

DRAFT last updated April 4, 2023

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# Cultivating the Relationship-Driven Library: A Toolkit

## Why this toolkit?

You've heard the adage "Teamwork makes the dream work," but what does that actually mean, and how do we apply this principal to our work in libraries?

This toolkit addresses this question! As part of [a federally-funded project](#), for a year and a half we interviewed 129 individuals in 18 communities across America (25 library directors/managers, 44 front-line library workers, and 60 library partners ) to learn more how teamwork makes *their* dreams work. Our interviews focused on the dream of community health: Communities where everyone has access to opportunities to be physically active, eat well, and be healthy.

Why is gardening a useful way to think about this work? There are lots ways of thinking about community collaboration and partnerships. We chose to focus on gardening because we think the process of growing plants has a lot to teach us about the work we do with and in communities. In the garden, nothing is guaranteed. In the garden, plans are not synonymous with outcomes. In the garden, we tailor what we do to the environment. In the garden, some things are perennials, others are annuals; that is some things come back every year and others have to be planted again each year. And yet despite all this uncertainty, we can't wait to get back into the dirt each Spring. All of these statements are also true about the work of cultivating the relationship-driven library.

We'd love your feedback! Email feedback to Noah Lenstra at [lenstra@uncg.edu](mailto:lenstra@uncg.edu)

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# Toolkit Introduction: Prepping the Soil

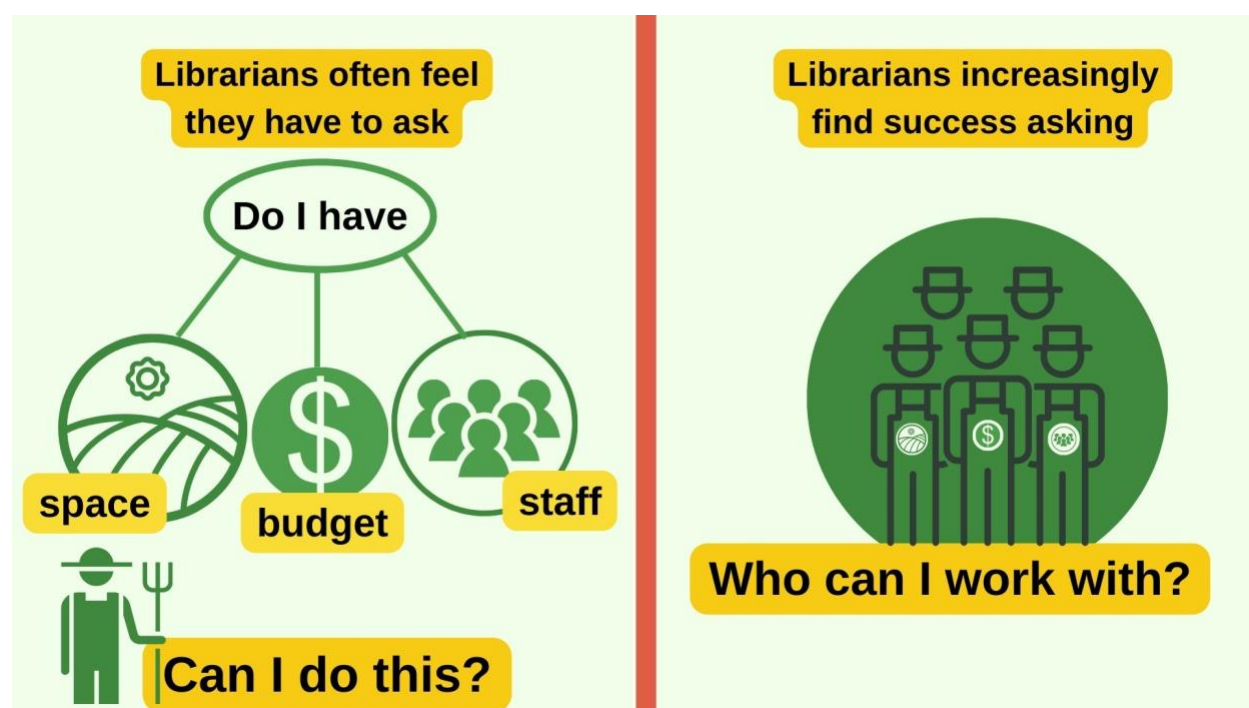
Why should you be a gardener of community relationships and partnerships? You may be saying “I have enough on my plate just keeping the lights on and the doors open.”

This page introduces the “why” behind this work.

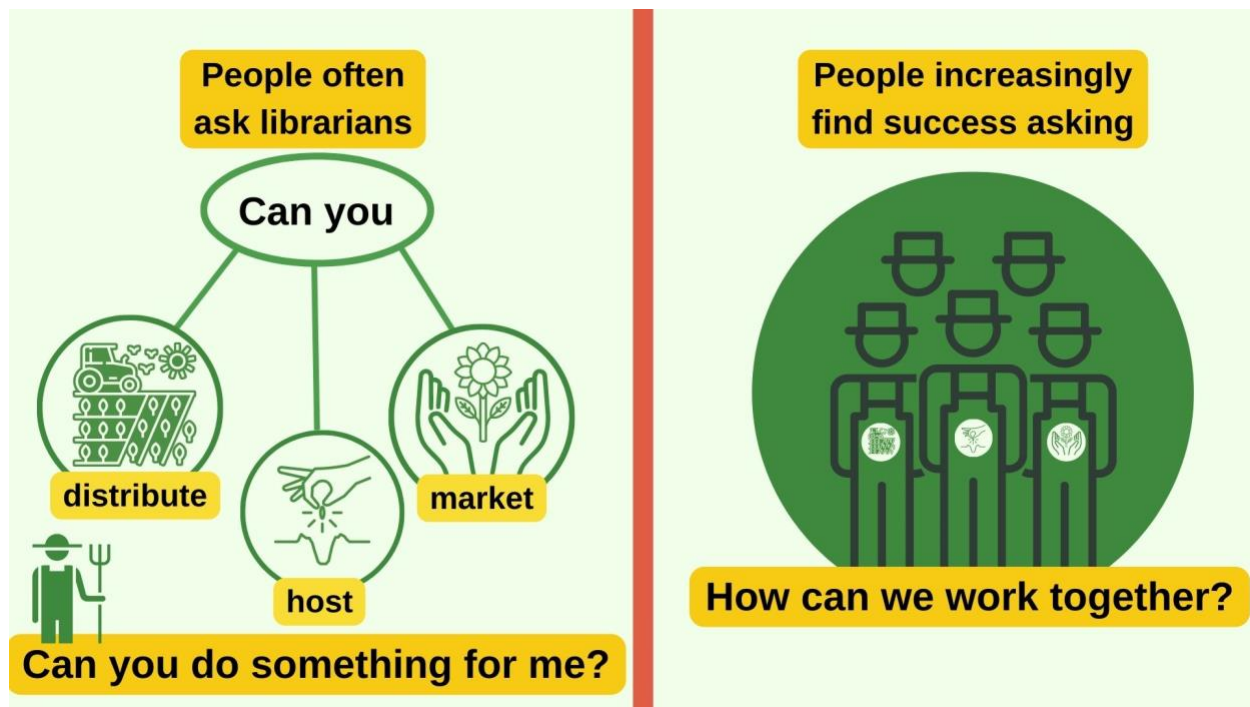
To get this work going you **need** to convince administrators, funders, and possibly even yourself that it is worth the time to do this work. That the bounty you’ll cultivate is worth the investment.

The most important work associated with prepping this soil is to get ready to talk about the importance of this work.

We have developed the following two images to illustrate what librarians often feel like they have to ask themselves before launching a new initiative, and also what partners often ask of librarians when they ask librarians for help.



We believe that changing the conversation around these topics is critical to preparing the soil for the relationship-driven library.



Given that public library workers so often feel they have to develop new initiatives by themselves, and so often are asked by external organizations to do something for them, we think it is **critical** to take time to celebrate and make visible the work that library workers do. We also think it is **critical** to take time to rest, reflect, and plan.

