



# Mitigating Theft and Vandalism

You've weeded, you've watered, and those peppers and tomatoes you've been waiting on all summer are perfectly ripe. Then, overnight, your vegetable treasures disappear. It sucks! Unfortunately, theft and vandalism can occur when gardening in public space like a community garden. Most likely your beautifully cultivated veggies are now feeding a hungry community member or family. At worst, your tomatoes have been smashed by vandals. Although rarely malicious, effectively and empathetically dealing with theft and vandalism is very challenging. We've compiled tips from other organizations across the country to help you anticipate theft and plan for success. Read on!

## Community Steps

The best way to prevent theft and vandalism is to build community through education and friendships. This takes time and effort, but is the most effective strategy. Here are some specific steps that your gardening community can take:

- Befriend other gardeners. By creating a strong gardening community, you can all look out for each other's plots and work together to spot inappropriate behavior.
- Contribute to caring for a community plot or giving garden that people in the neighborhood can pick vegetables from.
- Coordinate gardening times with fellow gardeners. If there is always someone gardening, theft is less likely to occur.
- Keep your space tidy. Pull weeds, put away tools, and keep things organized. A garden that looks well-cared for is less inviting to thieves or vandals.
- Commit to using positive conflict resolution principles in the garden.

## Individual Steps

- Grow unusual varieties that don't look as appetizing like heirloom tomatoes, purple cauliflower, white eggplants, gourds, or unusual squash.
- Try to avoid growing popular "trophy" crops like melons or pumpkins that take up a lot of space and only produce a few fruits.
- Prioritize abundance: expect at least some of your produce to get stolen, i.e. plant an extra 10% or choose crops that produce continuously throughout the season. If you end up with more veggies than you need throughout the season, share them with the community instead of letting them go to waste. [Check out this list](#) of places to donate extra produce around Missoula.
- Hide desirable (tomatoes, peppers, etc.) or highly vandalized (pumpkins) crops behind other plants like root vegetables, and try to plant them towards the center of your plot.
- Visit the garden often and be mindful of your surroundings and visitors. This is especially important during the harvest season when theft and vandalism is more common.

- If you're comfortable, gently confront someone who appears to be stealing produce. An easy way to do this is to approach them, greet them, and ask how their garden is doing or which plot is theirs. If they seem uncomfortable or don't give much of an answer, keep the conversation going. Many people who steal don't really understand how our community gardens function—they might think the garden is intended for communal harvesting, or that a gardener won't miss a few tomatoes. Once they understand that it's made up of many people working hard to grow their own food, and they themselves can get a plot, they might want to join next year.
- Lightly dust your plants with flour. Veggies with a strange white dust on them may look diseased or covered with pesticides, which will deter theft.
- Don't invite kids or people in to freely pick your veggies because it might send the wrong message. Pick the vegetables yourself and share with kids or passing neighbors. You can also share produce with the community taking it to sites on our [Places to Donate Produce list](#).
- If you do experience any theft or vandalism, [report it](#) to Garden City Harvest. (<https://www.gardencityharvest.org/contact>)

## References

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