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## Dog Days of Summer

**M**aintaining the garden through the summer vacation can be a challenge. It may be most helpful to you and the garden to consider this a time of much-needed rest for, and rejuvenation of, the soil. Unlike a temperate climate garden that lies fallow under a bed of leaves in the winter, your school garden in the desert will never “get a break” unless you use some summers for periods of inactivity. This is a good time to solarize the soil if you have nematode, disease or weed problems or to plant a cover crop to enrich the soil before fall term resumes.



### Solarization

Solarization can be thought of as pasteurizing the soil through trapped solar radiation. Cultivate manure into the soil, water well (we’re talking steam heat in this process), cover loosely with *clear*, heavy plastic, about 1–2 millimeters thick, and bury the edges. A minimum of six weeks of solarization is required for the extreme heat to reach the pathogens and weed seeds at lower soil depths.

### Cover Crops

Feeding the soil with a cover crop is easy. A cover crop is simply homegrown organic matter that is planted directly in the soil that you want to improve. In the summer, alfalfa, buckwheat, soybeans or sorghum can be a good cover crop. You must turn the crops under (till them into the ground) before the reproductive (flower) stage so that the plants do not start using up the nitrogen they have just built up in their root systems and which you want to keep in the soil. When turned under young, a cover-cropped garden can be recultivated and seeded in two or three weeks.



Alternatively, with a little planning and a few volunteers, some gardens survive the summer break with as few visits as every other week. Sun exposure, heavy mulching, a watering system on a timer, and the crops remaining are the issues to contemplate. Before leaving school for summer recess, think about planting some vegetables that will make it through the summer, with afternoon shade, for fall harvest (okra, eggplant).

### Summer Maintenance

- ☺ Will volunteers check on the garden and perform some routine maintenance and watering functions?
- ☺ Can fund raising cover a small hourly wage to students for working in the garden?
- ☺ Will the maintenance staff be available and willing to help with watering from time to time?
- ☺ Are there any volunteers who would work in exchange for garden produce?
- ☺ Will there be a summer school program on campus, and could a class adopt the garden during that time?
- ☺ Will other city or county departments, such as parks or recreation, use the school during the summer, and if so, could the summer program include the garden?