This is what gardeners and farmers do. Just as we know it is critically important to allow the soil to rest between growing seasons, so too we know it is critical to allow ourselves to rest in between innovation cycles.

Step 4 of our toolkit focuses on this part of the growing cycle.

**Why a garden?  
Why not a kitchen?  
Why this difference matters.**

In discussing innovation in public librarianship we often get asked for **recipes** – step-by-step instructions that librarians can follow to create programs.

But the problem with a “recipe” is that it implies one person is doing the cooking. We’ve all heard the phrase ‘too many cooks in the kitchen.’

Gardens	Recipes
One or more people working in an uncontrolled environment	One person working in a controlled environment
No guarantees of success – always depends on externalities	If you have EVERYTHING, comes out the same each time
There is a time and a place for different seeds to flourish	You can follow the same recipe any time or any place
Cyclical – time for rest, reflection, and harvesting	You can make a recipe any time if you have the supplies

Gardening does **not** have recipes. There are too many externalities: You can plan but ultimately things are out of the control of one person. As in gardening, when we work collaboratively with communities. There is **no** guarantee of success – but we won't succeed if we don't take the risk.

This, our research tells us, is how innovation in public librarianship actually looks. The work looks less like a cook and more like a gardener: In the garden there are no guarantees of success, there are countless things you can't control, and you always have to work in collaboration with your environment. Similarly, at the library there is no guarantee of success when you start working collaboratively with communities, there are countless things you can't control, and you always have to work in collaboration with your environment.

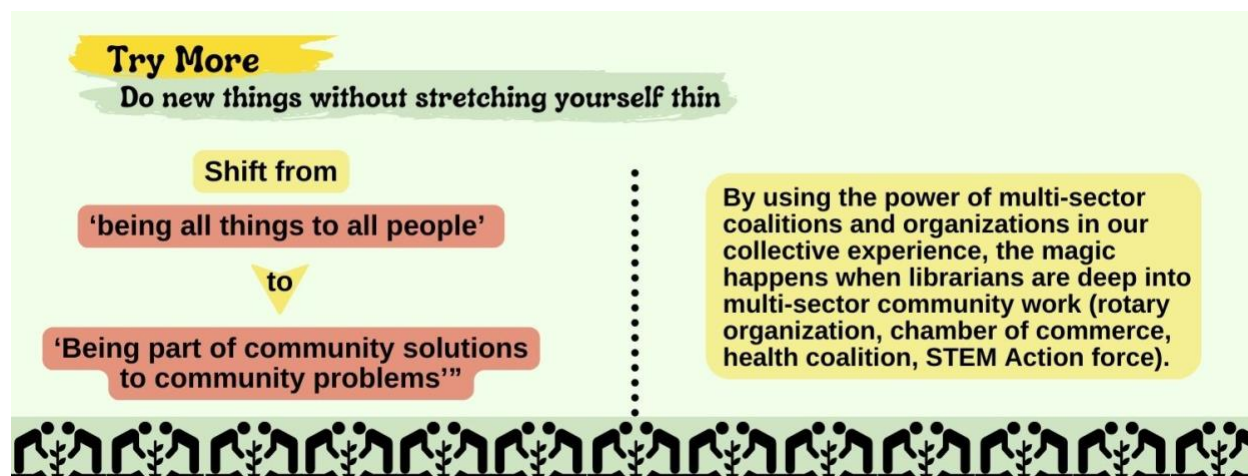
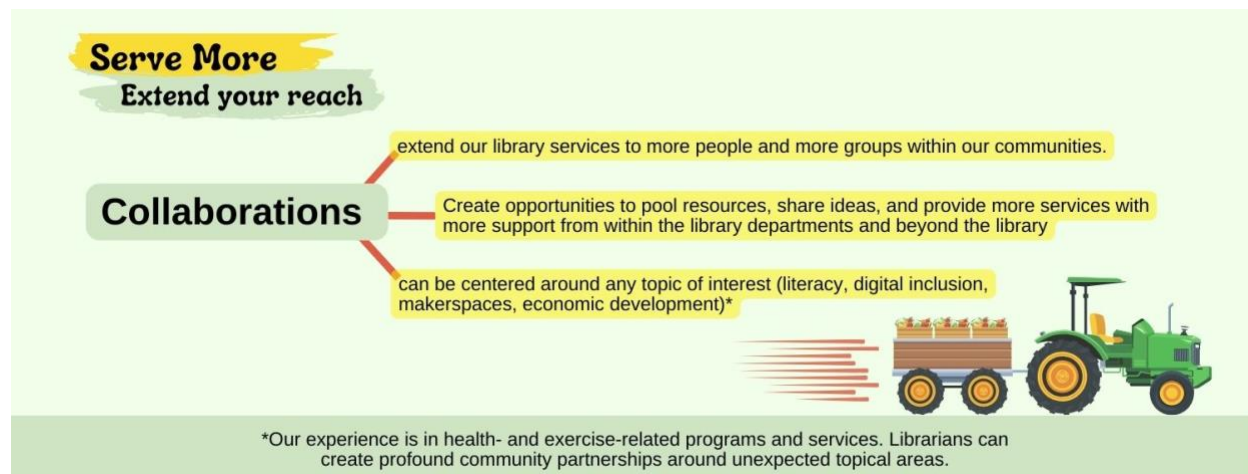
Gardening also resonates because it implies there is a time and place for different things. In a kitchen, with a recipe, you can create the same dish if you have the same ingredients and supplies. That's not true for gardening. We encourage you to lean in to the idea that you're not in control, that you can't do it alone, and that it's a marathon not a sprint.

This toolkit is premised on the idea the **recipes don't work for the things that matter most in public libraries**. What matters is finding **the confluence of need and interest** (what we call a "seed") and then nurturing that seed/seedling in collaboration with your community so that it becomes something awesome that you all can celebrate together. This harvest celebration is in turn followed by a period of **debrief** (looking back) and also **planning** (looking forward) to next year's gardening cycle.

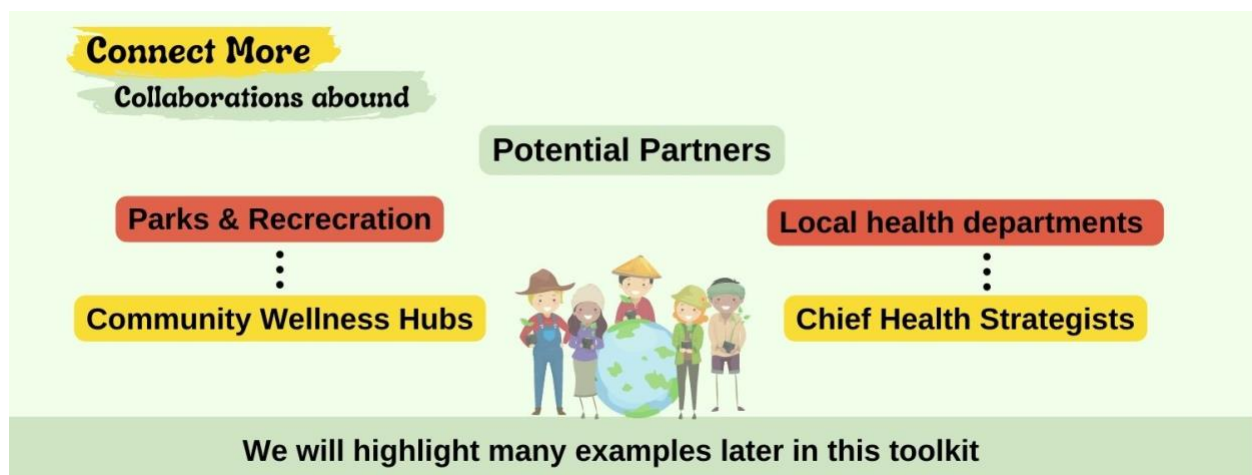
We'd love to know your "why." Email us at [lenstra@uncg.edu](mailto:lenstra@uncg.edu)

Cultivating the relationship-driven library can help you and your library:

1. **Try more** by doing new things
2. **Feel more** by experiencing the joy of collaboration
3. **Connect more** by integrating the library more deeply into the community
4. **Serve more** by extending your reach







## Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is designed to help librarians and others interested in working together to transform communities figure out:

- What seeds (or ideas) make the most sense for your library and for your community
- How to most effectively nurture these ideas through your expanding web of community relationships and partnerships
- How to harvest your bounty by celebrating, documenting, and sharing the results of your efforts to cultivate the relationship-driven library
- How to put your garden to rest by looking back at your journey, while also planning for next year through conversations with partners

# The Milagros Tanega Story



We believe in the power of storytelling. To introduce our model we want to share one of the stories we collected that succinctly puts all the pieces together. This is Milagros Tanega, branch manager of the [Evelyn Meador Library](#), Harris County Public Library. Her story illustrates one of the central findings of this project – namely that innovation comes from library workers/leaders and community partners coming

together to work together. This finding is illustrated below Milagros's story in two images that you are free to use however you want.

