

The Two Block Diet -- An Unmanual

Where do you start when you decide to grow as much of your own food as possible? What if you don't have the faintest idea what's possible, and the only thing you've grown are weeds?

Make your own checklist. Here is ours as a jumping off point.

1. Clarify what matters

Have a brainstorming session by yourself about your personal purpose and vision. It helps if you get clear about why you're starting something and the values you're absolutely firm on. For example, if you're strictly opposed to using chemical fertilizers, make sure you're up front about this. Use whatever medium you're the most comfortable with. You could make a simple list, do a mind map, make a collage or painting.

2. Find a buddy

Think of people you know who live within walking distance that might be interested in joining with you. If you don't know anyone within walking distance, that's OK too. In that case, skip to step 4.

3. Have a conversation

Connect with your 1-3 buddies. Two to three people is a great number to work with. If they like your ideas so far, invite them to help you start a food-growing group for your street(s). We recommend a small block radius.

4. Invite others to participate

A great way to do this is to create a simple flyer that introduces the idea/purpose (Helping each other grow more food) and invites people to come to a meeting. It doesn't have to be fancy. Be genuine and keep it short and simple. Say who you are, what you want to do, and specify a meeting time and place (someone's home). Include a graphic if you can. Then distribute the flyer door to door in 1-2 blocks, or more if that's what will work better in your circumstances. Alternatively, you could spend some time out and about and just wave at the people with gardens, strike up a conversation and wham! Give them a flyer.

5. Prepare for the first meeting

Work with your buddy or buddies to develop a plan for a simple meeting. Put in paper, and have a copy for you and for your buddy/ies. Key elements

can be: (1) Welcome and Introductions, (2) Story of how your group got started, and your purpose and core ideas so far (e.g. organic, geographic scope, ...), (3) Go around where people share what brought them to the meeting. (4) What resources (Land, skills, tools, fruit trees, experience) people can offer (this gets people excited.) (5) Is this kind of group of interest to people? Other ideas to shape what we want to create. (6) Next Steps. (7) Time and place of next meeting.

The Two Block Diet's first meeting included a speaker who shared about being an urban farmer. This part was at the end of the meeting, as the most important part was for people to meet each other and honour our own gifts and passions. If it's helpful, one of the Two Block Diet members would be happy to come to your meeting. Just email us! -- kate@katersutherland.com. Or, if you know a gardener or farmer who would do it, great! Just remember, this project is all about cooperative leadership. It's not meant for one person to do all the teaching and everyone else to listen. Everyone has a valuable skill to contribute.

6. Have your first meeting

It's great if you share the leadership role in the first meeting with one or both of your buddies. That way, right from the beginning, you are modeling shared leadership -- a powerful way to engage people and to create a strong group. gather names and contact info. Have someone take notes on the meeting.

7. And beyond

After the first meeting, our group took on a life of it's own. We don't know what will happen in other groups. In case they are helpful, here are a few ideas:

- Meet at a time that is the most convenient for the majority. (Sunday afternoon works best for us.)
- Start on time and end on time. People are generally more comfortable committing to share their time if it is respected.
- Meet once every two weeks in the off season (winter) and start taking action as soon as you can. People can easily get "meeting burnout".
- Take notes at the meeting and email them to everyone or post them on a website or blog.
- If people commit to actions at a meeting ("I'll call my friend so and so to see if she'll donate some manure. . .") make sure to follow up. It

helps facilitate consistency and respect. We often start our meetings with a check-in from each person to report on what they've done since the last meeting.

- See if you can recruit an experienced gardener. It is great if you have someone who can share knowledge, or talk down a panicked tomato lover who has discovered a spot.
- Once we had settled on a time and day that worked well for everyone, we decided to get cracking on work parties. The idea is that each week we go to one person's garden to tackle a large project that would take a single person at least a day or two to do themselves. The results have been quite dramatic, visually and emotionally. We have all learned to value the experience of giving, but most importantly, we all take a turn on the receiving end, which helps immensely when it comes to seeing ourselves as valuable people within our community.
- To date we have built a greenhouse, planted many greens, raised an army of tomato seedling from seed, built an herb wall, cleared an astounding pile of tree branches, applied for a small neighbourhood grant for a cooperative composting bin, among countless other benefits from working side by side with neighbours and getting to know the people who share your street.
- Each person decides their level of participation. Some people dig, some advise, some take notes, some do research. People come to the work parties if they can, without commitment or pressure.
- One or two people can be in charge of organizing the work parties. It helps to compose an email with details about the upcoming party with details about what to bring, and what will be accomplished.
- It's also important for the person receiving the party to have a clear idea about what they want to get done.
- Another important facet of the model has been the sharing of resources in order to minimize costs. We share tools, organize large purchases of seeds, compost, and rentals together to lower fees.
- Have fun events to break up the year and announce them around your neighbourhood. We have an annual block party. You could

also have a spring festival or harvest fest, even if it is just those three tomatoes that survived.

- Never underestimate the power of craigslist. It is your friend. The free section?! Amazing!
- Check in with yourself and your group to make sure you're still operating according to your values. If someone is feeling put upon or unhappy, it is important to create opportunities for this to be expressed in a constructive way. Unspoken tension can erode the integrity of your team of gardeners. If your goal is to grow food, then a work party to wash someone's garage is inappropriate unless everyone agrees to that type of flexibility.
- We operate under the idea that we already have everything we need right here. Your neighbourhood is full of free resources like leaves, compost, sticks, boards, bricks, pipes, cardboard, boxes, abandoned shelves, and amazing things that can be converted into planters.
- A big part of this project for some of us is helping other neighbourhoods to start and maintain projects like these because we've all been blown away by how simple, effective, and fulfilling this has been. We can't imagine going back to the way things were before our mini garden revolution. Funny that talking to your neighbours has become an act of rebellion. So, if you want help organizing something like this in your neighbourhood, just ask.

That has been a big lesson for many of us: sometimes all you have to do is get up the courage to ask. Just be prepared for people to say yes!

Final note from Julia

I really must stress that while we have learned a few very important ways to successfully share a project like this among a number of households and a wide variety of personalities, each neighbourhood is different, and only you'll know if things are going to work in your area. If you feel excited and energized when you sit down to write an email to your group, you know it's going well. But if you feel drained and anxious. . . change something.

Our Blog: <http://twoblockdiet.blogspot.com/>