



Greenwood Avenue Cottages, Shoreline, Wash
Photo by Ross Chapin.

The impersonal hand of government can never replace the helping hand of a neighbor.
--Hubert Humphrey

10 Ways to Love Where You Live
--by Ross Chapin, Yes Magazine, Jun 21, 2012

Community is not just for extroverts.

For thousands of years, our ancestors lived in barrios, hamlets, neighborhoods, and villages. Yet in the time since our parents and grandparents were young, privacy has become so valued that many neighborhoods are not much more than houses in proximity.

Now, many activities take place behind locked doors and backyard privacy fences. The street out front is not always safe for pedestrians, and is often out of bounds for children. With families spread across the country and friends living across town, a person who doesn't know their neighbors can feel isolated and insecure. And when the links among neighbors are weak, security relies on locks, gates, and guns, rather than a closely knit web of connections.

Building a community from scratch is daunting. But the good news is that vibrant communities can grow over time from existing neighborhoods.

Right here, right now: Ten ways to build community.

Neighbors at N Street in Davis, Calif.,
joined their backyards.



Photo by Ross Chapin.

1. Move your picnic table to the front yard. See what happens when you eat supper out front. It's likely you'll strike up a conversation with a neighbor, so invite them to bring a dish to share.

2. Plant a front yard vegetable garden. Don't stop with the picnic table. Build a raised bed for veggies and plant edible landscaping and fruit trees. Break your boundaries by inviting your neighbors to share your garden.

3. Build a room-sized front porch. The magic of a good porch comes from both its private and public setting. It belongs to the household while also being open to passersby. Its placement, size, relation to the interior and the public space, and railing height are both an art and a science. Make it more than a tiny covering under which you fumble for your keys; make it big enough to be a veritable outdoor living room.

Front yard garden at Danielson
Grove, Kirkland, Wash.

Photo by Ross Chapin.



4. Add layers of privacy. Curiously, giving your personal space more definition will foster connections with neighbors. A secure space will be more comfortable and more often used, which will increase chances for seeing your neighbors—even if only in a passing nod.

But rather than achieving privacy with a tall fence, consider an approach with layers: a bed of perennial flowers in front of a low fence, with a shade tree to further filter the view. These layers help define personal boundaries, but are permeable at the same time.

5. Take down your backyard fence. Join with your neighbors to create a shared safe play space for children, a community garden, or a wood-fired pizza oven. In Davis, Calif., a group of neighbors on N Street did just that. Twenty years later, nearly all the neighbors around the block have joined in.

If that's too radical, consider cutting your six-foot fence to four feet to make chatting across the fence easier, or building a gate between yards.

Layers of privacy at Greenwood Avenue Cottages in Shoreline, Wash.

Photo by Ross Chapin.

6. Organize summer potluck street parties. Claim the street, gather the lawn chairs, and fire up the hibachi! Take over the otherwise off-limits street as a space to draw neighbors together.



7. Put up a book lending cupboard. Bring a book, take a book. Collect your old reads and share them with passersby in a cupboard mounted next to the sidewalk out front. Give it a roof, a door with glass panes, and paint it to match the flowers below.
8. Build resilience together. Create a neighborhood survey of



assets, skills, and needs for times of crisis. Frame it around "emergency preparedness," but watch how it cultivates community.

9. Create an online network for nearby neighbors. Expand the survey into an active online resource and communication tool. Find a new home for an outgrown bike. Ask for help keeping an eye out for a lost dog. Organize a yard sale.

Take advantage of free neighbor-to-neighbor networking tools such as Nextdoor to facilitate communications and build happier, safer neighborhoods.

10. Be a good neighbor. It's easy to focus on your own needs and concerns, but a slight shift in outlook can make a big difference in the day-to-day lives in a neighborhood. Check in on your elderly neighbor if her curtains aren't raised in the morning. On a hot summer day, put out a pitcher of ice lemonade for passersby, or a bowl of cool water for dogs on walks.

To be sure, grievances among neighbors are common. But when a neighborhood grows from a base of goodwill, little squabbles won't escalate into turf fights, and neighborhoods can become what they are meant to be: places of support, security, and friendship.



Cul-de-sac street party.

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