



Your Goals



Plan for Plants

If one of your goals this year is to start a class garden, it's already time to start planning!

BY MARY JEAN BABIC

WE KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING—sure, it would be nice to start a school garden, but there will be plenty of time to do it in the spring. Think again. By the time spring rolls around, you'll be so busy with all your other school projects and obligations that if you haven't

planned ahead, the garden will be the first item to get struck from your to-do list. Why not set yourself up for success, and start planning now? With our handy guide, it will be a breeze. We'll show you just how (and when!) to do each step.

PHOTO: LENA GRAMSFELT/MEDIA BAKERY



SCHOOL GARDENS

FALL: Choose a Location

When staff, parents, and students at Evening Street Elementary School in Worthington, Ohio, set out to build a school garden, they quickly learned that “you can’t just go out and plop a garden down on the grass,” says Principal Mary Rykowski. You need maximum sunlight and available water. And you can’t assume the soil is okay; it is important to get it tested. (The local Cooperative Extension office—there’s one in every city or county—can perform the test at a low cost. You can also buy a do-it-yourself test at a garden store.)

At Evening Street, fifth graders conducted a sun study and determined that the ideal spot for a garden was in front of the school. No dice; city zoning laws wouldn’t allow planting there. So they looked at the back of the school. A test revealed concrete in the soil, where, apparently, a stadium had once stood. Finally, the students settled on a paved patio outside the kindergarten room that got plenty of light. The spot had the added benefit of being situated in a visible place—near the bus unloading zone—so kids could see it every day and get excited about their project.

EARLY WINTER: Form a Committee

As the weather turns colder, bring your planning indoors and form a school garden committee. It may sound like drudgery, but experienced school gardeners vow that this is by far the most important step. The committee should include teachers, administrators, parents, and custodial and cafeteria staff, and possibly neighbors and local civic organizations. Get students in on your recruiting efforts—they’re often the most persuasive!

“Build as much interest and buy-in as possible,” says Denise Richter, program manager of Edible Schoolyard New Orleans and a longtime garden educator. One or two enthusiasts may be able to create a garden but not sustain it. Says Richter, “The tragedy of



“If they find worms in the digging station, they can bring them to a flower bed to give them a happy home ... and learn how worms perform soil aeration.” —Kevin Pope, science teacher, Future Leaders Institute

a lot of school gardens is that, without this committee, you end up with a cute little garden at a school rather than a fully integrated school garden.” That is, one that supports the school’s vision and purpose.

Committee members should work together to create a vision for your garden. What do you want it to do? Which grades will be involved? How will it be integrated into the curriculum? Where is the closest water source? Who will maintain the garden during the summer? Grow to Learn NYC’s website, growtolearn.org, offers a “garden wizard” worksheet to help committees think through these questions.

LATE WINTER: Design and Gather Supplies

A garden can be anything from a couple of containers to raised beds to rows of in-ground plantings. More ambitious rooftop or hydroponic gardens are also possible. Each design has pros

and cons—raised beds, for example, are great for pavement-locked urban schools but costs for materials can add up; besides, who’s going to schlep water up to the roof? The decision will be dictated by budget, available space, and needs. Assign committee members to draw up a plan (and budget) for the garden you choose. Students can participate by researching different types of gardens and the produce they want to plant.

At Evening Street, each grade in the K–6 school was assigned one raised bed. Teachers let students decide what to sow in their grade’s bed. First graders chose native Ohio wildflowers; second graders, a “salsa garden” of tomatoes, peppers, and onions; and third graders, corn. Lowe’s stores donated material for the beds, and parents contributed soil and plants.

The garden at Future Leaders Institute, a K–8 charter school in Harlem, was designed to impart a sense of environmental stewardship

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): RACHEL WEIL/MEDIA BAKERY; CHARLIE SCHUCK/MEDIA BAKERY; LEE DELANO



and encourage healthy eating. The garden is divided into stations for digging, watering, weeding, and harvesting, as well as one for reflection and writing.

The setup helps accommodate full classes, which rotate through stations in 10-minute shifts, says Kevin Pope, a fourth- and fifth-grade science teacher. “If they find worms in the digging station, they can bring them to a flower bed to give them a happy home,” and also learn how worms perform beneficial soil aeration, says Pope.

SPRING: Get Planting!

This is when all of your hard work and planning will really pay off. When you plant and harvest depends, of course, on where you live and what you grow, but here’s a general schedule for planting a vegetable garden.

- **Mid-March**
Plant seeds indoors, if you’re starting from seed.
- **Late March/early April**
Prepare the outdoor beds. Turn the soil over, folding in any leaves that were covering it, and work in some compost as well.
- **Early/mid-April**
Plant the early-harvest vegetables, such as lettuce, spinach, peas, broccoli, onions, brussels sprouts, and

radishes. These guys thrive in cool weather and can handle a light frost, which may make them taste even better.

- **Mid-May**
Time to plant the veggies that love heat and can’t handle frost: tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, melons, cucumbers, green beans, zucchinis, summer squash, and so on.
- **Late May/early June**
First harvest! Gather up the spring vegetables and set aside a day to have a school garden feast. Invite volunteers who have helped to make the garden happen.

Wrapping up Evening Street’s first growing season, Principal Rykowski enthuses about having a “living lab” on school grounds. “I would just so recommend this to any school,” she says. “There’s so much learning and community building that happens.”

SUMMER INTO FALL: Enlist Volunteers

During the summer months, you don’t want your efforts to die on the vine—be sure the weeds are pulled and the plants watered. This is a great time to enlist parents, says Evening Street parent Kathryn Hindall, who helped line up fellow parent volunteers. Now, when she checks on the garden, she finds that anonymous caretakers have already tended to it. “People have just gone and done it, because they feel connected to the school,” she says.

By back-to-school time in late August or early September, the tomatoes, peppers, and other warm-weather veggies are ready to harvest. Consider planting winter-hardy vegetables such as collards, parsnips, and leeks in October. Throw in some garlic bulbs, too, and harvest next spring ... when you’ll start the whole thing all over again.

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SCHOOL GARDENS



CAN'T GARDEN OUTDOORS?

Try these indoor activities that feed science learning.

- **Herb Garden** Growing herbs indoors creates sensory experience, says Denise Richter, program manager for Edible Schoolyard New Orleans. Grow lights are an option, she says, but not necessary: Most rooms receive enough sunlight to coax something out of the soil.
- **Salad Bowl** Julianne Schrader, director of Grow to Learn NYC, suggests growing lettuce from seeds. This is also a good winter activity, when an outdoor garden is dormant. "Kids get so excited

when they see their seeds sprout," she says. "Then you can harvest the leaves and make a classroom salad."

- **No-Plant Garden** Your lesson doesn't have to involve planting at all, says Richter. Collecting and identifying leaves, starting a worm compost operation, or making "pots" for seedlings from recycled newspaper are just a few ways to create garden projects without planting.

For more curriculum suggestions, check out these websites:

- edibleschoolyard.org
- growtolearn.org
- kidsgardening.org □

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