When she moved to Texas she wanted to bring new ideas about sustainability to her library. She thought that the library's greenspace would be ideal for hosting a community garden. She also knew that such an initiative is not something she could do on her own.

She "planted the seed" by telling the community she wanted to be part of efforts to support sustainability in her community and specifically that she'd love to bring a community garden to her library.

Through the simple act of sharing her idea, Milagros got connected to the collaborators she needed to get the idea off the ground. At a Rotary meeting, Milagros shared her garden idea and in the audience with the City Manager.

Shortly thereafter, the city manager was approached by a non-profit interested in started a community garden. The city manager connected the non-profit with Milagros and they started work together.

Milagros then "nurtured the seedlings" by setting up a structure to move the idea towards reality. Library staff met regularly with the non-profit to go over all the details and logistics involved with starting a community garden, developed a business plan, and successfully applied for a small grant. As a county employee, Milagros navigated a lot of legal requirements while the non-profit took lead on the actual installation work. They started small with an herb garden so they wouldn't get too overwhelmed with the work. With that success in hand, they expanded to a raised bed garden. And with that success in hand, they expanded to a fruit forest. And they didn't stop there. They now have a lending library of

garden supplies and even a StoryWalk (pictured here), along the way expanding their web of partnerships to include schools and many more

The expansion of the effort over time is a product of how Milagros and her partners “harvested their bounty.” They created videos and shared updates on the [Friends of the Library webpage](#), got [the attention of local media](#), and took full advantage of social media.

The same channels that Milagros used to plant the seed of the community garden she know used to harvest, or celebrate, her bounty.

Throughout the course of this saga, Milagros took time to “rest the garden and prepare” for next steps. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. They didn’t start expanding until they got a grant, and through the structure of their regular meetings Milagros and her non-profit partner created space to debrief, share, and take stock of where they were and where they wanted to get to.





## Step 1 – Planting the Seeds



This step is about **exploring** your library and community to find seeds (a confluence\* of need and interest), identifying where to plant them (the partnerships you need to get ideas going), and then **planting** them (talking up the ideas to those you need to work with you).

In other words, this step is about figuring out where there is a confluence of interest and need. After you've found this confluence, the next step is to figure out how to most effectively move the needle

forward on this confluence.

The fundamental idea is that you can do a lot if you're in dialogue with partners.

You can't do a lot if you're not actively in conversation with potential partners.

Let's talk about how you can "plant" the idea of the library as part of the community conversation, and therefore part of the community solution.

*\*A confluence is the term for that area where different rivers or streams come together. Similarly, in this toolkit we refer to seeds as that place where community needs and community interests come together. It represents the most promising area for action.*

## Finding the Seeds: Exploring your library and community

Where do great ideas come from? They are all around us, inside our libraries and in our communities. The best way to find out where there is a confluence of need and interest – a seed – is by being curious, open, and interested in your staff/colleagues and in your community.

How do you find seeds in your community? Let us know at [lenstra.uncg.edu](mailto:lenstra.uncg.edu)

### **Finding seeds *inside* the library**

What are you, your staff, your board, and your library friends excited about?

Good questions to start the conversations with:

**Professional goals** – Why do I work in libraries?

**Personal goals** – What am I excited about in my personal life?

Use this inventory of interests to make a list of seeds you can plant.

**Here's an example:** Marie Mueller of the Bigelow Free Public Library in Clinton, Massachusetts is an avid walker, so she decided to start a library walking club at the park across the street. That 'seed' led to opportunities to partner with the local hospital on their Walk with a Doc program. Walk with a Doc is a national initiative to get people walking and engaging with medical professions. It all started with Marie's "seed" of walking, which she made visible to the community in a way that sparked collaboration.

Tools you can use to find seeds inside your library:

[Community Heart & Soul's guide for discovering what matters](#)

[Asset mapping for librarians – presented by the Free Library of Philadelphia](#)

### **Finding seeds *outside* in the community**

- What is your community passionate about?
  - Good questions to start with:
    - What are big issues in the news, in the school district, in the chamber of commerce, etc?
      - If you don't know, could you go to those organizations and ask them?
    - What do patrons ask for when seeking local community information?
  - **Example:** High Point Public Library noticed that the local newspaper had extensive coverage on food insecurity in the city of High Point, leading

them to ask what they could do to get involved, ultimately leading to teaching gardens, farmers markets, and a large grant from the Environmental Protection Agency

- GOAL: Discover what residents love about where they live and identify common hopes and aspirations—what matters most.
- Decide which ideas best reflect what matters most and create a plan that ensures action, both now and long term.

### Gardening tips:

As Pete Seeger and The Byrds sang “To every thing there is a season / and a time to every purpose.”

Finding seeds is hard! You not only need to find a need, you **also** need to find (or build) enough interest to move the needle forward on that need.

Do not take something on if you do not think there is enough interest to make a difference. You can come back to it later.

Figuring out good seeds to plant is HARD! It’s hard in part because you have to be fully aware of your environment to know what is going to work. Think of trying to plant a palm tree in a blizzard. It’s not going to work.

But. BUT! If you and your partners are able to build a greenhouse, then maybe you CAN plant a palm tree in a blizzard.



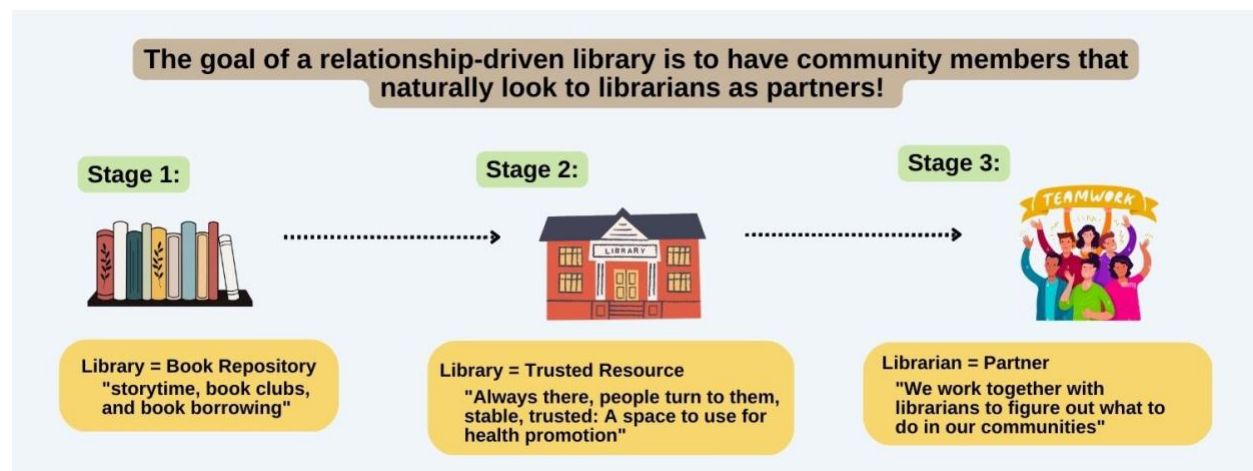
Our approach is that librarians CAN be involved in anything, but to do it well we have to be aware of personal limits, our institutional boundaries, and what support we may need to try something outside of what we consider to be our wheelhouse.

