



## 7 Steps to Creating a Successful School Garden

By:

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## **7 Steps to Creating a Successful School Garden**

School gardens can be a great asset to the school environment. However, the process involves careful planning and good management skills. The school garden is not a one person show. Rather, it should be a collaborative effort that involves administrators, students, teachers, parents, and other members of the community.

### **Step 1-The Committee**

Organization is one of the most important keys to the success of any endeavor, including the school garden. Forming a good committee that will be able to oversee the operation of the garden is critical to the success of the school garden. Your committee may be as small as five members or it may be as large as 15 or more members. Of course, you should have at least one representative from each of the following:

- Students
- Teachers
- Parents
- Community members

It is a good idea to survey your perspective student committee members and choose those who are actively involved in farming or gardening at their home. Even though this would be an asset, it is not absolutely necessary. Teachers who teach science classes such as biology, botany, chemistry, or agriculture would make great committee members. Of course the ideal teacher for the job would be one who has a garden or farm of their own. Similarly, parents who do gardening or who farm would be great committee members. Other community members of the committee could include business men and women, politicians, supervisors, and the like. This group could provide financial benefits for your garden program, in addition to serving as thought partners and builders. A suggested school garden committee of ten members could effectively help organize and manage the community garden.

### **Step 2-Select a garden manager for the School Garden**

One could compare the school garden committee to a board of directors. It would be their job to select a chairman or director of your school garden program. Their role is to coordinate the daily details. The “garden leader” or “garden manager” may be a school principal, an experienced teacher or an experienced gardener from the community. She or he should be backed by a small team who between them have commitment, interest, experience, authority and contacts: for example, the head teacher, some parents or community members, a few students, a school inspector, a health worker, the school caretaker. Later a wider network of helpers and supporters can be built up.

The garden leader should have a colleague who can act as a deputy when necessary. It is also a good idea to establish an executive team of senior students who are able to carry on without much supervision.

The garden leader can be led by a teacher, aide, or experienced volunteer. Their roles will be covering basic gardening practices, safety, discipline, as well as the purpose and philosophy of your school garden.

### **Step 3-Plan the Garden**

Planning the school garden should involve the school garden committee, other interested parents, district and school administrators, school staff such as the grounds keeper, as well as the class(es) that will be the main participants in the school garden. These key persons should need to meet initially in order to determine:

1. The design of the garden
2. How many plots the garden will contain
3. A start date for the garden
4. What to plant in the garden
5. What to do with the produce obtained from the garden
6. A schedule for those who will tend the garden
7. A schedule for those who will harvest the garden
8. The materials and supplies needed for the garden
9. The budget for the garden
10. The seasons that the garden will be in operation
11. Fundraising for the upkeep and sustainability of the garden
12. The use of volunteers in the school garden
13. Integrating the school garden into the class curriculum

The thirteen items listed above suggest a need for sub-committees that may include the care and harvesting of the garden as well as a fundraising committee.

### **Step 4-Find a Site for the School Garden**

The best way to find the ideal site for the school garden is to involve the school maintenance personnel and the school grounds keeper.

- They would know where pipes are located underground that do not need to be disturbed.
- They would know where the closest water source would be located for the garden.
- In addition, you want the garden located where it would receive sufficient sunlight.
- You also want the garden easily accessible by the students.
- Finally, you want good visibility where the community can see your beautiful school garden.

### **Step 5-Selecting the proper Tools and Equipment**

Some tools that will be useful in the garden include: spades, iron rakes, leaf rakes, hoes, spading forks, shovels, pruning shears/scissors, tool cleaning brush, wheelbarrows, watering cans, hoses/nozzles, and trowels. Other useful items to have on hand include: rain gauge, twine/string, sharp knife, stakes, and harvest baskets. Finally, be sure to include a storage facility that is specifically for the school garden equipment and materials.

The quantity of each sort of gardening tool you buy will depend on your budget and the scale of your program. But be sure to buy quality tools, even though they cost a little more. Well-made tools will hold up under the wear and tear youngsters often give them. There are also tools available that are scaled to children's sizes.

While gardening tools are not dangerous when used properly, it is important that all students (and adults) be instructed in their proper use. Set up a consistent training program to teach the basics of safe tool use.

### **Step 6 -Planting the Garden**

Make the opening of the garden a grand event. Kids love it when there is good food and a little folly involved. Do not create a stressful atmosphere for them. However, be sure to have rules for the use and care of tools.

### **Step 7- Strong Pool of Volunteers**

Volunteers are a major part of successful garden programs. Volunteers can help you build a tool shed or fence, organize a fundraiser to pay for a garden aide, contribute gardening expertise, or help you in the classroom.

Once you have your volunteers lined up, the next task is to organize them. Ideally, organizing your school garden volunteers will be a task for a volunteer support committee. It can make recruiting, organizing, training, and scheduling volunteers one of its tasks. While the initial establishment of a volunteer corps can be time consuming, this groundwork will result in an ongoing, dedicated, and reliable group that provides a steady flow of energetic help.

Let your volunteers observe the class until they feel comfortable supervising a small group on their own. Keep the number of students per volunteer as low as possible.

Regular volunteer meetings will not only allow you to discuss activities and address problems and questions, but will also let the volunteers know how valuable they are to your program.

Keep parents informed as you plan your outdoor classroom. Send home flyers letting them know about your new outdoor classroom and how they might get involved. Ask them for specific types of help, such as expert help in gardening, design, or carpentry, and donations of tools, materials, and supplies.

Volunteers will come to you with varying degrees of expertise. Some may have experience with children, some with gardening, and others with both. Provide a short orientation for new volunteers.

### **Conclusion**

If you followed the guide you can celebrate your harvest because you have all worked so hard! Be sure to plan a special event and invite everyone who helped your school build the garden.

And don't forget to alert the local media and provide your own coverage through your social media channels. A good strong team of administrators, partnerships and volunteers are key to the development of your school garden, from approving and arranging teacher time for workshops. Your principal can also be an important school garden advocate outside of your school—an ambassador to your school district and your community. It is essential that the principal be an active participant in the process.

School gardening is rapidly gaining momentum and popularity as the best way to cultivate everything from flowers and food to medicine. In the West and Midwest, School gardening is now widely accepted by consumers and is quickly catching on in other areas. By now you should be well on your way to planting your first crop of produce. I hope that I have answered all of your questions, and I have provided you with a strong understanding of school gardening. We are constantly striving to include a complete selection of components, nutrients and accessories that you may require to build and maintain the gardens.

### **Good Luck and Happy Growing!**

Contact Mississippi Farm to School Network's Co-Lead Dorothy Grady-Scarborough for more information on school gardening in Mississippi: [dorothy.mega@gmail.com](mailto:dorothy.mega@gmail.com) or 662.402.4798

The Mississippi Farm to School Network works to connect farmers with schools in order to bring Mississippi products to school cafeterias. We seek to strengthen the local agricultural economy and educate Mississippians on the importance of eating locally-grown, nutritionally-dense foods. By gathering a diverse community of farm to school advocates, the network strives to reach all students and their families.

Learn more at <http://www.mississippifarmtoschool.org>