



STARTING AND MAINTAINING A SCHOOL GARDEN

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GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER

The National Farm to School Network is an information, advocacy and networking hub for communities working to bring local food sourcing and food and agriculture education into school systems and early care and education settings.

School gardens are an integral part of farm to school programs and offer a multitude of educational opportunities. They are wonderful instructional tools and engaging spaces in which to explore the entire curriculum. Whether they are container gardens or school farms, fruit trees or herb gardens, greenhouses or other on-site food production, school gardens serve as hands-on, interdisciplinary classrooms for students of all ages.

Getting Started

Below are some suggested steps for getting started with a school garden project. Each step is a learning opportunity.

1 Collaborate for School Garden Success

Involve school administrators, facilities staff, food service staff, students, teachers and the community throughout the planning process. Together, develop a vision for the school garden including how it will benefit the school, community and students; how the garden can be incorporated into existing school activities; a plan of action; and list of supporters and commitments.

2 Identify Goals and Design

As a group, identify goals for the garden. Consider these questions, which will serve as the foundation of your school garden:

- What purposes will the garden serve (education, food production, etc.)?
- How will the garden be integrated into learning objectives and standards-based instruction?
- How will students engage with the garden?
- Who will plan and maintain the garden?
- What will happen to the garden when school is not in session?
- Will the garden have a theme?

3 Designing the School Garden

This is a great step for engaging students. A school garden can be many shapes and sizes. Consider the size of your space, existing features, soil, sunlight, water sources, water drainage, security and safety, and plant selection. Test soil for toxins, contaminants or other harmful substances. Take into account existing assets and known/expected limitations.

Benefits of School Gardens*

- Increase in academic achievement
- Positive learning environment for teachers and students
- Increase in children's consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables
- Enhanced psychosocial development of youth
- Valuable tool in educational engagement



Garden Activities to Match Curricular Areas:

Math: Measure growth rates of plants and display results on different types of charts and graphs.

Science: Investigate the functions of different plant structures.

Language Arts: Keep daily garden journals documenting observations in the garden such as plant changes, weather conditions and classroom activities.

Art: Create beautiful artwork using paints derived from plant pigments or stamps formed from plant parts.

Health and Nutrition: Explore the many edible components of plants, the nutrition of different plants and create delicious recipes to sample.

History/Social Science: Investigate cultural or ethnic differences in food consumption and gardening practices.

Starter List of Supplies

(will vary with type of garden):

- Garden tools and gloves
- Materials for container gardens or raised beds if needed
- Soil free of toxins/pathogens
- Soil amendments/compost
- Irrigation supplies
- Seeds, vegetable starts, fruit trees, fruit bushes, etc.
- Children's literature and curricular resources

Training and Skills Needed for School Gardens

- Classroom management
- Food safety, handling practices
- Gardening 101

Designing the School Garden cont.

This is a good time to enlist the help of a local farmer, Master Gardener or other expert in the community. Dream big, engage imagination and consider possibilities, but also remain practical. A few containers in a courtyard can provide as much hands-on educational experience as a large garden. Identify your garden manager/coordinator—this point person will keep things moving forward.

4 Secure Funding and Resources

Consider donations, grants and specific fundraising events. Ask school administrators and parent groups for contributions from their budgets. Hardware stores and other local businesses often donate gardening supplies such as gloves, plants, soil and gardening tools. Consider a school garden fundraising activity/event such as seed or plant sales; hosting a garden dinner, silent auction or raffle; a craft or art sale with a garden theme; or create a "Donate a Tool Day."

5 Plant the Garden

The fun begins! This is usually the quickest step in the process, but one that children of all ages (and adults) can take part in. Consult experienced gardeners and regional planting guides to help decide when and what to plant. Planting day is a great way to raise awareness about your project, so get the word out through newsletters, flyers and other avenues.

6 Maintaining and Sustaining Your School Garden

The work with a school garden doesn't end on planting day. It is important to continue to care for the garden year-round so that students can enjoy the garden for years to come. Develop a sustainability plan for your garden that includes regular maintenance, identifying resources to plant and repair the garden in the future, continuing to build support by communicating your successes, providing training and tools to teachers and staff, and continuing to find ways to connect the garden with curriculum so that the garden is part of the school and experience. Consult with your local health department regarding food safety and regulations for using garden produce in the school meal program. Create a schedule for watering, weeding, thinning, mulching, fertilizing, composting and other activities involved in caring for and nurturing the garden. Students can do many of these tasks as part of a lesson plan, and you can reach out to community members and parents for support when school is not in season.

7 Most Importantly, Have Fun!

All of your work will pay off come harvest time when everyone can enjoy the fruits of their labor! In many parts of the country, the return to school in the fall is perfectly timed for full garden boxes. Consider planning a special event during National Farm to School Month in October to celebrate and enjoy the success of your school garden.

*References:

1) Bell A. 2001. *The Pedagogical Potential of School Grounds. Greening School Grounds: Creating Habitats for Learning*. New Society Publishers. 9-11; 2) Dirks AE, et al. *HortTechnology*, 2005, 15(3) 443-447; 3) Klemmer CD, et al. *HortTechnology*, 2005, 15(3): 448-452; 4) McAleese, JD, et al. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2007, 107(4) 662-665 5) Morris JL, et al. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2002, 34(3):175-6; 6) Morris JL, et al. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2002, 102(1):91-3; 7) Skelly SM, et al. *HortTechnology*. 2000, 10(1): 229-231; 8) Smith LL, et al. 2005. *HortTechnology*, 2005, 15(3): 439-443 9) Waliczek TM, et al. *HortTechnology*. 2003, 13(4): 684-68



With support from the National Farm to School Network's Seed Change initiative, Richland Parish School Board in Louisiana renovated its school greenhouses to serve a variety of purposes, including starting plants for community and school gardens, growing lettuce and tomatoes for school food service and incorporating the greenhouses into educational programs.

The National Farm to School Network has compiled resources on this topic and others as well as contact information for people in your state and region who are working on farm to school programs. Find more information and join our network: farmtoschool.org