



a URJ Biennial Initiative

A Guide to Synagogue Gardens

Why Start a Synagogue Garden?

Building & Strengthening Community

A garden can be a great way to bring in congregants and community members, create a shared space for conversation, festive meals, and worship, inspire new interfaith and community projects, and strengthen ties with your neighbors while you strengthen the earth! Synagogue members to religious school students to retired people can participate by helping out in the garden and enjoying the fruits of their labor.



At Oheb Shalom and Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, the community sukkah and produce gardens have brought together the Baltimore Jewish community around a common project and led to spin-off projects as the gardeners work together and talk about other ideas.

Social Justice in Action



*Our current food production and distribution system has many shortfalls: Millions of people currently live in 'food deserts,' shopping for groceries at convenience stores and gas stations with no access to fresh produce; heart disease, obesity, and many other health problems result from lack of access to healthy foods, especially among young people. A community garden begins to tackle these problems, giving community members access to fresh, healthy food, and lets people connect with the land and their food in new ways. A synagogue garden is also a great forum to see our Jewish agriculture values, like **Pe'ah** (leaving the corners of your field to those in need), and **Shmita** (the sabbatical year for the land) in action.*

At KAM Isaiah-Israel, social justice programs for the next three years will focus on equal access to healthy food and responsible land use. As their garden manager explains, "The production and distribution of healthy foods is an integral part of environmentally responsible land use and a greener planet."

Food & Fun!

Most community gardens offer individuals a small, personal 'rental' plot for growing produce, but it is much more efficient (and more fun!) to work together on a communal project, and the synagogue is an ideal setting for this work. Communal gardens allow for bigger crop beds, which yield more produce and better produce, and the rise of urban agriculture means that most synagogues (even those in urban settings) can take advantage of new techniques for successful urban gardening.



At KAM Isaiah-Israel, the synagogue garden has become a catalyst for social action, revitalization, and renewal, and was recently featured in the synagogue newsletter and rabbi's Yom Kippur sermon. Congregants enjoy the garden produce every Friday at Shabbat services!

Simple Steps to a Successful Synagogue Garden

With very special thanks to Robert Nevel of KAM Isaiah-Israel in Chicago, the members of Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco, and Larry Kloze of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation for sharing their stories, photographs, and words of wisdom.

Getting Started

➤ **Garden gurus:** Many successful gardens have one trained 'master gardener' to oversee their work. Find out if there is already a gardener in your congregation, or if a local university or community college offers an extension program to train gardeners. Local farms may have volunteers and interns who are willing to help out as well.



➤ **Set up smart:** Because you can never predict how your first garden season will go, start simple in your garden design and planting choices. Focus on a few crops, and don't try to build too big. Work toward costlier and more intricate features like drip irrigation, geometric garden designs, and raised beds (which can increase yields but require more investment) in later years, once you have the basics down.

➤ **Don't forget the essentials:** Make sure your garden will have plenty of access to the two core elements: sun and water. Locate your garden near either a hose or natural water source, and out of the shade of large trees.

➤ *Designer choices: Be deliberate about where and what you plant. Complex designs can be beautiful but take a lot of work. Lay out your garden design on paper first, making sure that gardeners will have access to plants, and that your maintenance staff will be able to care for the area around the garden.*

Planting the Seeds



➤ **Dish the dirt:** before you plant, do a simple soil test for major nutrients and possible contaminants. Most state university extension programs will conduct a low-cost test and give tips on what will grow well in your soil. If your soil isn't nutrient-rich you can add supplements for nutrients with soil from another source. If your lead levels are too high, consider trying raised beds.

➤ **Seeds of success:** Decide whether you will plant from seeds or start indoors and transplant into the garden later. Seeds are inexpensive but take more work to grow successfully, so think about how much time and how many volunteers you have to determine what will work best for your garden.

➤ **Grow the right stuff:** If you are planning to donate food to a soup kitchen or pantry, think about what they will be able to use. Crops like leafy vegetables and collards go well in salads and stews, or can be cooked as a simple dish. Don't forget to include food for the people working the garden too, and a few items that might inspire your food-growing partners to innovate a bit in their own cooking.

➤ *Experiment: In your first year, try many different crops to determine what will grow in your location and what you are best at producing.*

People: your most precious resource

➤ A team effort: Taking care of your garden is a great way to bring in a diverse group of congregants, both young and old (and in between). You don't have to know anything about gardening to help; you just have to be willing to get your hands dirty! Make sure you have at least 20 dedicated volunteers, and five to ten gardeners for each session.

➤ Set a schedule: Most gardens have one or two one-hour long gardening sessions each week for planting, maintenance, and harvesting (depending on the time of year). Set a regular schedule and assign volunteers for each garden session. You'll be amazed by how quickly you can get the work done when you do it together.

➤ Find new friends: Many garden volunteers are NOT congregants, but interested members of the community. Look for opportunities to work with other faith-based institutions in your community, local schools and after-school education programs, and other community groups who can learn from and enjoy your garden.



➤ Watch the weather: You can put up a rain gauge to measure your water needs, but you don't need to buy one - just use your eyes! Have volunteers sign up for an emergency 'water brigade'

that will spend extra time watering during dry weeks and take some time off when it rains!

➤ *Keep people in the loop: The master gardener at KAM II sends out a narrative and detailed summary after each garden session to keep people engaged, informed, and accountable!*

Using what you grow

➤ A healthy harvest: During harvest season (late summer and fall), collect food once or twice a week so you have regular produce to donate and/or enjoy, and so new plants have room to grow. Assign one or two people to be in charge of food distribution so everyone takes a fair share.



➤ Think Jewishly: Many synagogue gardens embrace the idea that the corners of the field should go to the less fortunate. If you are interested in donating, find a local soup kitchen or food pantry to partner with.

