

## **Virginia Cooperative Extension Recommended Guidelines for Community Gardening during COVID-19**

April 10, 2020

All Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) faculty, staff, and volunteers should follow directives currently outlined in Governor Northam's Executive Orders in all of their VCE work and volunteering efforts. *The Governor's Executive Orders are subject to change. Please ensure you are basing decisions on the most current version or any modified versions of the most recent Executive Order.*

All VCE faculty, staff, and volunteers should follow the directives and guidelines put into place by Virginia Cooperative Extension leadership. The Executive Leadership Team is working hard to ensure that the VCE community, and the communities we serve, stay safe during this pandemic.

All VCE faculty, staff, and volunteers should be sure that their volunteering efforts follow any directives put forth by their local government or their local agent.

Due to current circumstances, the 20 volunteer hour requirement for Extension Master Gardeners has been waived by the Extension Master Gardener State Office for calendar year 2020. Volunteer opportunities available during this time are optional and should only be done if you are comfortable doing so, are feeling well, and haven't been exposed to the virus. No VCE volunteer should feel pressured or obligated to volunteer if they are not comfortable doing so, even within what is currently allowed by Governor Northam's Executive Order. Should you choose to proceed, the guidelines listed below have been set for the protection of both our volunteers and the communities they serve.

### **Directives for specific garden locations:**

**Community gardens:** VCE faculty, staff, and volunteers are able to work in community gardens at this time. All faculty, staff, and volunteers should ensure that they are following the guidelines listed below, in addition to any directives from the Governor, VCE, and their local government, and that they have direct approval from their local VCE Unit Office to continue their volunteering efforts. Community garden work should be directed toward food security. Food grown during this time should be working to meet the needs of the community. Consider the potential volume and variety of produce anticipated from each garden. Will it genuinely meet a food access need? In other words, will the garden produce a significant amount of produce to sincerely alleviate hunger?

**School gardens:** With school closures across the Commonwealth, VCE faculty, staff, and volunteers should not work to plant or maintain gardens that are located on school owned property during this time unless the local Extension office has secured



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permission from the school district to be on school property for the express purpose of maintaining an active garden explicitly and solely for food production purposes only to address local food access/security.

**Community-based youth gardens:** Gardens located at community sites that serve youth such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, etc. can be planted and maintained with permission from the partnering organization. No programming with youth should take place inside these gardens at this time, only garden planting and maintenance explicitly by adult volunteers and faculty/staff.

**Demonstration gardens:** Working in demonstration gardens is allowed if the garden is functioning for food production and produce is donated/used in the community. No in-person adult programming should take place in these gardens at this time, only garden planting, cultivation, maintenance, and harvesting activities are permitted. As an alternative, please consider sharing online resources and learning materials with garden patrons through electronic means (online modules or videos, online publications, etc.).

**Ornamental display gardens, environmental demonstration gardens and arboreta:** Volunteering in these are not allowed at this time. All volunteering efforts should be focused on issues of food security in order to help meet the needs of our communities during this crisis. Food pantries, food banks, and other community entities who assist with food distribution will have unmet needs that gardeners can help to fill.

**Plant acquisitions and donations of plants:** As work begins in community gardens, forethought should be invested in where and how plants are acquired and handled to ensure safe handling practices are followed in every step of the acquisition process. Likewise, plants originally grown or intended for Master Gardener Plant Sales can be donated to the community. Any donation site must allow for social distancing guidelines to be met when community members go to pick up the plants. Additionally, faculty, staff, and volunteers should wash hands prior to and after handling any containers, pots, etc., and make sure to avoid touching their mouth, nose, and eyes.

COVID-19 is not a foodborne illness and it is extremely unlikely that someone will catch it through eating. However, extra care can be taken while handling plant materials and plant containers by assigning specific and separate tasks to volunteers while practicing social distancing. Individuals handling plants and containers should wash their hands before and after each activity.

## Guidelines for volunteering in gardens during [COVID-19](#) pandemic:

**Handwashing:** Wash your hands frequently. Handwashing stations with soap, disposable paper towels, and trash receptacles should be set up in community garden spaces to allow faculty, staff, and volunteers and other gardeners a place to wash their hands in the garden. Please refer to this VCE publication to learn how to properly set up a handwashing station: [Handwashing Facilities](#).

**Face coverings:** Since CDC has recommended wearing face coverings (not to be confused with face masks needed by health workers), individuals should consider



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wearing a covering for added protection. For instructions on how to make a face covering, [click here](#).

**Garden sanitization:** Sanitize high touch areas frequently, including at the start of a shift and at the end with disinfectant sprays or wipes. Such areas might include water spouts, hoses, garden gates, and other hard surfaces in the garden. It is important that high touch areas are first free of any dirt or debris before sanitizing.

**Tools:** Faculty, staff, and volunteers should bring their own tools and gloves to use in the garden and should leave with those same tools at the end of their shift. **Communal tools and sharing of personal tools should be avoided at this time.**

**Scheduling and group size:** A schedule for each local garden location should be created to help with staggering of volunteers in gardens. We highly suggest creating watering and work schedules that allow one person to water the whole garden in effort to minimize touch points between volunteers. When scheduling, limit group size to no more than 10 volunteers in the garden at one time. Family/household members are encouraged to volunteer together. Based on the size of the respective garden and the potential presence of community gardeners working in rented plots, you may need to reduce the number of volunteers present in order to maintain current social distancing recommendations.

**Social distancing:** Social distancing should be maintained at all times while in the garden. Volunteers and any others in the garden should maintain a distance of at least 6' between each other. No more than 10 individuals should be in the garden space at one time.

**Harvesting and Delivery:** While food has not been implicated in being a source of transmission for the coronavirus, it is important for individuals to follow best practices for hygiene such as handwashing and avoiding touching the face during transport and delivery of produce. Gloves may be worn while harvesting. Hands should first be washed and then gloves placed on the hands. Gloves should be discarded if tears develop. After discarding used gloves, hands should again be washed. Necessary precautions must be taken to minimize the number of touch points between volunteers, harvested produce, and transferring the produce to the appropriate distribution outlet (e.g. food bank, food pantry, direct to client). This includes packaging, containers, vehicles, surfaces, and coolers at the distribution location. Please consult food safety documents listed below for further details.



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## **Related VCE Publications:**

- [VCE COVID-19 Resources\\*](#) (*there is a fact sheet specifically for Community Garden Managers and Gardeners*)
- [Homemade Hand Sanitizer](#)
- [Steps for Garden Managers and Gardeners](#)
- [Covid-19 and Food Safety FAQ: Is Coronavirus A Food Safety Issue?](#)
- [COVID-19 FAQ for Food Banks: Receiving Food and Cleaning](#)
- [Food Safety For School and Community Gardens: A Handbook for Beginning and Veteran Garden Organizers](#)
- [Harvesting & Food Storage Safety](#)
- [Transporting Produce Safely](#)

## **Additional Community Gardening Resources:**

- [COVID-19 Guidelines & Resources for Safe Community Gardening](#)
- [Public Health Guidelines for Safe Community Gardening Best Practices for COVID-19 and other communicable diseases](#)
- [GARDENING: A Guide for Community Gardens During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Purdue University Extension)

\*Some resources on the VCE COVID-19 landing page are available in Spanish. Please look under each specific icon to locate all publications offered in Spanish.