What do you and your staff have the capacity to do? **And also what are the capacities and boundaries of others in your community network/soil?** Knowing your boundaries and being confident in them is foundational.

## YOU: The most important seed you can plant

In our research we found that the libraries that are most successful are those libraries that had successfully seeded the idea of librarians and other library workers as critical community partners.

Again and again in the 60 interviews we did with library partners, we found those partners go through a process of transforming their thinking about the people who work in public libraries.



In Stage 1, potential partners see libraries primarily as book repositories, and therefore library workers exist to distribute, preserve, and promote books.

As partners work more with library workers, and begin to learn about the roles of public libraries in communities, they begin to see that the library as a trusted resource (Stage 2), a space that is always there, that people turn to, that is stable, and trusted. But, **and this is critical**, at this stage partners see the library primarily as a space to use. They do not see all the amazing contributions library workers make to communities.

It takes time, and a lot of work, to get to Stage 3. Here, the focus shifts from the library as a space to the library worker as a critical community partner. In this stage, librarians and their partners work together to figure out what to do in and with communities. There is true back-and-forth going on, and library workers have a seat at the table.

We believe this idea – that the people who work in public libraries are critical community partners – is the idea we **always** need to be planting. How have you planted this seed in your community?

Don't just take our word for it! Others have come to similar conclusions. See this research by a team of scholars from Kent State University in Ohio. They studied the process of "building a collaborative preschool-library partnership to support whole family engagement" and found that, as one library worker told them,

***"I think part of the struggle of library work is that it can be hard for people to grasp what we can do. I think it would be good for us to have time to talk, so we can remind them of what we can do and then talk about how we could work together."***

Campana, K., Martens, M., Filippi, A., & Clunis, J. (2022). A ["library school:" Building a collaborative preschool-library partnership to support whole family engagement](#). *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(1), 71-82.

## Where should I plant my seed?

The people you may want to work with are vast. The right people for the job are not always obvious. We advocate for looking for partners in coalitions and moving beyond the usual suspects.

Figuring out where to plant the seeds of collaboration involves preparing good soil.

Soil represents the network (formal or informal) of community ties out of which collaborations can be built.

### **Finding fertile soil inside the library**

What groups/organizations are your staff, your friends of the library, your library board connected to already?

What organizations does your library work well with already? What organizations seem to be "go-getters" currently?

What does "fertile soil" look like for you? Thinking about your library, what makes some organizations better partners than others?

### **Multi-sector organizations**

**"Multi-sector organizations"** is a fancy way of saying organizations or groups that bring together a lot of different people and groups in your community.

Every community has one, even if it is as small as a group of elected officials, like a Soil & Water Conservation Board.

Some of the more promising multi-sector organizations we found in our research include:



- United Way and Community Foundations: key institutions in almost every community that can help you get on the road to long-term collaborations
  - Rotary, Chambers of Commerce, and other groups of businesses and business people
  - Non-profit alliances
  - Ministerial and inter-faith alliances
  - Health coalitions
  - Food Councils
  - Community of Hope Coalitions
- 
- Schools, Universities, Colleges, and any other educational institutions that typically have a wide array of potential partners within them, including librarians, teachers, nurses, social workers, etc., as well as community groups like Parent Teacher Associations

### **What if I can't find fertile soil?**

If you can't seem to find a group where you can plant your seed – that is find interested allies – try to start your own!

For instance, we learned that in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, the library identified the fact that there was no venue for organizations interested in STEM education to work together and stay connected.

So they started a STEM Learning group! It's been great for the library, great for the community, and has led to a more cohesive STEM learning ecosystem, including in the health sciences side of **Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math**

### **Looking beyond the usual suspects**

We sometimes imagine that to get something done we 'have' to work with a particular partner. For instance, sometimes when communities talk about education they imagine they 'have' to have the school district involved.

But that's simply not the case!

The best way to push the needle forward is through a coalition of the willing, and being able to consider, identify, and recruit strange bedfellows is often the best way forward.

Here are some quote-unquote non-traditional health partners that we found libraries working with in our research. Who are your 'beyond the usual suspects' partners?

- Local parks and recreation agencies, represented by The National Recreation and Park Association and its state chapters

- Out of School Time educators, represented by groups like The National Summer Learning Association and the Afterschool Alliance
- Other local government, represented by ELGL – Engaging Local Government Leaders
- Downtown Development Associations, represented by Main Street America and State Main Street Associations
- The US Department of Agriculture and its State-Wide networks, including the Cooperative Extension, 4-H, and Summer Feeding Programs
- Society for Public Health Education and its state networks
- No Kid Hungry
- Alliance for a Healthier Generation
- Area Agencies on Aging

There are many others! – look broadly for ideas, resources, and support, wherever you can find it!

### **Doing the work: It starts with a conversation**

Cold calling (or cold emailing) can be intimidating, but it can also be the most impactful thing you can do to start partnerships and relationships that may transform your work, transform your library, and transform your community.

The greatest things in the world often can be traced back to a single conversation. In the words of the musical *Hamilton*, you want to be “in the room where it happens,” and that room is wherever or however you and your potential partners start talking and brainstorming together.

Expect that some of your attempts to foster these conversations will elicit no response. That is OK! Not every conversation, or attempt at conversation, has to lead to an amazing partnership. The key thing is to keep trying. Eventually you will reach a tipping point – where organizations start reaching out to you!

Learn more in our [Laurel Public Library case study](#), where that very tipping point took place.

### **Figuring out how to plant the seeds**

Confidence is a key ingredient in the process of building partnerships: **You ARE someone others want to work with!** If that’s the footing you step out on, you’re on the way to success.

Confidence also includes **boundaries**. You **ARE** just one person! Remember that you have a lot to offer, but you can’t do it alone.

What do you and your staff have the capacity to do? **And also what are the capacities and boundaries of others in your community network/soil?** Knowing your boundaries and being confident in them is foundational.

Think of the gardener who tries to plant a palm tree in a blizzard by themselves. They **MIGHT** be able to be successful, but only if they overextend themselves by building a greenhouse, and controlling temperature, humidity, and light to replicate ideal palm tree growing conditions. That's a lot of work for one gardener! Look to lighten the load.

What's your "blizzard palm tree?" – something you'd LIKE to see but that you know you can't do alone. That's the perfect thing to use as a test-bed to put these principles into action. Talk up the the you know you CAN'T do by yourself. See where that conversation takes you.

### **Networking introductions**

Role-playing exercise: What's your "networking introduction"?  
What's the language you use to introduce potential partners to the idea of the library as a community partner?

**For Example:** In Anne Arundel County, Maryland, when the library opened a new branch in a shopping mall one of the first things library staff did was send out a form letter – customized to recipients – every single other entity in the mall and in the surrounding business district. That letter essentially said "we're here, and we want to work with you. Let's set up a time to talk." And that got the ball rolling. Sometimes it can be that simple.

Keep it simple! **Don't overthink the idea of seed planting – you're not committing to something just by talking it up in the community**

The most important thing is to have your talking points – your elevator pitch – ready to go.

Struggling with small talk? Start with why you are doing this work! Your 'why' – your personal why for being a librarian – can be a great way to get the conversation going and open up horizons of possibilities. Telling and sharing personal stories about your experiences is a great strategy because it will help you find common ground.

### **Pitching the library as a partner**

Remember that when you are planting seeds you are also planting the idea of the public library as a community partner.

In the process of doing so, you are also advocating for the library. You are saying ‘we are a critical community institution, and we need to part of efforts to make our community the greatest place it can be.’

Some language that may be useful to your pitch include (adapted from OCLC/WebJunction’s [Public Libraries as Partners in Access to Justice](#)):

- REACH: There are 17,000 library locations across the country that often are open past traditional business hours, and that also increasingly offer a wide variety of outreach services.
- PROGRAM DELIVERY: Libraries welcome 1.3 billion visits and offer 5.4 million public programs each year, making them the most utilized lifelong learning institution in America.
- COMMUNITY TRUST: Public libraries are familiar, nonpartisan institutions communities turn to and trust, making them a natural partner for the development and delivery of pragmatic solutions to pressing issues.
- BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: For many—especially in rural areas—libraries provide the most consistent and reliable internet connection in a community.

