of seldom-turned compost.

Solutions include:

- turn the compost weekly to make a rapid, hot compost
- cover and enclose the compost to rodentproof it and manage it as a slow, cool compost.

Compost bins of the domestic, plastic type or those made of fine wire mesh can be stood on a solid or fine steel mesh base to prevent rodents burrowing into them. Wire mesh bins should be made of small

gauge wire that exclude rodents, rather than poultry wire.

Open compost bins are the most likely to become inhabited by rats if they are not maintained as frequently turned, hot composts. Some custom made models of compost bins have plywood sides and removable top and front panel for ease of turning, adding to and removing compost material. These are made to be rodentproof, however the panels must make close contact to achieve this.

Rats may find shelter under stored building materials set aside for future use in the community garden. This suggests the wisdom of collecting and storing only those materials the gardeners have use for in the short term.

Once again, it's gardener education in effective compost production that is the best solution.

### 3. NOISE – community gardens will become a source of unwelcome noise

Noise is another common objection to setting up community gardens, however it is one that seldom eventuates.

Noise could occur during construction but as community gardeners usually make use of hand tools rather than power tools, noise in normal operation is seldom an issue.

Councils have fixed hours during which work on a construction site can take place and these apply to community gardens as well.



**Glebe community gardeners at a participatory site analysis organised led by community garden consultants, Steve Batley and the author. Design for participation brings the group coherence needed to counter unreasonable objections to community gardens.**

There are few sources of noise coming from community gardens. The best solution to ensuring noise doesn't become a nuisance is to minimise it wherever possible.

#### **4. UNSIGHTLINESS – community gardens will become unsightly and messy**

Here we enter the slippery area of aesthetics and preconceived notions of what gardens should look like.

A sense of aesthetics—of how a garden should be designed and managed—is a personal attitude and has little by way of objective attributes to judge it by.

There are numerous garden designs ranging from the formal arrangement of rectangular garden beds in parallel rows through to the food forest model the design of which is based on the structure of the natural forest with its ground, understorey and canopy layers of vegetation.

What may appear chaotic to one person might be visually appealing to others. Someone with little ecological knowledge might see the multilayer structure of a food forest as somewhat chaotic and undesirable while those in the know see it as a valid design based on the ecological relationships found in natural systems.

Likewise, a garden designed as regular rows of garden beds with straight lines of fruit trees, while exhibiting symmetry and simplicity, might be seen by some as ecologically unsophisticated and simplistic.

While appearance and its appreciation is an individual thing, gardens with superfluous materials scattered through them would likely be regarded as untidy by all. Materials in storage should be stored safely—off the ground and with heavier materials lower down—and in a designated storage area.

Effort should be made to keep compost areas tidy and rat free by storing materials awaiting composting in containers of some kind.

Organised gardens with designated areas for compost, storage and other garden activities are generally safer gardens.

Avoiding complaints to councils or landowners about unsightly community gardens is another thing where gardener education will go a long way.

#### **5. ATTRACTING UNDESIRABLES—community gardens will attract people who constitute a risk**

The complaint that community gardens could attract 'undesirables' is another of those slippery ideas lacking objective assessment criteria

## **NIMBYism...**

### **...not in my backyard!**

Objections to inappropriate developments such as big box malls and some industrial development in residential areas are justified, but those are on a scale that far exceeds any impact of a community garden.

This resistance to change, in some cases a fear of change, has become known as NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard) and is familiar to local government Australiawide.

NIMBYism has become a brake not only on community garden development but on other development as well. Unfortunately for its adherents, it can signify a selfish attitude, especially when they say they do not oppose a development in principle, such as a community garden, just where it is to be located. In effect, they seek to push what they see as a problem onto some other community so they can keep things where they live as they are.

NIMBYism portrays itself as civic mindedness but it can be exactly the opposite.

## **A pervasive public negativity**

A further basis of objection to community gardens comes from what appears to be a default negative response by the public to the repurposing of any public land and, in some cases, private land.

There may be historic reasons that contribute to this ingrained attitude.

Although people can drop their opposition as they learn more about a proposal, opposition frequently becomes quite vehement with objectors getting media coverage, compiling petitions and mounting public campaigns.

Information presented is often quite selective, wording is reframed to support objector's agendas, arguments are simplified and the needs of the city as a whole ignored.

because the concept of 'undesirable' is a variable one.

