

Mentoring & Assessing Garden Use

TIP

PP502

02/07/22

P-Patch TIPS are reference documents that address topics related to the development and ongoing management of P-Patch Community Gardens.

All P-Patch Program participants must actively maintain the garden space they are assigned, as well as pathways in and around the assigned plot, year-round. In order to ensure that there is help available for those who need it, while also keeping plots active, we follow a best practice called Assessing and Mentoring Plot Use. Each garden establishes one or more volunteers to mentor and assess the garden plots and work closely with staff to ensure gardeners are active, productive, and successful. Untended plots can attract pests, spread weeds, and harbor plant disease. They also create safety hazards and lower the morale of other gardeners and neighbors.

Roles Defined

Gardeners

- ⇒ Garden organically and actively throughout the year with the seasons.
- ⇒ Actively care for assigned plot, soil, and plants.
- ⇒ Strive to be a life-long learner.
- ⇒ Follow the rules and code of conduct.

Plot Monitors

- ⇒ Are garden volunteers that are friendly mentors, creating an environment that assists in the success of gardeners regardless of level of gardening skills or personal challenges.
- ⇒ Are eager to learn from others about different cultural styles of gardening; including being familiar with a variety of food plants and alternative uses for plants that many might see as weeds.
- ⇒ Are familiar with the [Plot Monitoring Procedure](#), [Rules](#), [Code of Conduct](#), and [Anti-racism Statement](#)
- ⇒ Create a system to regularly observe assigned garden spaces and assess use for active gardening with an eye on the seasons.
- ⇒ Assess plots for active gardening with an eye on the seasons.
- ⇒ Communicate clearly and compassionately what you have observed and how it relates to program requirements.
- ⇒ Coordinate with P-Patch staff on needs, issues, and on year-end reporting.



Q: Is this a weed or is someone using this plant for food? Food!

Staff Role

- ⇒ Use input from volunteers assessing garden use to manage and communicate with gardeners across the program and for the yearly garden renewal process.
- ⇒ Send official notices and make exceptions for special circumstances, offers additional tips or relinquish space when appropriate.
- ⇒ If a garden does not have volunteers to do this important work, Program staff fill this role.

TIPS should not be used as a substitute for codes, regulations, or rule requirements. Individuals are responsible for compliance with all code, regulatory, and rule requirements, whether or not described in this TIP..

- Plants must not spread into neighboring garden spaces, pathways, or common areas.
- All ripe produce must be harvested and not rot on the ground so as not to waste food and create rodent issues.
- Garden spaces may not contain any plants from “Class A” of the [King County Noxious Weed List](#).
- Tires, railroad ties, treated lumber, trees and large bushes are not allowed.
- Perimeter plot fencing is limited to 3 feet.
- Invasive plants must be controlled or removed from P-Patch garden spaces. See “[P-Patch Invasive Plant Guidelines](#)” for a list of these plants and information on how to control or remove them.
- Political signage is not allowed in any area of the P-Patch.

Things to keep in mind when volunteering to assess garden use

Don't assume! What makes a garden “active” may look different depending on the garden. While garden spaces must be in compliance with the standards listed in the “Rules for P-Patch Participants” garden spaces may contain a broad range of gardening styles that reflect the diversity of people’s knowledge, skill levels, interests, cultures, reasons for gardening, and seasonality. There can be many reasons people get behind on gardening. Before assuming that someone is not following the rules or has abandoned the space, check in with them directly.

Know your plants: Talk to people and try and understand before you assume a plot is weedy. If you don’t recognize something that is growing, ask the gardener what they are growing. Some plants that appear to be weeds might actually be plants that some cultures use for food and/or medicine. Examples include deadly nightshade (*Solanum nigrum*, Mien name: Chipielay), epazote, lambs quarters (pig weed or wild spinach), *Chenopodium album*, Spanish name: esquites), and Purslane, which is edible and can be used as a ground cover under plants to control weeds. If plants are going to seed or spreading and affecting neighboring plots, it’s appropriate to ask the gardener to address the problem.

Be aware of different styles of gardening: Some styles of gardening can appear messy, but they are very productive growing techniques. **Polyculture** (scatter sowing, non-linear gardening) is the simultaneous cultivation or growth of two or more plants in a single area. Polyculture increases biodiversity and enhances soil health. **Permaculture** is long practiced by indigenous cultures and uses the principles of nature in its design and function. It is intended to be less labor intensive than traditional European growing techniques, better for the ecosystem, and has a greater use of perennial food plantings. Just remember trees and large bushes are not allowed in most P-Patch individual plots. One example of such planting is known as the Three Sisters. For many Native American communities, corn, beans, and squash represent the most important crops. When planted together, these plants work together to help one another thrive and survive.



