

“Don’t Pocket the Potatoes: Addressing Community Garden Theft in Richmond”



Popular Theft Prevention Methods for Community Gardens

Public Food Donation Box or a Community Bed (with signage stating that people may eat this produce):

Allows controlled access to food, deters people from stealing from gardens if they are supplied with some access. “If you can’t beat ‘em, feed ‘em” mentality. Thieves may just be hungry citizens.

Signage in Multiple Languages/Using Images:

People may not know what the plots are and may believe that they are public property. Popular sign options are: “Private Property, Neighbours Growing Food for Their Families,” “Neighbourhood Watch, Surveillance Cameras”, “Produce Picking is Theft,” “Harvesting without permission is theft,” “City of _____ Property.” Post a sign stating who grows the plants and harvests the crops and why. Include how anyone can join the garden, garden open hours (no open hours after sunset) and how produce in shared gardens is donated to food banks and people short of food.

Canvass the Neighbourhoods Spreading Knowledge about Community Gardens:

Spread knowledge about the gardens so the community understands, is engaged, and involved. When people feel a sense of ownership for and inclusion in the garden they will treat it well.

Increase Surveillance:

With cameras. Or involve nearby neighbours to help keep a watchful eye and/or during harvest season create a weekly system of gardener patrols. Try to minimize times when the gardens have no “eyes on the crops,” particularly near harvests. The more people in the garden the more active it looks to outsiders, the more chances of discovering thieves and maintaining a presence in the gardens. As part of garden membership, require all members to take one week during the growing season that they will visit and check the entire garden every day for a week. Try to have fewer times where the garden is unattended. Schedule events, coordinate visits, get volunteers to keep watch.

Fencing, and Other Border-defining Tactics:

Physically prevent thieves with obvious barriers to getting access into the gardens. Plant prickly and stinging plants on the borders of the community garden to deter access into them without

a fence such as nettles, rose bushes and other crops. Or use fencing too high to climb over and/or a padlock on the door. Minimize the number of entry and exit points into the garden. Even low-fences can act as a psychological barrier to potential thieves.

Avoid Landscaping that May Conceal Offenders:

Eliminate barriers that create hiding spaces such as tall, thick shrubs. Avoid having covered and walled outdoor areas where loitering may be a problem. Keep all canopies and gazebos open for all to see. Create a wide open space so it deters thieves by the fear of being caught.

Dust Crops with Flour:

To look like the plants are unsafe to eat: it looks like chemical pesticide. It's unappealing, and outsiders may think it's poisonous.

Avoid Leaving Ripe Crops In the Garden:

Have gardeners pick quickly so there is little to entice thieves. Create systems to help other gardeners harvest their neighbour's crops. Put in the gardener's agreement that gardeners leaving ripe produce in their beds unharvested will be contacted. If the gardener does not respond, the crops will be harvested and given to an agency serving those in need who do not have access to fresh food. Have a support network to call when you can't harvest crops yourself.

Keep the Gardens Clean and Presentable:

When it's clear that the gardeners respect the space other neighbors will be more inclined to respect it as well.

Grow Strange and/or Less Desirable Crops and/or Grow Root Vegetables:

Thieves may not realize what the crops are. Root vegetables are hidden underground and they are harder to harvest.

Gated and Locked Garden Beds (make sure hours are posted on signage):

The garden is only open to the public during certain hours.

Providing Seating Areas:

It increases bystanders sitting nearby therefore discouraging theft.

Minimize the Number of Entry and Exit Points to the Garden.

Lighting at Night.