For example, it may mean strangers in the area (non-residents), homeless people overnighting in a community garden, vandals and the like.

Because of the imprecision of what makes an undesirable other than someone who causes damage, it is not really a valid criteria for making decisions about community gardens.

## 6. ATTRACTING VANDALS—the garden will attract vandals

Vandalism occurs in community gardens, however it usually takes the form of minor incidents such as damage or theft of plants and food, damage to signs such as tagging and theft of equipment left out. The theft of young fruit trees from community gardens seems to be a popular activity.

A limited amount of vandalism should be expected in community gardens without fences or with low fences. Some councils will provide only low fences or install no fence at all when the community garden is on public land, as erection of a high fence could be interpreted as handing public land to the exclusive use of a small group and be seen as alienation of public land.

Solutions tried include signage inviting visitors to look but not to take plant material as that has been paid for and maintained by the gardeners. Some gardens make a foragers' bed with a sign inviting visitors to help themselves.

## 7. LOSS OF PARKING—community gardeners will take our parking

Parking of vehicles is difficult in some areas and its loss is understandably resisted. This can lead to opposition to new community gardens where local people assume that the gardeners will take their parking spaces.

This is why placing community gardens in close proximity to public transport is a good idea.

## 8. LOSS OF PROPERTY VALUE—community garden will reduce the value of our house

Local residents can get the idea that the presence of a community garden, especially where they fear it

will be unsightly, will affect the value of their homes.

There is no evidence to support this belief and it could be argued that a well maintained community garden that presents a bright face to the street with, say, displays of colourful annual and perennial flowers could actually add value to nearby properties.

## 9. LOSS OF DOG EXERCISE AREA—a community garden will take away our dog walking space

There are cases where dog owners fear that community gardens would deprive them of their dog walking areas.

Dogs can damage community gardens when they trample and urinate on crops and thus can be a health hazard, and where this occurs it reflects poorly on the dog owners.

While dog ownership can have positive psychological value as well as physical value in getting people on the street exercising while walking their dogs, it can be the basis of vocal opposition to changes to urban landuse of all kinds.

Like other urban landusers, dog owners represent only a single interest and council decisions must be taken accordingly if due process is to be followed.

Councils can best make landuse decisions with the entire city in mind in terms of the availability of recreational options. Dog walking, then, becomes seen as simply another use of public land along with all of the other landuse demands made by the public.

## 10. LOSS OF PUBLIC LAND—community gardens alienate public open space

This is emerging as a leading objection to the development of new community gardens.

Looked at in its urban context it can be seen as a reaction to the increase in urban population density, particularly in inner urban areas, and the setting aside of too small an area of open space to cater for all of the demands people make on it. This leads to two things:

- increasing competition for the use of public open space

- increasing vehemence of arguments around the future use of open space.

## The urban context of public landuse

Opponents of new community gardens say they alienate land from the general public for the use of a comparative few.

Community gardening, however, can be considered a recreational option in our cities—aside from its role in urban food security, placemaking, community learning, mental health (especially destressing) and socialisation—in the same way that the tennis courts, bowling greens, swimming pools, skateboard bowls and children's playgrounds are recreational options for comparatively few people.

Seen this way, community gardens are validated by the existing allocation of land for these other uses as another creative recreational option for communities. They become merely a new landuse demand from the public.

## Opposition often based on assumptions

Experience demonstrates that opposition to community gardens is often a voicing of fears over something new. That is, opposition is frequently based on the assumption that something could go wrong.

While there have been isolated incidences of some of the objections listed in this publication, they have been too infrequent to be regarded as typical and in the cases I know of they have been simply resolved.

The key to avoiding the objections consists of two parts:

- competent community garden design
- competent community gardener education.

Community gardeners would do well to find someone competent in landscape design. The trouble with using amateurs—and here I am not saying that non-professionally qualified people should not be used—is that their knowledge base can be too limited and that they do not know that there is much they do not know. Frequently, they know little of local government landuse regulation

that could affect the community garden and may have insufficient understanding of drainage and other technical detail.