Three Sisters permaculture planting, Image courtesy of 4 String Farm



Late winter polyculture



Active Polyculture



Chayote, squash

Mentor and assessment process by season

Remember the goal is to help all of your fellow gardeners to be successful. Before the first assessment walk in the spring, send a message to everyone letting them know what to expect.

Suggested items to include:

- Start with a check-in message to find out what might be going on in their life that could keep them from gardening.
- Let gardeners know the date or series of dates you will be assessing plot use.
- Let them know when a follow-up walk will occur (2 weeks later provides a deadline for compliance and gives gardeners time to clean up).
- Share any thoughts about resources or tools they can use to work on their clean up efforts.

Spring message example

Hi <your garden here> Gardeners,

It is that time of year you should have started working the garden plot at the P-Patch. I am your plot monitor this year. I will begin visiting the garden to check for activity <Date>. If you have not yet worked your garden, please do so, the weeds are growing, well, like weeds.

I will do a follow up walk on <Date 2 weeks later> to check on compliance issues from the first walk. Let me know if you have any questions.

*Happy Spring,
Plot Monitoring Team*

Spring Monitoring

Methodically walk the garden to evaluate each plot and document your observations. You might want to use an unmarked map to ensure you are being as consistent and neutral as possible. Always include staff when communicating with other gardeners about plot monitoring. Without documentation it is hard for staff to make compliance decisions. A garden-wide update message might also be helpful if you notice patterns that need a general alert.

Sample—General alert notice

Hi everyone,

The volunteer plot assessment team walked through the garden today to look at plots. The garden is looking great.

Here are some overall garden suggestions:

- **General Maintenance** items, like pathways, weed alerts, plants growing into paths, harvesting, etc.
- **Information on overall health of some plants**, such as tomato blight, watering, other plant diseases noticed, planting suggestions for a time of year, etc.

See you in the garden,

If you find a compliance issue, contact the gardener

1. Describe what is happening in the plot and offer suggestions on how to address the issues. Share photos.
2. Offer supportive suggestions on how to control common weeds that make a home in your garden.
3. Give them a date to comply (two weeks is standard).
4. Let affected gardener know that staff can make accommodations if gardener has special circumstances. Examples would include a family emergency, health issues, etc.
5. Offer support, if possible.
6. Notify P-Patch staff of all communication.

If someone does not comply or communicate within 2 weeks, send to your P-Patch staff, who will complete the communication and report back.

Sample—Individual Check-In Spring (you may want to change this up depending on the season)

Hi <Name>,

I volunteer to check on plot activity. I noticed that you have not been out to clean up your plot this spring. I wanted to check in to see if you need help. The weeds are growing fast. Please get out and clean up the plot in the next two weeks. If there is a special circumstance that is keeping you from the garden let me know so we can find you some help.

See you in the garden,

SPRING

What to look for:

- Shift from winterized or dormant space to active gardening of spring crops.
- Tilled soil.
- Weed control.
- Cover crop is incorporated into the soil.
- Space is actively used for growing.
- Transition from spring to summer crops.



Grassy, weedy, overgrown plot



How to protect corn or other seed from crows, conserve soil moisture for seed sprouting

SUMMER

Monitoring Walk—what to look for:

Look for well cared for and growing crops.

- * Is the plot well used and active?
- * Is harvesting happening?
- * Is there transition from spring crops to summer crops?
- * Are weeds or spring crops seeding?



Summer: underutilized, needs weeding, watering, tending. Items have bolted. Check in with this person, what are their growing skills, do they need mentoring?



Overgrown and not tended, weedy, etc.

Fall Monitoring Walk—what to look for:

Look for transition from summer crops to fall crops and winterization steps such as establishing cover crops.

- Is harvesting happening?
- Are weeds well established / going to seed?
- Is there a lot of bare soil? Encourage mulching or planting cover crops if not too late.



