

SO YOU WANT TO START A *School Garden*



**Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Division of Food, Nutrition and Wellness
Farm to School Program**



SO YOU WANT TO START A SCHOOL GARDEN...

Do you want to start a new or revitalize an existing school garden? Great idea! Before you jump in head first, keep in mind that successful and sustainable school gardens must be well planned, which is why we have put together this step-by-step guide to help you develop your school garden from beginning to end.

First and foremost, what will it take to start and sustain a thriving school garden? All too often when people answer that question, they consider only the agricultural aspects of gardening with thoughts like, “We need seeds, a sunny location and a water source!” Though such agricultural components are essential, *school gardens are more than just gardens.*

They are outdoor classrooms, writing laboratories and science observatories; they are a chance for young people to breathe fresh air while learning about nutrition and where their food comes from. School gardens produce food that can benefit school cafeterias, families and even food pantries. They are a great way to engage parent volunteers and develop relationships with community partners.

With so much more than a simple garden in mind, your school garden will require things such as a dedicated leadership team, volunteers, partners, a watering schedule, curriculum and access to cooking equipment, just to name a few. What’s true of community gardens is also true of school gardens: they both begin with *community*.

Our goal is to help you find and organize the people and assets you’ll need to develop and sustain a great school garden. The backbone of this guide is an eight-step process for getting your garden in the ground. Additionally, there will be side-bars that expand on key ideas and/or provide additional resources. We’ll conclude

with a few simple tips compiled by garden experts that will pave the way for success. If anything is true about school gardens, it is that every garden is different, and each successful school garden has its own unique development story. In this light, take our play-by-play guide with a grain of salt. Add, amend or omit steps as you assess the interest levels and community assets available to your team.

May your school garden thrive!

ASSEMBLING YOUR TEAM: KNOW YOUR ASSETS!



Knowing your assets means recognizing that everyone has something to bring to the table. Rather than focusing on deficiencies or needs, the best way to develop your project is to stress the strengths and capacities of the people on your team.

Everyone has at their disposal resources, skills and connections. In terms of a school garden project, resources might look like a shovel, a free hour once a week, a bunch of crayons or simply five dollars for supplies. Some skills might include sending emails and making phone calls, balancing a budget or planting a seed. Finally, connections are the people and organizations with whom you’re associated that may be able to help.

In addition to individual assets, groups have community-level assets such as:

- Institutions (government, nonprofits) with resources, knowledge and programs that directly or indirectly tie into school gardening
- Land and buildings (consider your school’s kitchen)
- The local economy-- Many businesses are eager to support school gardens

Keep in mind that individuals of different educational, professional and economic backgrounds of all ages bring a wealth of diverse assets to the table. Everyone has something of value to offer, and a diverse team means a greater range and network of assets. Often times, individuals who are traditionally overlooked have assets that your team needs to succeed.

Continually watch and listen for potential assets that will be useful in developing your school garden. When community assets are aligned and leveraged through relationships and team-building, you are closer to reaching your group's goals to a thriving school garden.

HOW TO START A SCHOOL GARDEN IN JUST EIGHT SIMPLE STEPS!

1) Ask Around: Start A Whisper Campaign!

Whisper campaigns can be a good idea when trying to generate interest into a particular topic or project. By instigating indirect conversations on the topic of school gardens you can spark a movement of interest.

You can start by listening for teachers, parents and students who mention that they garden or know somebody who gardens. A more direct approach can be done by asking, "Do you know anyone that might be interested in starting a school garden?" This in turn allows you to gain interest and make the person feel less committed. You can also make an announcement at a school staff or Parents, Teachers and Students Organization (PTSO) meeting that you are interested in exploring the possibility of a school garden and encourage anyone who shares a similar interest to follow up with you.



The purpose of the whisper campaign is to get the conversation started and assess those who are initially interested to come together on a school garden project.

2) Background Research: Dig a Little Deeper!

With two to five people on your team, dig a little deeper and find allies. These allies are not necessarily the people who will help directly with your garden, but they are people who generally have an interest in gardens and/or have working knowledge on the topic. Examples of allies include, but are not limited to: other local school garden leaders and volunteers, community gardening groups, civic organizations, agriculture extension agents, farmers and chefs.

Next, research and explore curriculum resources such as those found in this book. In order for teachers to engage their students in a school garden project, the garden must prove itself useful in achieving curriculum standards. During this step you should also investigate funding sources, models and ideas. Funding can often be viewed as one of the first hurdles when starting a school garden as it is vastly important. Adequate planning and research will help you decide the overall budget and needed materials for your project.



NEED A FUNDRAISER IDEA?

One of the best ways to raise funds is to, as a team, generate a list of 25 to 50 people who may be willing to sponsor the school garden. Write a letter or speak with them directly about your vision, written plans and future goals. If 25 people give an average of \$25, you would have \$625, which is often enough for your start-up costs!

Everyone has financial assets: resources, skills and connections. If you ask, nearly every person you talk with, including your team, would most likely be willing to give \$5 each to support a school garden.

3) Approach Leadership and Key Stakeholders: Share your Vision!

Touch base with your school's administration. Share your vision and the information you've gathered thus far. Mention that your team would like to host a school garden interest meeting to see if there are enough teachers, parents, students and/or community partners invested in the idea to ensure its success.

Next, inquire about a possible location for the garden. Plant the idea that a visible, highly trafficked location would be preferable and help guarantee the garden's success.

