

Checklist for Starting a School Garden

Prepared by Dorothy Mullen, Princeton School Garden Cooperative, NJ
www.DorothyMullen.org

Check off or fill in the blanks. Any place you don't know the answer is where the trouble is likely to come from.

Stakeholders

School gardens rise and fall on the relationships of the people who make them happen. Cultivate the relationships like you take care of the soil. We have found that the best "way of being" is to "become water" and flow into the areas where it is possible to start. Particularly where administrators have had bad experiences – like parents making a garden, moving on, and leaving a weed patch – fighting or pressing will just make things worse. If they don't care about nutrition, start with a colonial herb garden and teach history, the kids will find plenty to eat while they're out there.

___ Administrator

(At least one is non-negotiable. Principals can approve or deny teacher training time, determine use of space, dedicate funds. It is very important to know what he/she cares about and stay on that page)

___ Teachers

(At least a few with buy-in is non-negotiable. Even if teachers do not drive the garden, they will decide if the children will go out there. It is very important to know what they care about and make sure the garden provides enough of that)

___ Parents

(At least a few is helpful but may not be necessary. Many of the tasks can be performed by anyone who is willing to devote the time, but only teachers and administrators decide if the children will use the garden. Parents can make it easy for others to say yes by understanding institutional priorities and teaching lessons that coincide)

___ Students

(Assumed. Old enough students can be a great source of labor. Request parents or other adults volunteer some time assisting at after school garden club and work days to learn with and from the children)

___ Community Volunteers

(Helpful but may not be necessary. Gardens attract attention from the community. There may be a lot of talent in the form of garden clubs, Master Gardeners, potential donors of gifts and services. If none of the school insiders understand the horticultural needs of the garden, this will have to come from the community)

___ Custodian

(May not be necessary, but he or she should be on the team to be sure certain maintenance requirements are met)

___ Cafeteria staff or food service

(May not be necessary for sustaining the garden, but will have to be on the team if food and nutrition education or garden-to-table are priorities. In any case, good relationships should be courted as an investment in the kids' food future even if this is not a current school priority)

___ Nurses

(Not necessary, but potential great allies of the process) School nurses and health teachers will find a lot of good curriculum connections for health, safety, nutrition, and hygiene in the garden. In Princeton we have started doing nurse-led field trips to the local whole food store and tying them in with lessons in the herb garden.

___ Librarian

(May not be necessary, but the librarian is a great ally of the process.)

___ The coordinator

(the buck-stops-here-person) Who is the identified person or small group that will deal with the life or death issues of a living classroom when details fall through the cracks or assignments are not clear

___ Team

(Of the above, who will serve as the steering team to make sure the non-negotiable requirements of the garden are met)

___ School and community gardeners in neighboring schools and other towns. Connect to the people who have what you want and find out how they got it. Make a list for your area. You can share resources. You can form a cooperative. You can create your own non-profit and act as your own fiscal agents. You can use each other as precedents to show the people in power how the Joneses are doing it next door.

Purpose

___ Articulate what the garden is for. If several people are in it for different reasons, can they agree on the purposes of doing a garden. Are the priorities learning where food comes from, improving nutritional status, or spontaneous learning? What does each of the stakeholders want out of the process?

___ Articulate the values that drive the garden (For example, will it be organic, will commercial fertilizers be allowed. You may need this later to help decide from whom you will or will not accept donations)

Location

___ Space

___ 6 hours of sun at minimum for vegetables. Place a sheet of paper in what you think is a sunny spot and record the sunlight hours through the day

___ Water source must be very convenient. Watering takes place ideally very early in the day, afterschool second. Consider mulching to reduce use.

___ No blockage from trees for water and sun.

___ High accessible location for all stakeholders.

___ Protection. What might threaten the gardens, people? pests? Plan for protection from whatever the local threat is.

Design

The design will be driven by the purposes the garden is to serve, the desires of the team, the available space, and the needs of the plants you select. Most of the early effort should go into care of the soil, then any design will thrive.

