



## **Fenway Garden Society**

**P.O. Box 230038, Astor Station, Boston, MA 02123-0038**

### **NEW GARDENER SURVIVAL GUIDE**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the Fenway Garden Society (FGS) and gardening in The Back Bay Fens. Below you'll find a brief community garden primer that will tell you a lot about gardening in The Back Bay Fens. This guide has 2 sections - 1) Guidelines and Regulations, and 2) Gardening itself – each of which has subsections. You should familiarize yourself with both as, in combination, they tell you a lot about what is involved.

Please note that the Survival Guide does not supplant “Guidelines and Regulations” and “Questions and Answers”, two other documents you should be familiar with. Finally, please be assured that the FGS Board and many of your fellow gardeners stand ready to answer your questions and give you tips; don't hesitate to ask. A good place to start is with the 2008 VP of the Park, Joe Axelrod (contact information below).

Finally, one thing you should take away from reading this Guide is that gardening in The Back Bay Fens is a commitment. While the membership fee is nominal – currently only \$30/year – there can be significant cost involved in initially equipping your garden (securing the perimeter with fencing, raising the level of the garden, acquiring tools, plants, and chemicals, etc.) Moreover, there can be more costs in on-going garden maintenance (taking care of issues raised about your plot as the result of inspections, etc.). Finally, there can be a significant time commitment for weeding and watering, park clean up, and committees assignments. Do not take a plot without carefully considering the cost and time involved.

#### **GUIDELINES AND REGULATIONS**

A fundamental thing to understand about gardening successfully in The Back Bay Fens - what we gardeners are allowed to do is a compromise between Olmstead's park vision, security requirements as laid out by Boston Police Department personnel, the safety and enjoyment of park visitors, and the needs of the FGS community. Note that “compromise” means we didn't get everything we wanted, and won't.

A brief note on each element of the compromise:

- Olmstead's park vision. Fredrick Law Olmstead laid out The Back Bay Fens incorporating a number of elements such as tree and bush types and locations. Some regulations like the "5 foot height" guideline and the "colored furniture ban" have

been put in place to preserve the original "landscape architecture" of the park as designed by Olmstead for the Emerald Necklace series of city parks. Many constituencies are committed to maintaining and restoring where necessary Olmstead's vision.

If your new plot has such non-conforming trees or bushes, please "top" them such that they aren't taller than 5'. If you cannot do that yourself, call the VP of the Park for help. If you were going to bring in and plant trees and shrubs, please make sure they are easily kept to the 5' maximum. There are many dwarf varieties available which can be a wise choice.

- Security requirements. Gardening in an urban environment has its challenges. To protect ourselves, police, park rangers and FGS personnel need to be able to see through the gardens. Hence, creating concealed areas in your garden via the use of evergreens and other plants is prohibited.

You can plant vines, shrubs, etc. on your boundaries as well as in your garden but they must be trimmed and managed in such a manner that sight lines are available into and through your plot. As described in more detail below, we are all required to maintain effective perimeter fencing around our plots, and to have a locking gate which is kept locked.

- Safety and enjoyment of park visitors. The Back Bay Fens is a public park "owned" by the citizens of Boston and Massachusetts. FGS gardeners do not enjoy tenant type rights to the plots. We should not do anything which makes visitors feel unwelcome or puts their safety at risk. Hence, some of our Guidelines and Regulations set out and prohibit unsafe practices e.g., barbed wire or the sharp end of nails or screws sticking up from fences.
- Gardeners. To keep The Back Bay Fens a good place to garden requires cooperative effort particularly given our close proximity to each other and FGS' small operating budget. Hence, there are many Guidelines and Regulations around our behavior towards each other, and a premium put on our contributing to our FGS community. Be familiar with and abide by our Guidelines and Regulations, and participate in volunteer activities.

FENWAY GARDEN SOCIETY. A fundamental thing to understand about FGS is part of our mission is to ensure that gardening in The Back Bay Fens - in the form it currently takes - continues long into the years ahead. Towards this end, one thing we cannot allow: a gardener or group of gardeners doing something that erodes the City Administration and public support.

Failing to police ourselves in accordance with the agreed upon Guidelines and Regulations will ultimately cause sufficient irritation and concern that could cause a major change in the way we garden if not outright elimination. Hence, FGS' penalty for non-compliance is swift and severe i.e., revocation. A final note: be nice to the people

whose jobs bring them into The Back Bay Fens including police, park rangers, tree surgeons, trash pick up, grass mowers, etc. as well as visitors to the park. It is in all our interest that these people feel appropriately welcome and appreciated.