### **Seed planting: A recurring process.**

Just as gardeners have to keep planting their garden, so too do you need to keep planting community relationships. Staff change, organizations change, communities change. As the local conditions change, you need to stay out there.

To that end, it is critical that you pitch the idea of the library as a partner while you also work to develop relationships around your particular seed, or idea.

In this way, you’re planting two things simultaneously: Your idea and the idea of library workers as critical community partners.

### **Gardening tips:**

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” – similarly an amazing idea starts with a single conversation.

We don’t always know – we can’t predict – which conversation is going to be the one that carries our idea forward, and thus our job is just keep talking! The more we talk, the better we get at talking, and the more likely we’ll find those we need to help us get things going.

## Step 2 – Nurturing the seedlings

This step is all about **nurturing the partnership seeds**. It involves setting seedlings up for success, and nurturing them after they're in the soil.

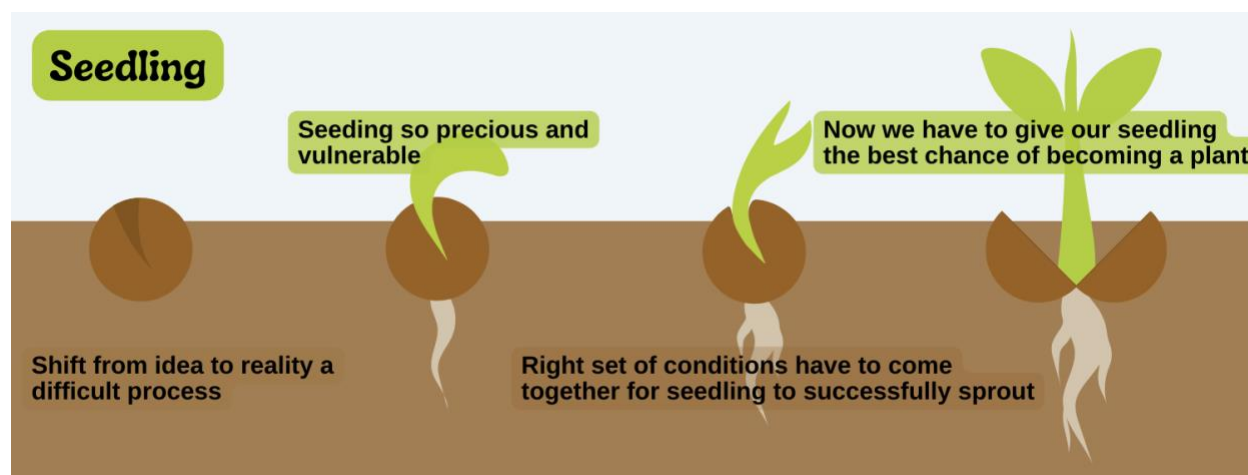
In other words, this step is about all the work you and your partners put in to bringing ideas into the world.

It takes time, energy, and attention to transform an idea into an impactful initiative. This step is focused on the work associated with tending to a seed, or idea, so that it can bloom and produce the sustenance you, your library, your partners, and your community needs.

Enjoy the journey as you're on it! As Miriam Lytle of the Gail Borden Public Library District in Elgin, Illinois told us, *"If you really have the right intention, of reaching deep into the community. And if you have an open hand to partnerships, it will be exponentially explosive, and powerful to a point that you can't even imagine."*

Let's unlock that potential by learning more about how to nurture our seedlings through our relationships.

The image below visually illustrates what this step entails as we seek to move from seeds to seedlings that have the potential to burst out of the soil and create something new and impactful in our community.



## Don't be the only one in the garden!

A key part of successfully nurturing your seedlings is ensuring you are **not** the only library person working on the idea.

Why?



More people from your library involve can help add more perspectives/ideas, which can lead to better collaborations. That increased library involvement can also plant more seeds for new programs/services and continued collaboration support.

Also invite members of your library board, your friends of the library, your volunteers, and whoever else is loosely affiliated with your library team to join you in nurturing your seedling. Their participation can help you increase support and advocacy for the seedling/idea.

Does it take time to build this institutional buy-in? Yes.

But without it you'll be working on thin soil, and in that context your seedling could very easily blow away.

Give your idea a chance to establish roots by cultivating connections internally and externally around it.

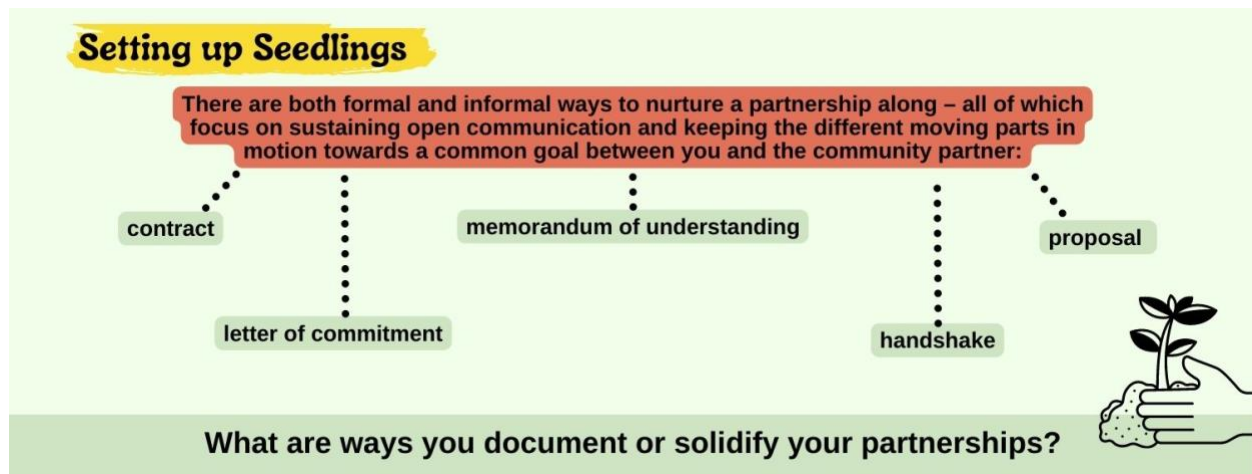
Here's an example: In Bethlehem, Pennsylvania library Josh Berk was invited to join a multi-sector effort to increase bicycle access in his city by making bicycles available for free check-out. The health department and a local hospital were part of the planning organization. Josh realized that for the library to successfully participate he'd need to get his team on board and excited, so he talked with the circulation manager and got her and her team excited and involved in the planning, so that the final check-out system would work for them, while also working for the community. Learn more at [Bike Bethlehem](#) and in our [Bethlehem Area Public Library case study](#).

## Setting up the seedlings

There are all kinds of ways to set your seeds up for success.

Some techniques we heard about include regular meetings among partners, working together towards milestones, drafting memoranda of understanding to get everyone on the same page, and, in some cases, just simply building up trust and mutual understanding among the partners so you don't need to have anything super formal in place. As the director of the Community Services department in Pella, Iowa, told us, if she has an idea she'll just go and share with the library staff, because over the years they've built up that sharing/collaborative culture.

The graphic below illustrates **some** of the ways librarians set their seedlings up for success when they plant them in communities. [What techniques do you use?](#) We'd love to hear from you and add your voice to this document!



Ultimately, different techniques are just means to an end, and that end is having a culture in place in which different organizations and individuals feel like they can talk openly about what's working, what's not working, and what they may need to do differently to take great ideas and turn them into impactful realities.

### Gardening tips:

Thinking about the list of options displayed in the settlings up seedlings graphic on your left, what techniques do you use in your library to nurture partnerships with outside organizations?

Do you find in your community things get done more through handshakes or more through written documentation? There is no right answer!

### Navigating roles, in general

A great deal of practical advice focuses on the different types of partnerships that can exist across and between organizations. The figure below distills that wisdom.

