

## **Part 1**

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# **Managing Your School or Youth Garden Program**



## Cultivating Support

A school gardening project may be as simple as a potted plant in the classroom or as complex as the creation of an urban wildlife habitat on campus. The larger the project, the wider the base of support needed to sustain it. No matter what size the project, it is critical that the students and the teacher(s) buy in at the beginning. “Ownership” is key to developing long-term support for any project. The more people who are certain that they shaped the program, that their personal input has made the project possible, the more people with a stake in the project’s success.

In addition to providing an outstanding exercise in planning, organizing and decision making, including the students and teacher(s) in the development process connects them with the garden and ensures their commitment to its success. The experience of creating the garden is a critical component and this is why it is important to see the garden as a perpetual project, rather than something that was built by the class of 1997. Each class, each year, should have an opportunity to build and create the garden.

This same concept of ownership inspired by the responsibility of creation and stewardship applies to other garden partners as well. The more directly they are connected to the garden—the more active a role you can inspire them to take—the stronger their commitment to the garden will be.

Involve people early in the process. While it might seem expeditious to formulate the entire plan and then invite people to help you implement it, it is much more effective to include as many of the potential partners as soon as possible. Allowing them to have input into the plan entitles them to some responsibility for its success. It will also increase the likelihood of identifying and heading off potential pitfalls.

So, who should you include on this planning team? Students, teachers, parents, staff, administrators, maintenance personnel—everyone you can think of who will be involved in or impacted by the project. If you intend to have the produce from the garden used in the cafeteria, include the dietician. If you intend to have the students set up a farmer’s market to sell the produce, include the business teachers and representatives of the neighborhood associations. The more partners you establish up front, the fewer challenges you will have down the road. The school principal is a particularly important partner.

## Administrative Support

Involve your principal or administrator early in the planning stages and keep him or her posted on your progress. The introduction of a gardening program requires organization and follow-through, and your ability to mobilize a strong core group of teachers, parents and other volunteers will help to convince your principal of the garden’s viability.

No matter what the size of your project, your principal will probably want your thoughts on at least the following areas:

- Why do you want to start this gardening program?
- What are its goals?
- Who will provide the leadership, initially and ongoing?
- Who is participating and how will they become involved?
- What is the length of the program?
- What are your space requirements and have you identified possible sites?
- What tools, garden supplies and other materials do you need?
- How expensive is the program and have funding sources and/or donors been identified?

Once on board, your administrator can support your efforts in a number of ways: securing the garden site, allowing in-service time for planning, providing support during budgeting sessions, securing resources from the community, inviting school board members to view the program or integrating the cafeteria with the

garden (periodically providing for a student-grown meal and composting the kitchen's wastes). Involve your principal—his or her visible support is a powerful tool.

The school administration includes other people—be sure to involve the maintenance staff in your planning. They will have plenty of advice (and maybe a few contacts) on electrical and water systems, and might even find a storage closet for your supplies and tools. A friendly eye overlooking an early morning watering system is always welcome, too.

If you decide to start with a small pilot plot or use a container gardening approach indoors or out, keep the principal posted on the progress of these smaller initiatives. Also, photograph your progress, keep a journal of activities and continue to marshal parental, volunteer and faculty support for the larger garden project.



### TIP

It is simple to gaze appreciatively at the children's plants and flowers. It is not always easy to make the connection between that garden and the multidisciplinary learning going on both there and in the classroom. Don't just invite officials to view the garden. Bring them along on a day the garden is abuzz with activities. Better yet, hand them a trowel...

## A Growing Partnership

In order to effectively recruit and maintain fruitful partnerships, it is essential that you and your team clearly define your vision, your goals and your needs. You must also be able to succinctly explain what you expect to accomplish with your project. For example, will you increase school attendance, parental involvement on campus, student test scores and/or girls' interest in science? However, don't predict it unless you are planning to measure and report on the impact.

A steering committee is strongly recommended. Comprised of teachers, parents and perhaps an administrator, a collective ef-

fort will make it much easier to install the garden, make capital improvements, gather seeds and supplies, raise funds, develop projects, schedule activities, coordinate weed-and-feed parties and secure community support. Committees provide for program continuity in the face of staff and enrollment changes and prevent the burnout of a single garden coordinator.

In some instances, the committee may be faculty-driven; in others, a parent-chaired committee, under your parent-teacher organization (PTO), may manage the garden and support class activities through parent or community volunteers. Your administrator and PTO leadership will have some thoughts on the appropriate committee structure and leadership.

Members of the committee also ensure that garden operational needs are met. Is there a class use schedule to ensure tool availability? Do the tools need repair or sharpening? Who maintains the volunteer roster for each classroom? How is the watering scheduled? What is the site maintenance plan for weeding, fertilizing, turning the compost or amending the soil? Who is handling the disbursement of money? Who is assigning the beds to the classrooms? None of this is difficult work, but it can be time consuming. Assigning the duties to several parties helps to ensure a continued pleasant garden experience for all.

As early as possible, create an annual program of activities. Post it near the garden to generate interest. It also lends structure to the committee's activities, fund raising and donor campaigns.

### **Building Effective Partnerships**

- Involve all key players.
- Establish a shared vision.
- Choose a realistic strategy.
- Agree to disagree when necessary.
- Follow through on all commitments.
- Stay focused on the vision.
- Build ownership by all partners.
- Publicize success.