

Supporting Local Groups – Setting up a local organic group

Setting up a local organic gardening group may seem like a daunting idea, but if you start small and get the right people around to help, you could create a community of likeminded growers in no time.

The following are some of our top tips for setting up a new local group.

Define your group's catchment area

Thinking about the size of the area you would like the group to cover is an important starting point:

- Is there somewhere suitable within the area where you can hold meetings?
- How far are people willing to travel within your area? If you're based somewhere rural people tend to be used to travelling a little further than if you are in an urban area.
- Are there any other similar clubs nearby that will be competing for members, or conversely, other groups that you could be a division of – check for allotment associations, community gardens, groups in neighbouring counties etc.

How should you name the group?

Although you shouldn't need to spend too much time worrying about the name of the group, choosing words wisely can help to influence the type of people you will attract. Beginner growers or younger individuals, for example, may be put off by more technical names, such as a 'Horticultural Society'.

Make sure you include the name of the area the group will cover, so people know it's relevant to them.

What do you want the group to achieve?

Some groups are established to be a real force for change in their local community, fighting for improved green space, community growing and widespread adoption of organic methods within a local community. Others simply offer growers the chance to meet friends in the pub to talk about organic growing and bemoan the horrors of the local slug population.

Make sure you are clear from the outset what you want your group to achieve, and check back on this every so often to make sure you're still on track. Sticking to your original aims for the group is vital to ensure you stay motivated and enthusiastic.

What sort of people do you want to attract?

Once you've thought about what you want to achieve, try and define the type of people you want to work with – do you want your group to be a serious local growing institution, therefore only suitable for experienced growers, or do you want to take a more relaxed 'everyone's welcome' approach. Just a word of warning - if you do want to be more selective about who's involved, make sure you're not limiting yourself to too few people to make a thriving group.

How often should you meet?

We would suggest not being over-ambitious, at least not to begin with. Meeting every three months is a good starting point and means you can target activities/speakers to the season.

Where should you meet?

One great way to keep enthusiasm within the group is to vary where you meet – although a town or village hall is great if you have a speaker booked, why not look around for local organic gardens, farms or allotments where those involved might be able to give you a tour and some information.

Think ahead for activities and speakers for the group

One of the most common struggles for a local group is maintaining a good enough programme of activities to keep people entertained beyond the first 6 to 12 months. We would recommend always trying to have the next 6-12 months of meetings planned. If you plan your calendar from January to December, make sure you leave plenty of time to plan the following year – many of the best speakers get booked up months in advance.

We have a list of speakers that can talk on a range of subjects related to organic growing, visit www.gardenorganic.org.uk/speakers-by-region to see who's local to you. In addition, within the Educational Resources section of our website we have a number of activity sheets and games to download that may be suitable, especially if you have members with children. Visit www.gardenorganic.org.uk/schools to have a look.

Is your group family-friendly?

Welcoming young families is a great way to help secure the long-term success of your group. Make sure when you set up your meetings you don't have any barriers for families, for example:

- Avoid meeting during traditional working hours.
- Try and vary the day of the week you meet to help people with work/childcare commitments.
- Avoid meeting somewhere not suitable for children (eg pubs!)

Can you involve other local community groups or organisations?

Getting involved with existing community groups is a great way to recruit members, and ensure your group becomes a valuable team at the heart of the community. Does your local school have a growing club, for example, that willing members could help with? Could you contact a local U3A group and drum interest that way?

Establishing your committee

Although they shouldn't become too onerous, there are certain administrative and financial tasks required to set up and maintain a local group. We would recommend you consider appointing a Chair and Treasurer as a minimum, with a group Secretary if possible.

Getting your committee members right is vital to the group's ongoing success – too few people and the workload may prove too much, too many and decision-making may become challenging.

- Are they spread across a good age range?
- Will they have the energy and passion to keep the group lively and inspiring?
- Do any share seasonal commitments – eg a committee of teachers may find it difficult to support the group at busy school periods.
- Do they have the relevant skills required for their role – business acumen, good with numbers, good at chairing meetings, etc?
- Ensure you are clear about what's required of them, and the length of term they are expected to serve. Many people are put off joining a committee for fears of strenuous workloads and

unreasonable commitments when that really needn't be the case. On the other hand, you don't want to be stuck with someone unsuitable in a role for many years!

Managing the group's finances

Try to keep your running costs as low as possible from the beginning. Having a paid subscription for membership is a good way to achieve a stable income, but set it as low as possible so as not to alienate potential members, and then ask people to contribute more if they can. Membership subscriptions aren't essential – we know groups that generate all the income they need through one or two successful events a year.

Try to get as much for free as possible - think about ways you can broker deals with local venues, businesses etc. For example, you could promote a venue or company to your members, or on an event stall in return for them providing their services for free.

Make the most of Garden Organic's help

As well as advice sheets like this, we can help you in the following ways:

- We can contact Garden Organic members living in your group's catchment area to ask for people to help you set up the group, or join once it's up and running.
- We can list your group's information on our website – www.gardenorganic.org.uk/local-groups
- We can let people know you're looking for help via our Facebook and Twitter pages.
- We can recommend speakers and activities
- We can put you in contact with other group leaders so you can learn from their experience.

Once your group is up and running it's time to attract your members. For help please see our accompanying advice sheet – Attracting members to your group.