In essence, this wisdom boils down to figuring out – with your partners – who is going to do what, when, and then having the trust in place so that everyone follows through (or can confidently update the group if their situation changes).

This step also involves inter-organizational coordination and trust.

- Does your partner work the same way you do? Probably not. How can you most effectively work with partners who don't see things the same way you and your staff do?
- Examples from our research of coordination challenges and solutions.

The stage of nurturing the seedlings also involves figuring out what exactly your role is in the partnership and also what the roles of the partners are. Use the following four

categories to get started defining for your community where you and your partners are at in terms of your partnership journey.



<b>Building relationships</b>	Communication has been initiated. No partnership activities have been scheduled or taken place. Possibilities for future meetings may be discussed
<b>Common goal/ Common language</b>	The partner reciprocates communication, agreeing to discuss partnership development. Discussions include opportunities for activities that can be accomplished together or ways each partner can benefit one another.
<b>Supportive roles</b>	A common goal has been defined, and the partner provides a supportive role in addressing the issue. Ongoing communication takes place between partners. This partnership provides ongoing input to support the issue and partnership initiative
<b>Strategic collaboration</b>	This partner views the partnership initiative as benefiting their organization's vision. Coordinated, scheduled communication takes place between partners. Routine communication is reciprocated between partners to accomplish activities or goals. This partnership is fundamental in addressing the topic/issue and the initiative's success. The partner actively participates in key actions that lead to system or policy change around the topic/issue.

### Navigating roles, in detail, or different strokes for different folks

To close out Step 2, we want to consider some of the detailed discussions you and your partners may have to have regarding roles, or **who does what**.

There is no one right way to set up and navigate the many different roles and relationships that together cultivate and grow seedlings.

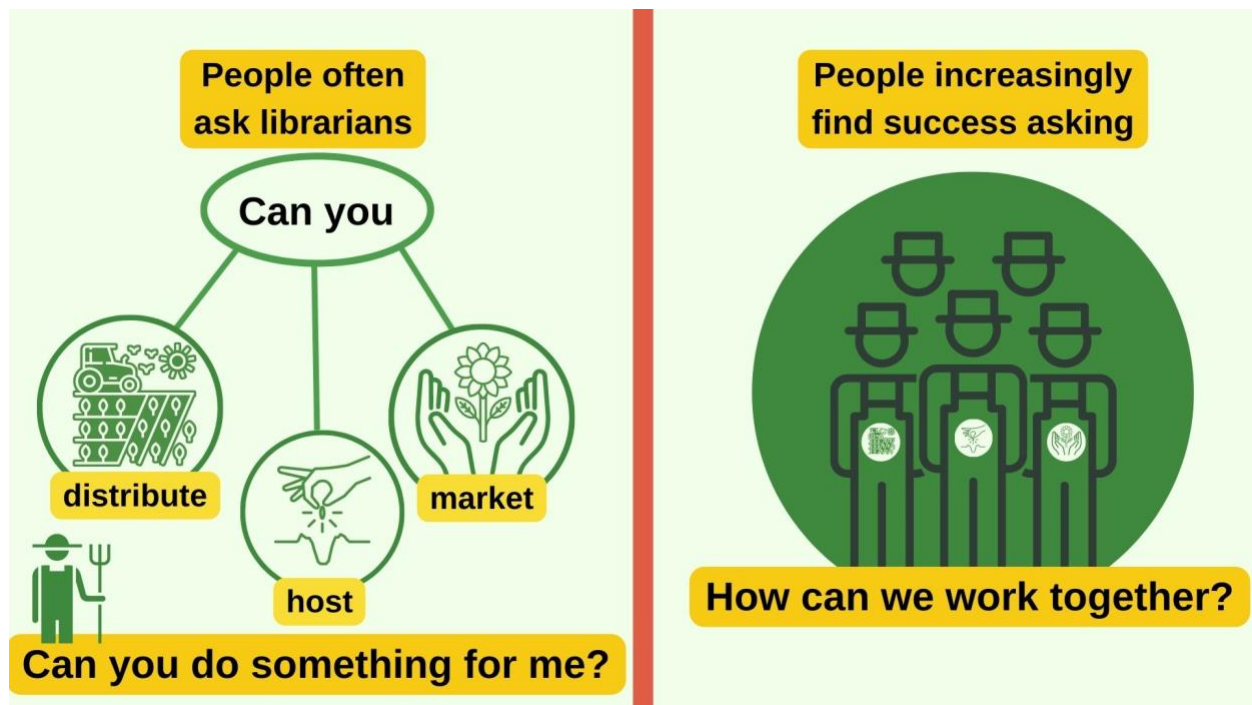
That being said, considering these roles is critical because [we found in our research](#) that a stumbling block in many community partnerships centers around the navigation of roles among community partners.

For instance, one librarian told us that when she started representing the library in a community health coalition, “almost the whole first year, when we met I was asked to explain why the library was there. ‘What are you doing here? Like you’re not a member of the community care team?’ Those were not the words. It was that sort of questioning. To which I said, ‘Oh, uh, we are.’”

### Part of navigating roles in asserting that library workers *have* a role in community-based work.

The images below illustrate what often happens.

People often ask librarians, “Can you distribute, market, or host something for me,” rather than asking “how can we work together.”



Similarly, librarians often feel they have to ask themselves “do I have the space, budget, or staff” to do this new initiative, rather than asking “who could I work with” to start this new initiative.



The work of nurturing seedlings with community partners can be a fraught process, full of landmines related to conceptions/stereotypes of libraries, librarians, and what it looks like to partner with a library.

To develop a seedling that is mutually beneficial for all partnerships, it is important for librarians to work hard, but it is also important to make sure that our labor is visible and appreciated.

Similarly, we want to work hard to make sure that all the contributions of our partners are seen and visible, appreciated and compensated (where necessary).

We will talk more about how to make this work visible in [Step 3](#), which is focused on harvesting our bounty, or documenting and celebrating the fruits of our (collective) labor.

Here, though, the most important thing to keep in mind is **transparency**. Do you and your partners know what everyone is contributing? Do you and your partners have the resources they need to hold up your/their ends of the bargain? Do you and your partners have the trust needed to re-negotiate roles if something changes? Do and your partners have the open communication needed so that everyone feels like they have a voice in decisions related to planning, budget, and implementation?

Sometimes these conversations can go into complicated terrain, such as **the topic of money**.

- Many partners will willingly do the work for free, but sometimes offering to pay helps show value for their work and it can add motivation for the partner to continue to follow through on their commitments.
- Similarly, many libraries will willingly do the work for free, but sometimes the offer of payment to the library helps show value for your work and it can add motivation for the library to continue to follow through on its commitments to the partnership.
- There is no one right way to work collaboratively with your community. The key thing is to strive to have the trust, transparency, and communication needed to ensure there are no hidden agendas, invisible labor, or unsupported work.

Finally, these detailed discussions may also consider what each partner represents. In general, there are two types of partners: non-profits and for-profits.

#### Nonprofits/community organizations/city and county departments

- These organizations may often be able to work for free.
- Collaborations may involve supplementing what each department/organization has to offer to fill in gaps.

#### Local businesses



- We as library staff often may need to work harder to market the programs to help ensure bigger attendance/turnout, which helps spread the word about the business and increase their own sales, etc
- You and your library may approach partnerships with these different sectors in different ways.

### Wrapping up

Navigating the many different ways that you and your library may find yourselves working collaboratively with partners is a complicated process. There is no one right way for library workers to collaborate with others to nurture seedlings, or to transform ideas into realities. Instead, there are multiple paths to success. We want to alert you to the different configurations that may be possible, so that you go into this process with your eyes open, and attuned to the possibilities.

## Step 3 – Harvesting the bounty

This step is focused on **documenting** and **celebrating** what comes out of the work you and your partners have put into nourishing your seedling, or your idea.

We are focused on that moment when a seedling becomes a fruitful plant.

In the language of libraries, we are focused on the moment in which our partnerships & relationships **become** programs & services, and then on the moment immediately thereafter when we **celebrate** those programs and services.

