

Recommendations for Community Horticulture Contests: Lessons Learned from BBG's Greenest Block in Brooklyn

Since 1994, The [Brooklyn Botanic Garden](#) (BBG), through its [Greenbridge](#) environmental horticulture outreach program, has been working with diverse communities to enhance green spaces. The [Greenest Block in Brooklyn](#), a “friendly but fierce” community horticulture contest and component of Greenbridge, stands as a model community greening contest.

The following list of recommendations / lessons learned was compiled by Ed Moydell, [Center for Public Horticulture at UD](#), from interviews with Robin Simmen, Director of BBG's Greenbridge, and Ellen Kirby, former Greenbridge Director, who was a great catalyst in establishing and growing the program.

Framework

- Ensure rules and procedures for participants are very clear and structured. BBG provides goals and steps that help entrants quickly pick up and run with the framework.
- Use successful models to develop the framework and judging criteria, like BBG, and similar programs in [Philadelphia](#) and [St. Louis](#).
- Engage commercial businesses as participants by getting buy in from the local chamber of commerce
- Build your contest around block and community associations as opposed to individuals to promote community building.
- Incorporate community development and outreach as a part of your organizational mission. It is a way to connect with people that wouldn't normally visit the garden on site.
- Find opportunities to see how you can fit this into something you're already doing
- Ensure the garden leadership has the vision and commitment to make the program a success.

Funding

- Start out small and build strong examples of success for potential funders. Don't overextend the staff or resources too early on.
- Build key sponsors that will get positive PR from their participation, so that they become part of the contest. At BBG, Independence Community Foundation has been the major sponsor since the inception of the contest, but companies like Lowes and Keyspan (now National Grid) have contributed greatly in recent years.

Partnerships

- The partnership of the garden, government, and industry is critical. The garden offers horticultural expertise and outreach, government brings the community ties and reputation, and industry provides financial backing and marketing.
- Develop partnerships to extend resources. For example, BBG partnered with Greenwood Cemetery on MulchFest, a program that provides free mulch for Brooklyn residents from Christmas Trees.

Recognition

- Issue prizes to all participants, not just the winners
- Hold a press conferences to announce the winners and a recognition ceremony for all participants
- Host additional support events. For instance, BBG annually offers 10,000 free tulip bulbs from their displays for blocks that enter the contest, as well as community gardens, schools, etc.

Operations

- Provide subsidized resources. Make it easy for entrants to get window boxes, mulch, or other contest materials.
- Develop an online presence- reach out to younger audiences where they are, not where you think they should be.
- Organize the contest with transportation in mind. In major urban areas, transportation is a major factor that limits participation.
- Provide workshops to educate community residents about appropriate plant choices, smart gardening techniques, composting, and the importance of appropriate tree care. BBG conducts street clinics about such topics as an ecological approach to horticultural information

For Contest Participants

- Stress that the purpose of the contest is neighborhood development, and not about winning. It's about making your block greener and overcoming obstacles to do so.
- Encourage participating gardens to be flexible but greatly organized
- Push participants to be creative in their displays and management methods
- Understand that every age group participates, some have more time to do more
- Take an interest in every spot on the block, and encourage all residents to take part in the contest