GARDEN ASSIGNMENT, USE AND REVOCATION. The guiding principle around FGS' assignment, renewal and revocation of gardens is the plot must be: 1) actively used, 2) in compliance with the Guidelines and Regulations, and 3) the gardeners contribute to FGS' community. Plots that are not actively used or are out of compliance will be taken away ("revoked") and reassigned quickly. There is a well-established system which evaluates gardens' use and compliance including frequent inspections. The Guidelines and Regulations set out the process in detail. There is no reimbursement for anything you lose in the process.

One of the natural things new gardeners do is turn to their neighbors for advice and many neighbors are happy to help. FGS encourages this but with a caveat: the Guidelines and Regulations is the controlling document when it comes to what is allowed and prohibited, not what your neighbor says or what you might observe.

GOVERNANCE IN GENERAL. FGS is self-managed by volunteers. Every year the members elect a President, SVP Administration, VP of the Park, VP of Communications and VP/Treasurer. For 2008 those folks are Tim Horn, Victoria Stock, Richard Rogers, Joe Axelrod and Skip Naumnik. Additionally, there is a committee structure and Section/Area managers which are used to varying degree depending on the availability of volunteers and propensity of the Board. Your day-to-day point of contact, if needed, is VP of the Park, Joe Axelrod, accessible by visiting him on his garden at X35, W12-13, calling him at 617-437-8488 or emailing him at [rackliffe1@earthlink.net](mailto:rackliffe1@earthlink.net).

DEALING WITH EACH OTHER. Try to resolve conflict among yourselves first before involving FGS. There are many ways gardeners can irritate each other including failing to secure gardens, creating a mess, blocking light, partying hardy, planting invasive species, etc. Make a best effort to resolve these differences among yourselves before involving FGS. Once you involve FGS, the resolution might not be to the liking of any of the people in conflict. In all interactions, treat the various constituencies politely. Swearing, attacking, yelling, etc. are inappropriate and won't be tolerated.

SOCIETY. The gardeners of the Fenway Garden Society choose their preferred "sociability involvement." It is possible to create a very involving social life via the gardens, or to come and pretty much stay to yourself. It's your choice but remember, we are a community that requires some minimum level of volunteerism.

We are required to maintain the park on a "volunteer" basis. We put volunteer in quotes because the work MUST get done and it's a REQUIREMENT that all of us involve ourselves (except people over 65 – but your help is welcome and encouraged, too). Be sure to put wood chips on adjacent garden paths before the rainy seasons. Winter, when the paths are frozen, is a good time to put down woodchips if there isn't snow cover. Attend garden cleanup days to keep the park looking its best! Garden cleanup days are

the best way to meet your fellow gardeners, and to exchange gardening tips or learn new techniques.

## **GARDENING ITSELF**

FENCES AND GATES. It may seem odd starting a section titled “Gardening Itself” with a discussion of fences and gates but establishing a secure perimeter is job #1. You must have an effective perimeter fence and lockable front gate that is somewhere between 4’ to 5’ high (5’ is the current maximum). Not only does this protect your garden but also your neighbors as trespassers often violate neighboring gardens once they’ve breached one garden. Smart gardeners tackle the fence and gate first not only for security but because it’s something FGS looks for as a concrete sign of early progress.

Some straight talk about improving or building fences and gates: don’t use the readily available, easy to use green metal stakes that just pound into the ground unless you have a solid, deeply planted post at both ends with cable between the two through the top of your fence. Otherwise trespassers can and do just push the metal-stake only fencing down.

The best Fens fence builders understand that the restrictions on things like chain link and barbed wire fences (check the Guidelines and Regulations, please) make wood the best building material. Many new gardeners, when they realize there is a fence building component to garden survival in The Back Bay Fens, are at a loss as they haven’t the tools, materials, and/or expertise to build/strengthen fencing. Know that this non-optional; you must have a secure perimeter.

How some others have handled it:

- Buy a metal gate/post assembly, a roll of green vinyl coated metal and new lumber from one of the home improvement centers, and transport and build it yourself. (The issues here are cost, transportation and skills.)
- Scavenge around the vicinity of the trash cans for used materials which have been thrown away and improvise. (The issues here are the stuff you’re using is trash thrown away by someone else probably because it had reached the end of its useful life and sometimes it results in truly unsightly end results inappropriate for an Olmstead park!)
- Get someone else to help you. (VP of the Park Joe Axelrod and President Tim Horn have been known to build fences; Joe even has a vehicle which can transport the necessary materials if you want to take him shopping. Know, however, that building gates and fences are completely voluntary for Joe and Tim so if you should succeed in talking one or both of them into helping, you will owe them big-time and probably find yourself working off your debt helping FGS. Further know that some people have hired professional fence builders which can result in something quite beautiful and effective but, of course, is costly.)