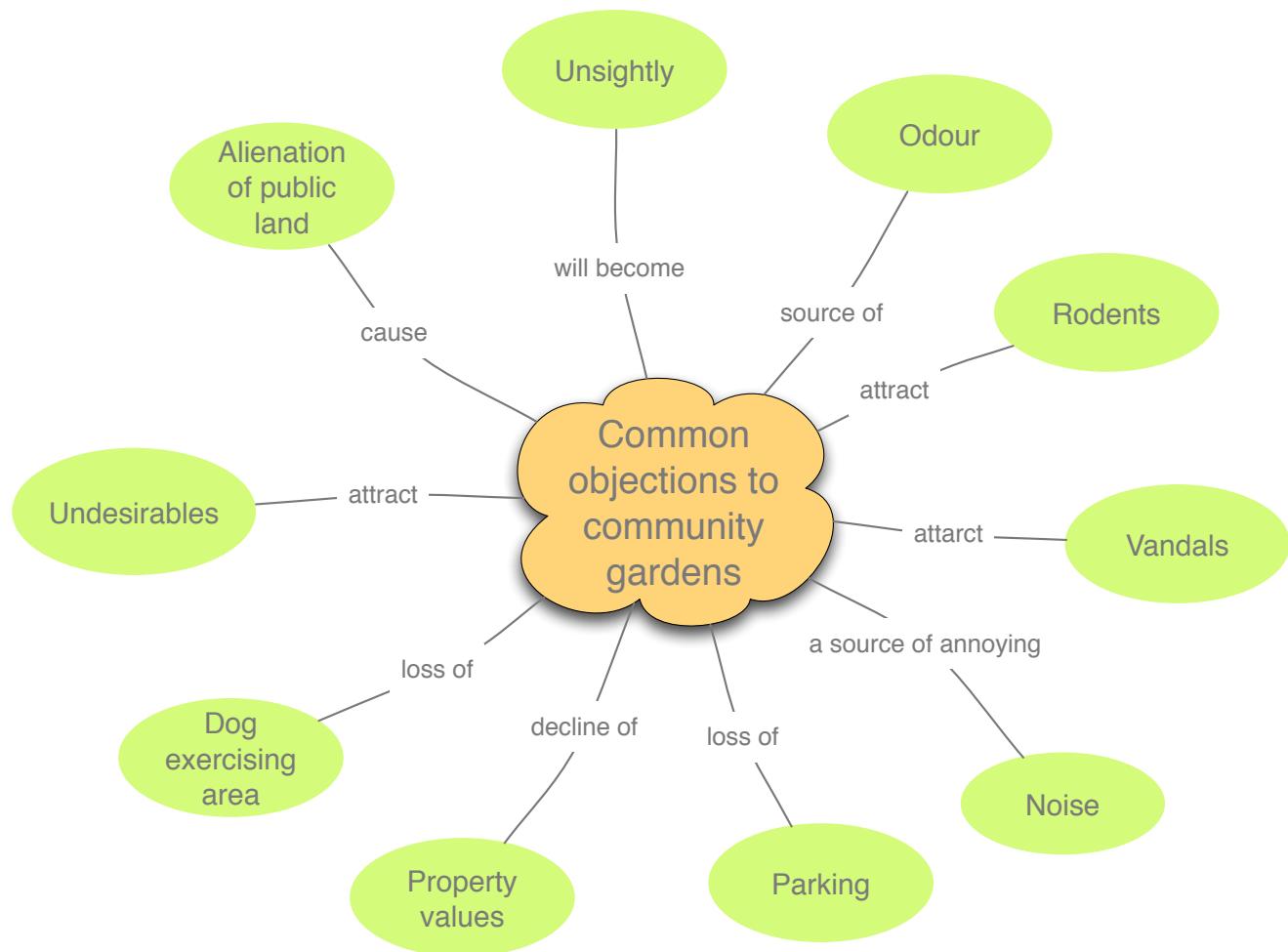
Likewise, be sure the people you find to skill up your team is competent in what they teach. People with insufficient knowledge and experience are likely to pass on erroneous information.

All community garden design, of course, incorporates the needs of the gardeners as the main priority and includes agreements on how the gardeners will make decisions, communicate and resolve disagreement.

Even when faced with vociferous opposition, it is good for community garden teams to attempt to resolve

disagreement with their opponents. This will not always be possible, however.

For local government staff involved in the process, it may be worthwhile engaging a professional facilitator to manage the negotiation.



OBJECTION	RAISED?	HOW TO REFRAME & COUNTER
Alienation of public open space		
Unsightliness		
Source of odour		
Attract rodents		
Attract vandals		
Attract undesirables		
Loss of parking		
Source of noise		
Loss of dog exercise area		
Reduces property values		
Other		