Leaf Mulch



Mixed Cover Crop Established



Well maintained: to the left, fall cover crop mixed with fall/winter plants

Preparing a plot for Winter

Option #1—Keep it planted: Many gardeners grow hardy lettuces, beets, carrots, chard, garlic, leeks, and brassica family plants (broccoli, Brussel sprouts, kale, and mustards). Absent a hard frost, these plants will produce all winter. Use mulch around winter vegetables to discourage weed growth and protect plants and soil from extreme weather and dehydration. Plants grow less in the winter, but the leaves and shoots become sweeter as the plant produces more sugar to protect itself from the cold. And don't forget—October (and November too!) is garlic and shallot planting time.

Option #2—Sow Cover Crops: Garden stores have a variety of cover crops. Cover crops are also called green manure because when turned into your soil in the spring they feed nitrogen into the soil as they decompose. Cover crops are best sown in the fall between September and October. In the spring, chop up the cover crop, turn it into the soil, allow it to decompose for a week or so, and then plant. Favorite cover crops include crimson clover (in March it produces stunning crimson flowers beloved of bees—it's also easy to dig in); winter field peas; winter rye (can be difficult to dig in), fava beans and rye and vetch mixes.

Option #3—Mulch—Mulch—Mulch: Any mulch not decomposed and turned into the soil can continue being used as mulch or collected and used in your garden's communal composting system. Try the chop and drop method.

Option #4—Try all of the above: Cover crops and mulches are great to plant between and around winter crops. A striping of cover crop, mulch, and winter hardy plants is a great combination, making it easier to turn in and rotate space in the spring.

The best way to deal with weeds is to plan to spend an hour a week weeding. The only way to control weeds is to keep weeding! Over time, persistent weeding leads to fewer weeds.

- **Pull, Chop, and Drop method:** Use as mulch around your plants, pulling and dropping them on top of the soil. Make sure you knock all soil off the roots so they do not keep growing. Most effectively done on a sunny day. Plants like shot weed, pigweed, lambs quarter can be treated like this as long as you do the work prior to seeding. Works for non-seeded annual weeds, non-seeded tops from perennial weeds, and volunteers from past plantings.
- **Decompose-them-in-a-bag method:** Perennial weed roots, like dandelions, are tricky because often pieces of them will regenerate even if buried. You can place these more aggressive weeds in a large plastic bag on your plot. Once they have fully decomposed, they can then be buried back into the soil. This can even be extended to problem weeds like quack grass, bindweed, buttercup, horsetail.
- **Mulch your beds:** Mulch keeps moisture in, loosens soil, makes weeds easier to pull, inhibits germination of seeds, moderates soil temperatures. This works especially well for annual weed control. When weeding or cultivating make sure to mulch right after. Many weed seeds respond to a flash of red light from the sunlight hitting the soil when you are stirring it up. This triggers germination, so topping with mulch will suppress them.
- **Stay on top of things:** Many weeds re-seed easily. Many of your neighbors may not want those plants in their beds, so be courteous with self-seeding plants. Many annual plants pop up in P-Patch gardens – cilantro, purslane, pigweed, shepherd's purse, calendula, evening primrose, bachelor's buttons, cresses (like shotweed), chickweed, borage, and many more!! Some perennials can be heavy seeders too – comfrey and fennel for example. A good healthy garden with good soil will grow weeds just as fast, or faster, than your intended crops, so don't be surprised if you leave it for a week and come back to find lots of weeds.
- **Perennial weeds**...will grow *through* mulch so use other strategies if you need to remove them. Many, like quack grass and bindweed, will need to be dug up more than once. Each small piece left behind can grow into a new plant. These type of weeds will need to be fried in the sun or placed in a airtight plastic bag to kill before you compost. Some, however, are tap rooted and pull nutrients out of the ground so drop the tops in the garden as mulch and make use of those nutrients!
- **Keep soil covered with your plants:** This will reduce the number of weeds growing and protect the soil from drying out and heating up, too.
- **Select certain weeds to grow as a groundcover:** This can reduce other weeds over the summer and act as a living mulch. A good choice for this is *Portulaca* or Purslane – which is also edible and nutritious. There should be signs of maintenance and harvesting of weed ground cover, such as Purslane.

Resources

For help, call or email the Garden Hotline: (206) 633-0224

http://www.tilthalliance.org/learn/hotline/index_html

P-Patch invasive plants guidelines:

<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/PPatch/Tips/Invasive%20Plant%20Guidelines%20Combined%207.21.17.pdf>

P-Patch Rules: <https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/PPatch/Rules.pdf>

Ray's Organic Gardening Tips 101: <https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Neighborhoods/PPatch/Organic-Gardening.pdf>