

How to Start a Garden

Whether it is at home or at school, starting a garden is one important way to teach our children respect for the environment. In the process of gardening, kids also gain important life skills such as cooperation, teamwork, delayed gratification, and self-respect.

So, let's plant a school garden!

Start With an Indoor Garden at School and even at Home

Because the growing season in most of the United States doesn't correspond to the school year, many classrooms start with an indoor garden. Light systems and activity guides allow teachers to grow plants in the midst of winter and conduct experiments integrating math, science, and language arts. They also use indoor growing labs to start plants for transplant to outdoor gardens in spring. You can do this at home too!

Though growing a garden under lights is usually a project undertaken by individual classroom teachers, they tend to get other faculty and students interested in plants and the process of growing. It also becomes very clear that kids learn best through hands-on activities. This often is the starting point for developing an outdoor garden. But such a large project requires that everyone — school administrators, staff, teachers, parents, and students — get involved. Here is a brief outline to follow to make sure everyone can benefit and contribute to the project.

Form a Garden Committee

Since teachers are usually very busy, responsibility for organizing the garden is often taken on by a parent or neighborhood volunteer — someone like you! The first step is to form a garden committee. Six to 12 people seems to be a magic number for getting things done; more is fine as long as you have a strong communication system. These garden teams can include faculty, administrators, parents, teachers' aides, and interested neighbors. Determine clear roles for members of the garden committee to ease delegation of tasks. Help teachers envision the different ways they can use the garden as a learning context.

Make A Plan

While the committee may include just a handful of teachers, staff, and parent volunteers, it's essential to involve as many people as you can in the planning process — especially the students, because if they don't feel ownership in the project, they're less likely to connect with the garden.

Here are some key questions to ask during the planning process:

- How will the garden be integrated into the curriculum for all grades?
- How much will the students be involved in the design and maintenance of the garden?



- How will the garden be sustained during the summer months?
- What materials will you need?
- What's the budget for the garden?
- Do you need to solicit funds and materials from outside the school to create and maintain the garden?



Invite students to participate in garden design, maintenance, harvesting, and fundraising. Let them help select at least some of the crops and ornamental plants, create designs for planting, and be responsible for the harvest.

Find a Site

Once there's agreement to start a garden on school grounds, you'll need to take a walk and find the best site. Ideally your garden's location will be in full sun and on well-drained, fertile soil. It should be accessible by volunteers, kids, and teachers; have a place to store tools and equipment; and be close to a water source.

Start small. Base the size and layout of the garden on the number of classrooms that will be participating in the garden and the amount of volunteer help you have to maintain it. Remember, you can always expand the garden later, but if you start too big you can quickly be overwhelmed by the work. Conduct a soil test to determine fertility needs and if there are any contaminants on the site.

Develop Community Support

Once your group is clear on the plan for the garden and you've located an appropriate site, you'll need to enlist some community support. Local business and organizations can donate tools, plants, supplies, and labor. Brainstorm fundraising events to bring in money for larger items.

Raise awareness of the garden throughout the whole school by inviting staff and students to volunteer planting days. The pride and the popularity of the project will increase dramatically when kids can see how they benefit from it. Encourage them to recognize that their outdoor work benefits others, too, through beautification and habitat restoration.

To foster more community investment in the project, host an "open house" and offer tours once the garden is built. If possible, designate a portion of the area as a community garden for the neighborhood. You might even offer neighbors free access to garden plots, tools, and water use in exchange for maintenance of the school garden during school vacations.

More Resources

For more detailed guidance on starting a school garden, visit NGA's Kidsgardening.org Web site. NGA also offers in-kind grants to youth gardens for materials and supplies. You can also sign up for support by participating in NGA's Adopt a School Garden program. Learn more about all of these opportunities at www.kidsgardening.org.