

Step by Step Guide to Starting a School Garden **by Will Green**

Starting School Gardens - School gardens can provide an environment in which students can learn to work with teachers, parents and neighborhood resident volunteers while growing plants and learning the relationship between people, plants and wildlife. A school garden must function as a garden education center not only for the students, but for their parents and other neighborhood residents. The lessons that are taught at the garden site are limited only by one's creativity. And if you run out of ideas, there are many sources available on garden activities and exercises.

School Gardens are a special kind of learning center. Like libraries, they need responsible and knowledgeable people to do all the jobs necessary to maintain them as functional places in which children will learn. They should be seen as permanent additions and must be utilized year-round. Below is a framework which you should consider before starting your garden. Gardens require work, and if you have not thought through the following guidelines, your garden will become a learning aid which cannot be utilized.

Step 1--Form a Garden Committee

As a teacher, you do not have the time that is needed to coordinate the garden program. Someone else has to be responsible for the garden work, finding funds to support the garden, scheduling educational activities, finding and training volunteers, researching and disseminating information. Forming a garden committee from a pool of dedicated people with those skills, will enhance the success of your program. Look for volunteers among the school staff, parents, and local residents. Or if you know of a gardener, ask that person to volunteer, or to recommend another gardener.

Step 2--Define the purpose and objectives of your garden

Every school garden must fulfill some need or objective. This is why each garden is unique. All teachers utilize the garden as a learning aid. For some teachers it may reinforce natural science classroom studies. For others it may reinforce social studies. Some teachers may utilize the garden across all curriculums. Whatever your needs are, by addressing these issues, you will have a better understanding of the work involved in this stage.

Step 3--Layout your students gardening activities

By determining your objectives at this early stage, you will have the opportunity to look at your lesson plans to see when and what types of garden lessons are needed. If you need help finding educational exercises and activities, there are many resources available for teachers (see below). You will need to determine which groups of students will be doing what and when, and determine how bed space will be allocated. The experiences and input from your garden committee will be helpful at this stage. This is your opportunity to schedule specific activities at specific times or assign certain tasks to your volunteers.

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Step 4--Define a year-round garden plan

You have identified what your garden will be like while school is in session. But now, you need to think about your garden during summer break. The main question is, "Who is going to keep this garden maintained until school starts?" "How do you want the garden to look on the first day of school?" A year-round garden use plan will account for any school break.

Step 5--Choose a permanent garden site and design your garden

Your garden site should be in an area that receives plenty of sunlight, has good drainage, and in close proximity to water, electricity and accessible to students, volunteers, and teachers. The site should have enough room for your garden, tool storage, and students. Maintaining a large garden will use up all of your time and energy so select a relatively small area.

Step 6--Build your Garden according to plan

This is the big moment when teachers, volunteers, students and their parents pool their resources and build this permanent addition to the school.