➤ Celebrate your success: Keep some food for your volunteers, so they can enjoy the fruits of their labor. Decide how much food you will give to *tzedekah*, how much you will give to the congregation, and how much to save for your gardeners ahead of time, so everyone gets a share.

➤ Pray with your feet AND your food: Consider displaying your weekly harvest at Shabbat services and using produce for *oneg* celebrations, so all congregants can learn about the garden, see what's in season, and get involved! Think about how you can use your garden to help celebrate Jewishly. In 2009, the *Sukkah* garden at Baltimore Hebrew Congregation grew pumpkins, squash, gourds, and ornamental corn for the synagogue *Sukkot* celebration. The congregation saved \$1,000 on produce, and next year they plan to distribute their *Sukkot* produce to other Jewish communities in Baltimore!

➤ *Close the loop: Build a truly sustainable garden system by composting the food and organic waste from your garden on-site, or giving your waste to a local farmer who can use it for soil or animal feed. The Religious Action Center started composting outside its office this year, and the staff can't wait to see the results!*

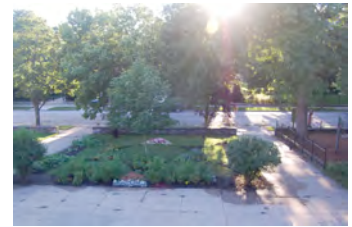
Best Practices –Innovative Ideas for Synagogue Gardens

Oheb Shalom: Temple Oheb Shalom in Baltimore won an **Irving J. Fain Social Action Award** for their successful synagogue garden in 2005. Oheb Shalom began their work by converting their synagogue courtyard into an organic produce garden where they cultivated over 2,000 pounds of vegetables! Congregants work with individuals from the local chapter of American Jewish Congress and Baltimore Hebrew Congregation to tend to the garden, with leadership from a ‘master gardener’ and the synagogue social action team. They donate most of what they grow in their garden to a local soup kitchen.



Contact: Larry Kloze (klozes@gmail.com)

K.A.M. Isaiah-Israel: Volunteers at KAM Isaiah-Israel in Hyde Park, Ill. planted their garden in the spring of 2009 and they have already grown large quantities of beans, tomatoes, salad greens, and herbs. Twice a week, groups of volunteers gather for regular ‘gardening sessions,’ with two dozen congregants working to keep the garden in shape, and compost their leftovers! The master gardener sends weekly email updates to the garden volunteers to keep everyone informed.



Contact: Robert Nevel (rnevelarch@aol.com)

Temple Israel: The Torah Garden at Temple Israel in Tallahassee, Fla. is a living, breathing illustration of Jewish values in action! Temple Israel is well on the way to building their five-section sustainable Living Torah Garden representing the five books of Moses. The garden includes fruit trees and vegetable beds in addition to an outdoor learning and meditation center. The Living Garden is designed as a place for all members of the congregation to come together to study, cultivate the land, and enjoy the natural environment in a sustainable setting.



Contact: June Wiaz (<http://www.templeisraelth.org/>)

Congregation Emanuel: The *Pe’ah* Garden at Congregation Emanuel in San Francisco grows food for the San Francisco Food Bank, honoring our commandment to leave the corners (*Pe’ah*) of our harvest to the poor and the stranger. Since 1995, congregants and local community members volunteer to take ‘days on’ at the garden every Sunday. The garden brings the Emanuel community together around taking care of the earth and helping those living in poverty, and enjoying Sundays in the sun!



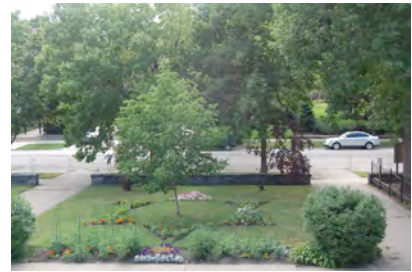
Contact: Sandy Rechtschaffen (srechtschaffen@emanuelsf.org)

KAM Isaiah Israel Garden - A Story in Pictures



Spring 2009: Garden Layout and First Planting
Garden Location: KAM Isaiah Israel, Hyde Park, Illinois
Site Description: 1741 sq. ft., previously lawn, roughly square, with southern exposure

July 2009: The Garden in Bloom
Garden Type: Vegetables, herbs, flowers
Garden Size: 925 sq. ft.
Garden Design: Formal design (designed by an architect/member) with a geometric pattern composed of vegetables, herbs and flowers
Support Structure: One small, existing shed for tool storage 350' from the garden



Water Access: Existing hose bib 65' from garden

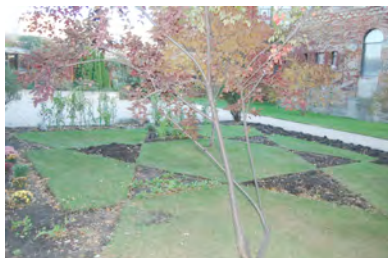
August 2009: Weekly Harvest (30 lbs of heirloom tomatoes!)



Planting List: Tomatoes, green beans, gourds, herbs, lettuces, eggplants, onions, peppers, rhubarb, beets, turnips, radishes, pickles, pumpkins, squash (plants were started both from seedlings and seeds, with a majority from seeds)
Gardening Sessions: Thursday evenings and Sunday afternoons, with watering in between as needed
Communication: From the garden coordinator to all KAMII gardeners a twice weekly email update, following each garden session

Late Summer 2009: Watering the Garden

Materials/Services Purchased: Soil test, plant stakes, compost bins, flowers, seedlings, seeds, compost
Gardeners: KAMII member volunteers (about 24, of which about 10 - 12 are regulars) supported by and part of the KAMII Social Justice Committee



Fall 2009:
After its first successful season, the KAM II garden is ready for Chicago winter!