Follow your meeting with school

Explore the potential for partnerships with businesses, parent donations or fundraisers. Don't forget to draw off the assets of your team for leads on effective funding ideas. Remember that everyone has something to bring to the table. Everyone



administration, touch base with anyone that will likely be impacted or who will benefit from the project. This includes custodial staff, science teachers, parent groups and students. Tell them that you are hoping to start a school garden and ask for their ideas and concerns about the project. The more people there are that contribute ideas, the better it is for your garden's short- and long-term success.

4) Organize an Interest Meeting: Grow Your Team!

Following conversations with stakeholders, schedule an interest meeting for everyone that is interested in helping with the school garden. Advertise the meeting well in advance by using campus-wide flyers, emails and announcements and best of all, personal invitations. At your initial interest meeting, there are five main goals: community buy-in, identifying leadership, organizing teams, discussing garden location and design and deciding on next steps.



- *Community Buy-In:* Have people introduce themselves by name, connection to the school and why they are interested in the school garden. Common motivations will inspire the group. Use these motivations and visions to inform the garden design and develop its purpose. For example, one might be motivated by hands-on learning and another might want to use the garden as an outdoor kitchen or classroom. Weaving people's motivations into the conversation and your developing school garden will help ensure sustainability of the project. People enjoy working towards something that inspires them.
- *Identify Leadership:* Look and listen for people who express a higher level of interest especially as they represent various skills and stakeholder groups such as teachers, parents, community experts and people of different backgrounds. Find excuses to engage such people in the

conversation during and after the meeting. These are the folks who may be recruited into your school garden leadership team.

- *Organize Teams:* Think about implementing these teams into your school garden plan!
- *Agriculture/Infrastructure Team:* This group will provide expertise for garden planning, design and oversee the garden build, plantings and clean-ups. Due to their agricultural knowledge, these individuals can be on call for garden questions and ongoing assistance.
 - Education and Curriculum Team: This group is tasked with finding and/or developing lessons and volunteers to support learning in the garden.
 - Communications Team: This group will keep all other members and the public up to date on garden happenings via emails, phone calls, print materials and social media. During meetings, this team will be responsible for note taking and documentation.
 - Finance Team: After identifying new potential funding sources (PTSO, grants, fundraisers, donations, etc.) this group should begin with a financial vision for the garden and decide how best to oversee the nature in which your organization will oversee its available money and budget.
- *Garden Location and Design:* Discuss with the group at large the wants and needs of the garden based upon the motivations the team initially expressed. Open up the floor to brainstorm design ideas. Keep in mind that a highly-viewed space for the garden is preferable, so the public can view all of your hard work and keep the team motivated to sustain the school garden.
- *Decide on Next Steps:* Decide as a team on a game plan for moving forward. Arranging a field trip to another school garden is a great next step. You could also schedule another meeting, select a team to draft a proposal or do more background research. Just be sure you decide on a direction forward, so the energy generated by the interest meeting

does not diffuse.

5) Arrange a Field Trip: See A Success!

This is where your background network research comes in handy. Set up a tour of one to three gardens, preferably school or community gardens, to witness a few working models. Be sure to schedule your visit in coordination with garden leaders, so they can be available to answer questions.

Don't skip this step! Why is it a good idea? A field trip gives your school garden team something tangible and achievable to work toward. It allows you to return with success stories to recruit support for your impending project. It also links your new school garden team with mentors and a larger network of school and local gardeners to learn from. A field trip is often the cornerstone in moving from a couple people with an idea to a team project that won't be derailed.

6) Engage your School Garden Team: Get to Work!

You've gone on a field trip and your team is now inspired and eager to install your school garden. Now what? Before you schedule your build, here are a few things you'll want to do or consider:

- Review resources, skills and connections
- Settle on a location and refine your design
- Develop a school garden proposal for either administrative approval or fundraising purposes
- Engage additional targeted audiences or stakeholders



- Create a garden schedule that integrates work times for all interested teachers and major volunteer schedules
- Determine what you want to grow based upon commodity (growing) seasons
- Begin fundraising
- Attend garden trainings and curriculum development sessions

7) For the Long Haul: Think About Sustainability!

The school gardens that stand the test of time are nearly always anchored to something that can sustain it year-in and year-out. Some middle and high schools develop organic gardening classes taught by an elective teacher. Many school gardens are anchored to an afterschool program and sustained by the afterschool coordinator. Others are sustained by an ongoing partnership with a gardening organization. Still, other school gardens are closely tied with the science department, Future Farmers of America or 4H.

Being anchored to something doesn't mean that others can't be involved. An anchor simply means that if or when other participants waiver, the garden will keep thriving. What will sustain your school garden for the long haul?

8) Lastly, the School Garden Build

Lastly, schedule and plan your school garden build. Make sure it's a public, participatory event. Builds are great opportunities to engage young people in the excitement and recruit future volunteers. Orientation and open houses are great days to schedule garden builds. Even though a school garden build is a very tangible project and lots of people and organizations may be interested in helping, be sure to employ and grow the internal capacities and assets of your school garden team lest an outside entity come in, do all the work and your team and young people are deprived



SIMPLE TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATION

- Connecting and staying in touch with other school and/or community gardening efforts will keep you in the loop about free/inexpensive supplies and materials, institutional assistance, grants, workshops and training opportunities. Additionally, by banding together with a few other garden projects, you may be able to purchase materials at a steep discount by making a bulk or wholesale purchase.
- Your garden can never have enough champions. Although the leadership team may remain small, supporters of your school garden are vital to continued support from administration, school staff, parents and the community.

of the opportunity to learn how to build the garden they've all worked so hard to conceive. There is nothing more empowering than creating one's visions with one's own hands. The point isn't just a pretty garden. It's all of the goals people mentioned at the interest meeting in terms of their motivation—it's for education and a chance to give back and to see your community grow.

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