

# The Two Block Diet

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Where do you start when you decide to grow as much of your own food as possible in a year? What if you don't have the faintest idea what's possible, and the only thing you've grown are weeds? Write down every obstacle that currently prevents you from doing it, and find creative ways around each and every one of them. That is exactly the spirit with which the Two Block Diet was born: a group of neighbours within walking distance of each other who get together every week to share the responsibility of producing as much of our own food as we can.

We started as just two: a woman who needed a space to grow food and some guidance about where to start, and a woman with space and experience to share. It really can be that simple: an agreement between neighbours. From there, things blossomed to include a core of about 10 households, along with a healthy following of interested sideliners waiting for an email about a big project that they're interested in helping with. We have a couple of members who are very experienced gardeners, and are always willing to lend a hand when it comes to advice or talking down a panicked tomato lover who has discovered a spot. We would not have flourished as we have were it not for the extremely skilled and patient Kate, who is an experienced mediator, chairwoman, and community facilitator. She has a knack for keeping things punctual, on topic, and balanced.

In the beginning, a lot of the work we did was around finding an organizational structure that was a good balance for everybody. We met every two weeks in my living room and talked about everything from why we were all there to urban chickens. Once we had settled on a time and day that worked well for everyone each week, 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 seedlings 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, including working side by side with neighbours and getting to know the people who share your street.

Another important facet of this group 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. It takes a bit of extra time to organize, but technology sure has advantages. "Reply All" has become my best friend.

I really must stress that while we have learned a few very important ways to successfully share a project like this amongst 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.

If you don't have a green thumb, surely someone in your neighbourhood does, and in my

experience, they're often very happy to trade their sage advice for a bit of good old-fashioned manual labour. Not the digging type? You could be the chair person to make sure that meetings happen and email updates go out on time. Hate dirt? Well, that's a tough one, but keeping a blog or a garden diary could be just the place for you to fit in. Work full time? Many of the two block dieters do--but you'll find strength in numbers and still get a lot of work done in one afternoon if you have 5 or 6 helpers.

Kids? Great! They can help out in the garden and learn more about where their food comes from. New parent? Me too!! What better way to feed yourself--and your little ones, than freshly picked greens straight out of the ground? Besides, in the first year of parenthood you learn to take sanity where you can get it...and sometimes that two hours outside in the dirt with a friendly neighbour holding your baby is just what the midwife ordered. There are creative solutions to every perceived obstacle between you and your dreams of being more connected with your food. It sometimes just takes a supportive team of neighbours to remind you of that. So how do you create that team?

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

### **1.) Brainstorm**

Have a brainstorming session yourself about how you envision your project. It helps if you get very clear about why you're doing it 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 collage, do a painting, use a giant pad of paper, whatever.

### **2.) Make a List**

List all the people you know (who live within walking distance) that might be interested in participating.

If you don't know anyone within walking distance, that's ok too. In that case you'll just map out how big your area is going to be when you give out flyers.

### **3.) Email, Call, or Chat**

If you have friends in the area, now is the time to send them an email about your project. If you don't, keep on going down the list!

### **4.) Design a flyer**

Ok, so you might struggle with stick figures. So what?! Take a risk. 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 decide on a meeting time and place.

If you don't feel comfortable with casting such a wide net, there are options. 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.) Hand out Flyers**

So it's not the Mona Lisa. You're feeling vulnerable. You're wondering if anyone will show up. This is the fun part!!

### **6.) Have your First Meeting**

It helps to have a speaker with experience to attract people. One of the Two Block Diet members would be happy to come to your meeting. Just email us at [little red hen@riseup.net](mailto:little_red_hen@riseup.net). 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.

After this, things get a little chaotic, so a checklist is just about useless. But here are a few ideas:

### **Meetings**

- Meet at the time that is the most convenient for the majority.
- 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 working as soon as you can. People can easily get "meeting burnout".
- Take notes at the meeting and email them to everyone each week or post them on a website or blog.
- If people commit to actions at the 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 started our meeting with a check-in from each person to report on what they'd done since the last meeting.
- Each person decides their level of participation. Some people dig, some advise, some take notes, some do research.

### **Work Parties**

- 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, including 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.

### **Other Hints**

- -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.

For some of us, a big part of this project 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. I don't think any of us could 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 my biggest lesson this year. That sometimes all you have to do is get up the courage to ask. Just be prepared for people to say yes!