It's critical to take the time to document and celebrate what comes from your relationships. Historically, many farmers celebrate the end of the harvest with a big meal called the harvest supper, to which all who helped are invited.

Our job is to translate these traditions into our libraries and into our communities. What traditions do you have to celebrate the culmination of new initiatives at your library? In your community? What traditions could you start?

Read on to learn more and [contact us](#) to share your experiences.



This image conveys what we learned about the process of celebrating our harvest. You and your partners have put so much work into taking an idea and tuning it into a reality.

It's critical that you, your partners, and your community take the time to celebrate what comes from your collective labors, and also to make sure that this bounty nourishes those that need sustenance.

**Know what you've grown**

Harvesting your bounty requires being able to discern a rutabaga from a weed. Do you know what you're looking for?

Put simply, do you have mechanisms in place to document what you're doing, and, then, to understand what exactly it is you're documenting?

Without documentation how can you celebrate what has come from your relationships?

Here are three ways to get started:

1. Culture of documentation
2. Social Media advocates
3. Stories of impact

What are some simple strategies you can use to document what you're doing? [Let us know](#) and we'll add your voice to this toolkit.

### **Gardening tips:**

Growing a bountiful crop can be a lot of work.

While the work itself can be joyful, it's sad to think of the crop being left in the field to rot because you don't have a system in place to harvest your crop.

In our toolkit, harvesting your bounty means documenting your work.

### **Culture of documentation**

If you're looking looking to document what you're doing, you need to set up sticky structures to ensure things get documented. But structures are only as good as the cultures that surround them. What cultures of documentation can you create to ensure that the work you and your partners engage in is documented, recorded, and shared?

For instance, at the Richland Library in Columbia, South Carolina, when you enter the main library one of the first things you see is a poster board announcing that in the public space of the library you may be photographed and videotaped. As the library's FAQ states "[Because all Richland Library programs are free and open to the public, individuals and media are invited to attend and photograph and/or film any part of the program.](#)"

Now, you do not want to be filming people all the time, but you do want to create a culture in which it is expected that you'll be documenting the things you are doing and then sharing that documentation.

### **Social media advocates**

You can also “outsource” some of that work to others. Denver Public Library’s Social Media Advocate program [“is designed to give our biggest supporters an opportunity to engage with us while helping us expand to new audiences we wouldn’t normally be able to reach.”](#) In other words, it is a structured system to enable advocates (and partners!) to document and celebrate all the things that libraries do in and with communities.

## Stories of Impact

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### Celebrate the harvest season

The harvest season is a time for celebration, but often in libraries we don’t set aside the time to celebrate the fruits of our bounty.

Harvesting your bounty gives you and the library the tools you need to toot your horn to drive resources to the library. Use the documentation you’ve collected to share your story!

You’ve developed some techniques to document what has come from your seeds/seedlings – it’s now time to share out your bounty in the most effective way possible. In other words, we’re talking about communication and advocacy.

**Advocacy** is a perennial need for librarians – we know that the squeaky wheel gets the grease but we are not always completely successful at advocating for what we need.

There are lots of toolkits on library advocacy, but in the context of our toolkit what we are especially eager to encourage is advocating through our relationships.

What do we mean by that? LaJuan Pringle of North Carolina’s Library Advocacy and Legislative Section and also the branch manager of the West Boulevard branch of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, says “You Are Not Alone” – Community Partnerships can be a form of Advocacy. Learn more in [presentation on this topic](#).

According to LaJuan, partnerships are important for library advocacy, because:

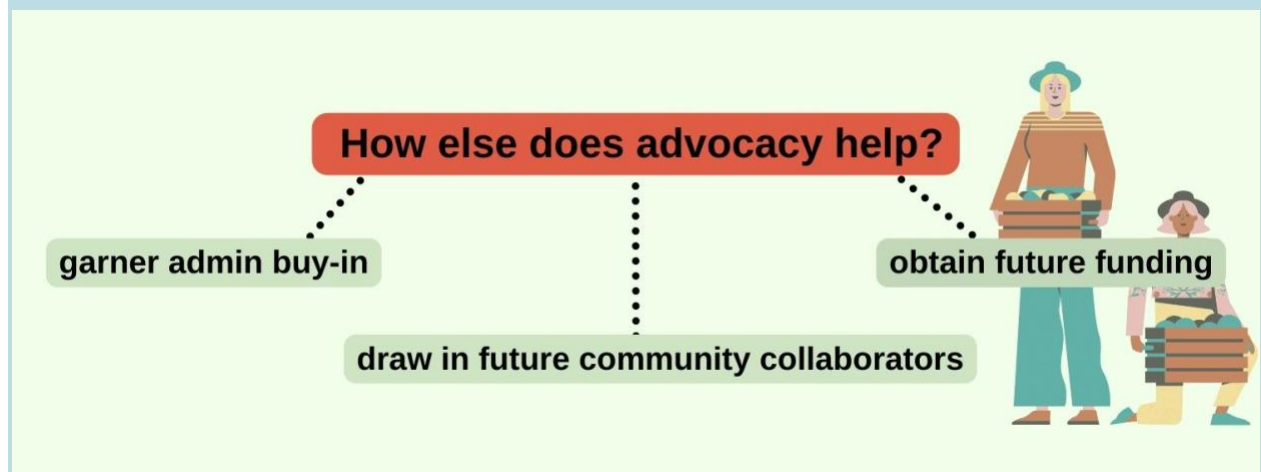
- Through your relationships, you’ve identified causes that have community-wide implications;
- Through your relationships, you’ve identified goals that can be better pursued with expanded networks and resources; and

- Shared goals can result in laws, legislation or policy changes.

So, when we are talking about harvesting our bounty, we aren't talking about just sending out a press release or posting photos to Facebook about the programs you held. Instead, we're focused on thinking strategically about how and your partners can use your shared documentation of your collaborations to strategically advance your goals, your partner's goals, and the goals of the wider community.

An example of how to share about your successes: You can empower your partners to be advocates for your library – speaking on your behalf to encourage more organizations and individuals to collaborate with and form working relationships with you and your library. In Paducah, Kentucky, Mike Muscarella of the Healthy Paducah Coalition brings applications for library cards to meetings, serving as a library advocate everywhere he goes.

How can you empower those you work with to advocate on your behalf? How can you in turn advocate for those with whom you work? You scratch my back, I scratch yours. We like WebJunction's article on how to "[Build New Community Connections with Partnership Marketing](#)." [Share with us](#) what inspires and shapes the work you do!







## Step 4 – Rest & Planning

Step 4 – Resting the garden and preparing yourself and the soil for next season – is focused on **reflecting** on the journey you, your partners, and your community have been on. It is also focused on **looking forward**.

It is critical to take the time to complete this step, even though you may feel pressure to immediately move on to the next thing on your to-do list.

It is also critical to advocate for this time, for yourself, for your co-workers, for your partners, and for your community.

Sustaining yourself, your relationships, and your community requires time to reflect, rest, debrief, evaluate, and plan.

This step is also about **long-term thinking**, or moving from planting individual seeds to thinking through what you want your garden (and the environment/community around it) to look like 5, 10, 20 years into the future.

### Questions to ask:



What legacy do we want to leave?

Where do we see the work we're doing going in the long-term?

This image communicates what we are focused on in this stage. We are simultaneously looking backwards and looking forwards.

Looking back to seek to understand what just happened.

Looking forward to prepare ourselves for the ideas (seeds) we want to plant next season.

### **Mindfulness-Evaluation continuum**

Part of resting the garden is taking stock how things went — for you, for your partners, and for your community – as you went on your journey from seed to seedling to bounty.

Below are some techniques you and your partners can use to take stock and to help you get ready for the next thing you plant together.

You can take stock at multiple levels: as an individual, as a library, as a partnership, and as a community.

**The main point here is to do what you can.** If all you can do is take the time to reflect – to be mindful of what just occurred – that is OK.

If you and your partners have the resources to more formally evaluate what you did together, pursue that possibility.