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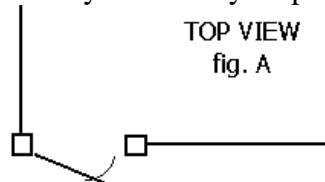
Most of the best fences one finds in The Back Bay Fens are simple wooden posts connected by “rails” boards at the top and bottom of the posts connecting one post to another plus wire to keep people from crawling in between the posts and rails. Posts are generally 4” x 4” and rails 2” x 4”. Posts should not be more than 8’ apart. A hard part: sinking the post ends 2’-3’ into the earth solidly.

The key to a strong fence lies in bracing the corners. If the corner posts are really solid i.e., cannot be rocked in the fence can be sturdily attached everything tight. It’s the nature unstable – they’re really just a ground. Push at the top and transmitted to where the post is relatively easy to push the post over. Attaching one post to another via rails and using cross bracing in the corner eliminates this weakness.



earth the rest of the to the corners keeping of posts that make them long lever stuck in the multiplied force is in the earth making it

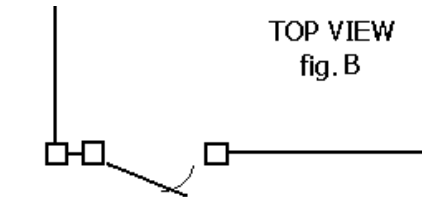
The gate is perhaps the most important part of the job, simply because it becomes the focal point. You will use the gate often and since it is a moving part, as with most moving parts, it is more prone to failure. The failure is usually caused by improperly set posts, sagging in the gate frame itself or pulling loose of the hinge hardware that causes sagging.



The weight of the gate will pull the post over

To avoid failure of the gate due to improperly installed gate posts, the first step is to avoid bad positioning of the gate. Figure A shows

bad positioning. Wood gates tend to be very heavy and the constant weight applied to the post will cause the post to lean very quickly. Adding a ton of concrete to the post will do little to avoid this. Hinge a gate from a post that has at least one more post inline to help support the weight as in Figure B.



Two posts support the weight much better

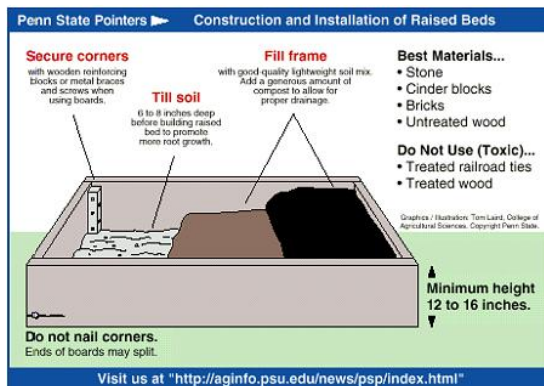
Finally, you should expect and plan for on-going fence and gate maintenance just like your plants will require on-going care. Anything outside will decay over time and there are people trying to get into the gardens who help the process along. It’s a bummer when someone knocks your fence down but you are responsible for immediately fixing it and

upgrading it if necessary. (If someone has succeeded in breaching your perimeter, do not expect that by merely re-erecting what was initially there will be effective – upgrade it!)

**EARLY WINS.** One of the things that FGS will be looking for is whether a new gardener makes early and significant progress towards preparing and planting the plot including securing the perimeter. Do not fall into the trap of trying to take everything on at once such that no planting and tending occurs for a long period! While learning about and planning your garden, some easily maintained plantings can keep the garden looking good from the start with little effort. For example:

- Annuals such as impatiens which can be planted in shady areas, and petunias which like for sun, provide color all summer.
- Lawns can be started from sod in one day, and removed when more space is needed.
- Pachysandra is a great ground cover for sunny or shady empty spaces, and will fill gaps under trees.
- Sunflowers in FULL SUN will look magnificent while requiring little care.
- Bulbs like daffodil, crocus, tulips, and iris can be planted in the fall for instant spring color!
- Herbs like chives, sage, thyme, marjoram, and Russian sage will produce all year long, and are perennial.
- Cabbages and chrysanthemums bloom from the end of summer until the freeze.