___ Make a map. It will have many uses including mapping crop rotation.

___ Make sure you can afford the design you want or have a means of raising the money.

___ Space limitations. Straw bale gardening (using a series of bales with 6 inches of soil on top as a raised bed) and containers (like Earthbox) provide options for schools with extremely limited space

Elements for designing the garden as an outdoor classroom include:

___ Garden beds, rectangular, square or hexagon, with clear wide (4ft) pathways around the bed.

___ A sitting area, including tables, preferably out of the harsh sun

___ Compost area

___ Tool shed or storage area

___ Cold frames or greenhouse, if using them

___ Signage

___ Fencing, if needed

___ Scheduling classes

___ Instructional materials (lenses, books, field guides, seeds and starting materials, scales, measuring devices)

Horticultural Needs

In addition to the obvious sun, water, and space needs, each plant has specific requirements.

___ Did you do a soil test? Soil for raised beds needs amendments. The extension office for your county has kits.

___ Do you know the needs for amendments, based on the soil test?

___ What is your zone? Know what grows in your geographic area and when.

___ What are your last frost date and first frost date?

___ How is the garden oriented? You want to face south, with tall plants on the north side and short plants on the south side to maximize sunlight hours.

___ Buy or order seeds and plants with consideration to planting dates and needs of different plants. Read the labels.

___ Tools: Depending on how many children will be working at a time, you'll need multiple rakes, shovels, trowels, clippers, scissors, hose, forks for turning soil and compost, a mallet for pounding in stakes, wire clipper, measuring tape, thermometers for air and compost.

___ Supports: What are your needs of trellises, ladders, etc.

___ Maintenance schedule: watering, weeding, staking, fertilizing, pruning, bug picking, turning compost, mulching, cover crop planting in fall

___ Schedule work days for volunteers

___ Harvesting and subsequent planting in the emptied bed

___ Crop rotation schedule

___ Schedule orders

Curriculum Needs

___ Must this garden provide a setting for learning things that have to be taught or is it more a setting for spontaneous learning, both?

___ Are the curriculum or extracurricular interests of the participating teachers well represented in the design?

Types of Gardens

For elementary schools, the biggest bang for the curriculum buck is an herb garden. You can combine many elements into one garden.

___ Food production, “snack” destination, source for food service

___ Setting for multi-disciplinary learning

___ Herb Garden

___ Butterfly or pollinator gardens

___ Sensory Garden

___ Community partnership garden

Safety Rules and Agreements

___ Set up the rules that protect the people (use of senses for plant identification, don't eat anything until you are sure it is food, when using tools stay your arm's length plus the tool length away from the next person, walking while holding tools, who is allowed to use which tools, discussion of pest controls and why we use what we use)

___ Set up rules that protect the plants (keeping feet on pathways, using two hands to pick plants so you don't uproot them, discussion of pest controls, keeping the gate shut)

___ Set up group agreements about being inclusive, how to behave towards people, insects and plants.

Community Outreach and Involvement

___ Consider what funds, goods, expertise, and services do not come from within the school community and whether you want the donation of a thing (for example, tools or machinery) or the service.

___ Consider who will take photographs and write press releases or thank you letters to the editor and donors. Be sure to follow school policy about parental permission to use images. Have all volunteer sign media release forms.

___ Consider how you will inform parents and the school community about garden activity.

___ Consider your system for requesting and thanking donors. Green Village Initiative offers schools seeds, seedlings, soil, and compost twice a year in the early fall and early spring.

___ Identify the talent in the community, garden clubs, Master Gardeners, environmental groups, environmental groups at the other schools in the district, 4-H, parents and friends with gifts for carpentry or other services

Events

___ Plan seasonal events, scripted tours for the public, tomato tastings, pesto day, colonial day fair, tea harvest and drying, harvest dinner, poetry readings, garden cycle tours and fundraisers like plant sales

Challenges

___ People move on. (If the garden is dependent on the good will of too few people, the principal may be left with a weed patch when those folks move on. Tell the principal up front what the exit strategy is so he or she can feel comfortable saying yes to a garden.

___ Summer care. Offer parents and volunteers picking rights and designate an area for them to grow food in exchange for summer volunteer hours. Or plant spring and fall but not summer harvest crops and vastly reduce the needs of the garden during summer break

___ Curriculum. Different stakeholders may have different ideas about how much the garden must be driven by curriculum and how much it should provide opportunities for spontaneous, seasonal learning, or food. This needs to be discussed.