### **Gardening tips:**

Given the resources you and your partners have, what can you do to understand what you all did together?

Not everything always works out. It's ok for some things to be annuals, rather than perennials.

### **Mindfulness**

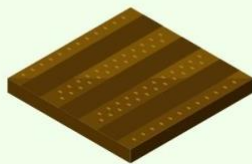
- **Recognizing the seasons of growth** makes the process flow more smoothly.
  - - - Planting tomatoes in the snow will not produce a crop, and likewise, forcing an initiative at the wrong time won't be as well received.
    - Before pressing forward, **pause to celebrate your success** by recognizing everyone who contributed.
      - Partners, volunteers, and staff all deserve and desire a bit of praise for their efforts. Knowing they are appreciated will help motivate them to delve into the next project.

- **Lasting collaborations often pay the highest dividends. Which partnerships are perennials, coming back year after year?**
  - - Perseverance is necessary for long term success, but even perennials change with the seasons. No blooms last forever, so staying aware of any slight changes in the community can help navigate the seasons and maintain partnerships even as they morph.
    - Some partnerships are annuals, lasting just for a short time.
      - Example of an “annual” partnership, but with longer lasting effects: A Girl Scout troop approached the library in Pilot Mountain wanting to install a Blessing Box on the property. It was understood from the beginning of the project that the troop would only be involved for the installation, but the impact of that short term partnership on food insecurity in the community is priceless. Four years later the Blessing Box is still used every day.

### **Reflecting as a library**

- How do we set up structures for reflection?
  - And ideally reflection that involves librarians in dialogue with partners
- What issues arose during the partnership’s gardening season?
  - What do you do (what can you do?) when you are involved in a collaborative effort and you feel like your contributions are not seen or valorized? Both your contributions as an individual and the contributions of the library writ large? What steps can you take to change that culture?
    - This can happen within partnerships as well as lack of validation from admin or funders
  - Example of what can be done:
    - [helping yourself be visible as a library / librarian – Diane noticed that a number of libraries participated in Christmas parades from work in NCLA -> at ARSL – a librarian from Iowa said for her a great way to get started was to join a committee for a parade, or other civic event – and maybe host meetings of these committees in the building]
- In your reflection make efforts to listen to everyone, even the people who might not have all positive things to say
  - (Bethlehem example- Josh wanted Connor’s insights to be a part of the discussion even though he knew that Connor might not have all positive things to say)

## Reflection exercise:



- Have you ever had to let go of a partnership?
- What did that look like?

- Do you need a larger garden plot or do you need more partners?

- Or do you need to scale back?
- Are there too many plants in the garden and not enough gardeners to manage it all?

- **Pruning and weeding to make space for new growth**
  - What can you let go of, or re-think, to get you ready for next year?
- **Setting your sights big** – Foundation funding for libraries
  - How can you tap into those who want to give back? Does your library system have a nonprofit associated with it?
  - Are there other funding streams your partners have access to that you could tap into?

## Debriefing as a partnership

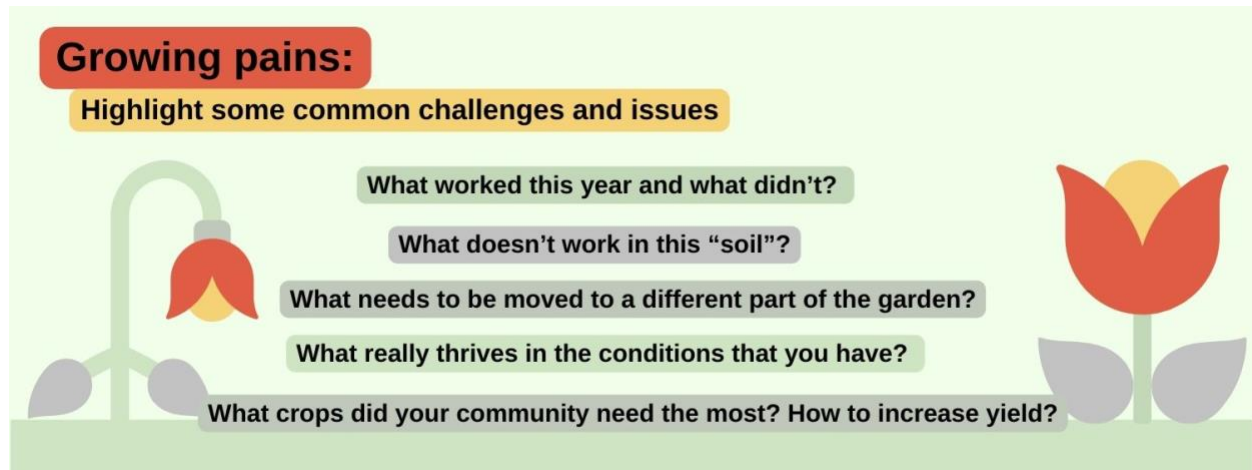
- What counts as success? You and any collaborators decide.
  - Gardens are meant to grow, but bigger is not always better.
    - In health and in programming seek **quality over quantity**. The “next” level may be sustaining, fine tuning, or even pruning to allow growth in other areas. Refer back to your own criteria for success will determine when to let go.
- Modifications
  - What tweaks can help future programs/services/collaborations?
- Snowballing/expansion
  - How (and when) should you take things to the next level?
- Maintain lines of regular communication during the “off” season
  - [insert examples from the shared doc after confirming sources]

## Evaluation

Though we pull this information together to evaluate at the end of the process, we are gathering the information the entire time.

- **Plan to evaluate before the wrap-up of the partnership**

- - - Setting goals in the planning process helps determine what data to collect and provides built-in opportunities for feedback throughout the process.



- Look at what others have done to evaluate
  - - In addition to sharing what you have done, taking time to explore what others are doing is invaluable. Many associations, libraries, and librarians now maintain blogs or social media accounts in which they share their ideas and processes for a wide range of programs. Discovering entirely new ideas can enhance community relationships while learning minor adjustments to current programs can drastically improve workflows. Remember there are always multiple approaches to similar projects, each uniquely suited to the community it serves.

## Look back to look forward

In addition to taking stock of what was, you and your partners (and the wider community) want to look forward to what could be.

Do you want to plant the seed again? Try a new seed? Bring in new partners?

### Expanding the garden plot

Now is the time to develop infrastructure by providing support for librarians who want to learn how to apply for grants. This can be a tricky process; is there support for it?

**Success has four ingredients** (example from Memphis Public Libraries, TN):

#1 – Culture in which library staff are seen as experts

#2 – Culture in which library staff are encouraged to dream, and to take risks (including with outside community partners)

#3 – Culture in which library staff have access to professional development, and to resources (via Friends of the Library)

#4 – Culture in which [insert goal] part of the work the library sees itself doing through partnerships

Expanding your garden plot involves expanding your infrastructure.

You've had success on one project, planting one seed, and now your task is to expand this work outwards to create space and opportunities for your library and all library workers to be involved in community collaborations.

### **Expanding the gardening tools**

In addition to expanding the internal infrastructure for community collaboration, you can turn outwards to increase capacity in your community for community collaboration.

What are some steps you can take to do so?

In our data, we found librarians becoming active, ongoing participants in community convenings as a way to build up this community infrastructure.

This may include getting involved in the leadership of your local Rotary Club, or your Chamber of Commerce, Partnership for Children, Food Council, or whatever other groups that exist in your community to bring together cross-sectors of the community to work together and share resources.

It may also involve looking towards larger opportunities, such as funding available from regional, state, or even national foundations. Check out [Visualizing Funding for Libraries](#) and then use this information to jump-start conversations with your community partners on how you could work together to bring new resources into your community.

### **Gardening tips:**

Looking forward can be exciting! As you're looking forward make sure to always keep in mind what you and your library bring to the table, as well as your capacity challenges – as



we discussed earlier in this toolkit being upfront about what you can and can not do is critical to building successful relationships!

**This document is a DRAFT! Let us know your thoughts so we can improve it by emailing [lenstra@uncg.edu](mailto:lenstra@uncg.edu) – Noah Lenstra**