



You've worked hard all season, and now your tomatoes are ripe and ready to harvest. Then overnight, your veggies disappear. It's discouraging. At best, a hungry soul benefited from the food and it didn't go to waste. At worst, your garden has been trashed by vandals. Dealing with such incidents is a heartbreaking - but not uncommon - part of community gardening. Long term, the best strategy is to build a public understanding of community garden boundaries and develop friendships with the surrounding neighborhood. However, this takes time, and even in the best-case, mischief still happens. In the short term, the most successful gardeners expect theft to occur and plan accordingly.¹

Individual Action Steps

The following are things that you can do right now, to help reduce theft and vandalism:

- Grow unusual varieties (eg. green tomatoes) that are less enticing to thieves, especially next to main pathways. Plant your more precious crops in less accessible areas of your plot.
- Avoid planting "trophy" crops such as melons that produce only a few fruits but take a lot of space. Focus instead on crops that produce a lot of abundance.
- Grow your plot intensively, and don't leave any unutilized bare soil. For example, if you are planting two rows of tomatoes, interplant rows of lettuce and carrots between the tomatoes. Also, succession plant an early spring crop of peas/favas, root vegetables, and greens (when theft is less rampant) with a summer crop, and then a fall crop, to get the full benefits of the seasons.
- Grow more than you need, and regularly check the Incident Report Log in the shed to share with gardeners who have lost produce - or put your extra produce in the garden's donation basket.
- Hang out in the garden! Your presence is the best deterrent. Harvest twice per week in the fall.
- Dust plants with flour. Thieves may avoid veggies covered in a mysterious dust.
- Pull weeds along fence-lines and garden entrance. A tidy garden invites less vandalism.
- Introduce yourself to visitors and let them know how they can rent their own garden plot.
- When you feel safe to do so, approach people taking produce and inform them of garden rules and ask them to leave the produce. Do not hesitate to collect evidence, such as photographing their license plate, and report the incident to the police. Write all incidents on the Report Log.

Collective Action Steps

The following are things your garden can do as a group to mitigate the impacts of theft:

- Plant veggies in a You-Pick-It Fence area outside of the garden for the public to pick freely.
- Establish "trap plots" inside the garden entrance that are maintained by a team as sacrificial plots, but that also can supply community gardeners who have had produce stolen.
- Implement a "garden watch" schedule to keep an ongoing presence in the garden.
- Distribute flyers about the garden or deliver produce to neighbors, asking them to help keep watch over the garden, especially at night when no one should be in the garden.
- Host a public event or invite local community organizations to work on a volunteer project.

¹ This handout is adapted from the American Community Gardening Association's resource, "What to Do When the Worst Happens," *Community Greening Review*, 1999.