**FLOODING.** Off the Main Path the plots flood when the water table is high because we are not very much elevated relative to the Muddy River. Many plants will not thrive with their roots submerged so the tendency may be to wait until the drier days of June before doing much. Don't wait! There are a number of proven ways to deal with flooding including:



- Build raised beds. Faced with the numbers above, many new gardeners opt to raise only a specific areas of the plot – a technique named “raised beds – which can be a lot more manageable from the standpoint of soil requirements. A raised bed is nothing more than a perimeter created by wood planks, stones, bricks, etc. filled with soil. Think sandbox. One can even skip the perimeter and just make a pile of soil. More about soil later.

- Use water tolerant plants. Some plants like “wet feet” (water emerged roots). Obviously, a water lily thrives in permanent wet like a pond. Irises, Lilies, etc. tolerate occasional wet feet.
- Raise the surface of your plot. This can involve the entire surface of your plot, a very ambitious undertaking requiring a lot of soil. Most



plots are approximately 16' x 25'. To raise a surface that large just 1' requires 400 cubic feet of dirt (16' x 25' x 1'). For perspective, a single cubic foot of dirt comes from a home improvement center in a bag weighing 50 pounds and costing \$3.50-7.50. Take that times 400 and we're talking 10 tons and up to \$3,000!!!

Whichever way you choose to go, if you are getting your plot early in the year, ask your neighbors or VP of the Park the extent to which your plot floods and will need to be raised. It is frustrating and expensive for a new gardener to work hard in April planting beautiful roses which hate wet feet only to see them murdered in a May flood.

WATER. The city generously provides us water. We are responsible for maintaining the water distribution system that brings the water from the city's main down our paths from where we can bring it into our gardens. There are water faucets every 4 gardens or so. At this point the path water distribution system is somewhat cranky and requires constant repair. Should you come to your garden and open the water faucet nearest your garden and find no water, possibly the water to your path has been temporarily turned off for repair. The faucets for each path are generally at the path's head i.e., where the row's #1 garden is. If the leak is in one of the bigger feeder lines, water to all the gardens or section of gardens may be off. We are generally able to effect repair in a day or two but like everything else at FGS, this is done by volunteers.

Some do's and don'ts about water.

- If you spot a leak please turn off the valve at the head of the path that the leak occurs on and notify the VP of the Park. There have been instances where leaks have been allowed to run for days which sends up an alert about wasting water when the city reviews its monthly water bills.
- Do not permanently attach a hose to the water valve for your garden – others have to use the valve, and a leak inside someone's garden is hard for FGS plumbing repair volunteers to get to.
- Be sensitive to the city's water cost. If you build a water feature in your garden, do not “run it” non-stop when you're at the garden, or overnight.
- Be careful with pitchforks and other sharp objects in the paths; our plumbing is rubber hose and is easily punctured.

SOIL (aka DIRT). Soil is critical throughout the Victory Gardens and particularly so for the many of us with low lying plots that may flood. There are a number of ways to get and even create soil in addition to buying it bagged at the local home improvement center or plant nursery. (By the way, the 2 closest home improvement centers are Home Depots – South Bay and Arsenal – and the closest nursery selling bagged goods is Mahoney's, 449 Western Ave, Brighton, MA.) Here are some of the other ways to get soil:

- Sift it from our compost piles into a wheelbarrow.
- Make a pond in your plot using the excavated dirt to raise some other portion of your plot.

- Dig a pit and fill the space with wood chips putting the dirt back in on top of the wood chips. (Wood chips are often available for free at the end of the asphalt road through the Victory Garden's center green.)
- Pay for a landscaper or retailer to deliver a truck load of soil (comes in cubic yards) to a spot near your garden where you can move it to by wheelbarrow.
- Stay alert to the one-time delivery of soil that FGS tries to arrange every year in the Spring – each gardener is entitled to 2 wheelbarrow loads.

Note that you are allowed to bring a vehicle into the park to unload supplies and/or transport people with mobility problems but are not allowed to leave the vehicle in the park for more than 20 minutes. Use your commonsense – if the ground is saturated e.g., by Spring rains, bringing a vehicle in is going to cause significant damage to the grounds.

SITE PREPARATION. Depending on what condition the plot was left in last growing season and/or how late in the current season it is when you get your plot, it may be quite overgrown and generally in bad condition. Like a farmer plows a field before planting it you need to do something similar – pull out the weeds and compost them.



Sometimes it is hard to know what is a weed versus a spectacular planting. Your neighbors might be able to help here or take a walk around the gardens, identify a beautiful one and ask the gardener to help you for a minute. That said, when in doubt, pull it out. When the garden is cleared it is an excellent time to think about what you're planning to do with the plot as far as broad outlines go.

TOOLS. After you've secured your perimeter including lock and chain, new gardeners need at least: Shovel, Rake, Trowel, Hose, Watering Can, and Garden Shears/Clippers. Other useful tools include gloves (good to protect yourself from sharp objects that might be lurking in the dirt and to prevent blisters when shoveling), stakes and twine for supporting taller plants, saw (remember that 5' maximum height!), appropriately colored chairs, etc. etc. Having this equipment out in a public park begs the need for an appropriately colored box to lock it in – you should consider getting one very early on as things that are not locked get stolen.

FGS provides some tools, primarily wheel barrows. You can find them at the wheel barrow terminal at V1. What you need to know about wheel barrows are: 1) there are 3 load levels – light (e.g., leaves), medium (e.g., plants with dirt on their roots) and heavy-duty (e.g., soil) – and 2) wheel barrows should never be locked in your garden overnight; return them to the wheel barrow terminal. Please put broken wheel barrows into the right hand back corner of the terminal so we know there is a problem and can fix it.

PLANTS. Like with fencing and gates, there are a range of options from Mahoney's, a high quality purveyor of bushes, trees, flowers, etc. to getting plants for free by using FGS' nursery located at V13. (FGS' nursery comes from gardeners who are dividing healthy plants that are over growing their bounds, or switching out old healthy plants for new ones.)

Whatever option your inclination and pocket book defines, you must avoid invasive species and plants that will, by nature, exceed height and sight line Rules, and become easily uncontrollable. We recommend against cultivation of plants on this list:

- Purple Loostrife - Tall summer blooming plant with multi flower purple spikes.
- Agrapodia - Low ground cover with 3 lobed leaves and white canopy flower.
- White spreading rose - Annual blooming rose with small white stinky flowers.
- Morning Glories - Climbing vine with multi colored trumpet shaped flowers.



CHEMICALS. While garden chemicals are not forbidden, many gardeners are sensitive to their usage. Alternative natural fertilizers such as Neptune's Harvest or seaweed fertilizers are available, and natural pesticides such as Neem Oil, soapy water, and chrysanthemum can be used for undesirable insect infestations. Also, vinegar is an effective weed killer on a sunny day. Please think very carefully about using chemical rodent killers. We are lucky to have a number of red tailed hawks nesting in the park, killing and eating the rodents. Poisoning the rodents can result in the hawks being poisoned as well.

PROHIBITED MATERIALS. Given the Olmstead and security objectives, there are a number of materials which you cannot use in your gardens. See "Guidelines and Regulations" for details, most of which require no explanation.

However, a couple that do include:

- Chicken wire – This mesh fencing material made of thin, flexible galvanized wire with hexagonal gaps is not allowed in the park.
- White furniture – A lot of plastic porch furniture is white, a color prohibited in our Olmstead-designed park (see Regulations and Guidelines for permitted colors). Some gardeners try to get around this problem by spray painting their white plastic furniture green or some other acceptable color. Unless the plastic has been properly primed before painting this won't work.



PATHS. You are responsible for the path adjacent to your plot. What this means is you should pull weeds, pick up trash and put wood chips on it. Smart gardeners coordinate with their neighbors to make sure the whole path gets taken care of, particularly "chipped."

The reason for chipping is to prevent the path from turning into a mud pit when it rains. Muddy paths quickly become impossible to push a wheel barrow down or even to walk on unless you temporarily put boards down. A good time to control the inevitable Spring mud season is to put extra chips down in the Fall. A word to the wise, get rubber gloves and/or a “grabber” (used in grocery stores to get items down from high shelves) because some of the trash you need to pick up is unsanitary.

TRASH. The Parks Department kindly helps us by picking up our trash which is a huge benefit. There are barrels around the perimeter of the Victory Gardens and along the main paths. You can throw anything into the cans that is garden related, cannot be composted and is not too big.

Large items like unwanted wooden posts, old fencing, etc. should be neatly placed by the barrels along the Main Path (the garbage guys have an easier time along these larger paths than along the Muddy River path). Do not put household refuse into these cans. Do not put in dangerous items (batteries, chemicals, etc.) either – you must recycle this stuff at the appropriate city facilities.

SECURITY. You’re in a public park – use commonsense. Do not linger into dusk (the park officially closes at dusk.) Stay away from hidden areas e.g. the phragmites (reed looking plants) growing along the Muddy River. If you see criminal activity call the police on 911 (there is an emergency phone in the area of the park near the flag pole plus carrying a cell phone makes sense). While some people think the police may take too long to show up, making a report is important as police assets are deployed based on police administrators’ understanding of where trouble spots are through reports on criminal activity.