

SCHOOL GARDEN GUIDE

Starting and sustaining a
school garden in Florida



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Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

GETTING STARTED




Do you want to start a new school garden or revitalize an existing garden? Before getting started, keep in mind that successful and sustainable school gardens must be well planned. This guide will help you to develop a school garden from beginning to end.

All too often people consider only the agricultural aspects of gardening. Though agricultural components are essential, a *school garden is more than just a garden*. School gardens 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, a school garden may 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*.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services created this guide to help you find and organize the people and assets needed to develop and sustain a successful school garden. The backbone of this guide is a step-by-step process for getting the garden in the ground. It's important to note that every garden program is different, and each successful school garden has its own unique story. In this light, add, amend or omit steps as you assess the interest levels and assets available to your team.



**SCHOOL GARDENS ARE
OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS,
WRITING LABORATORIES AND
SCIENCE OBSERVATORIES.**



ASSEMBLING YOUR TEAM: KNOW YOUR ASSETS

The best way to develop the school garden project is to implement the strengths and capabilities of the people on your team. Everyone has skills and connections. In terms of a school garden, resources may include a shovel, a free hour once a week, a bunch of crayons or five dollars for supplies. Some skills might include sending emails and making phone calls, balancing a budget or planting seeds. Finally, connections are the link to people and organizations 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 the school's kitchen); and
- 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 variety of diverse assets to the table. Everyone has something of value to offer, and a diverse team means a greater range and network of resources and skills. Often times, individuals who are traditionally overlooked have assets that the team needs to succeed.

Continually watch and listen for potential series that will be useful in developing the school garden

program. When community assets are aligned and leveraged through relationships and team-building, you are closer to reaching the goal of a thriving school garden.



START A WHISPER CAMPAIGN

Whisper campaigns can be a good idea when trying to generate interest in 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 allows you to gauge interest. 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 IN A SCHOOL GARDEN PROJECT.

DIGGING DEEPER FOR RESOURCES

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 the garden, but they are people who generally have an interest in gardens or have working knowledge on the topic. Examples of allies may include: other local school garden leaders and volunteers, community gardening groups, civic organizations, agriculture extension agents, farmers and chefs.



Next, research and explore curriculum resources. In order for teachers to engage 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 materials needed for your project.

Explore the potential for partnerships with businesses, parent donations or fundraisers. Don't forget to draw off the assets of the garden team for leads on effective funding ideas. Remember that everyone has something to bring to the table. Everyone has financial assets: resources, skills and connections. If you ask for donations, whether it be cash, materials or supplies, you will find that many people are willing to support the garden project.

SHARE YOUR VISION

APPROACHING LEADERSHIP AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Touch base with your school's administration. Share the vision and information 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 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.



Following your meeting with school administration, touch base with anyone that will likely be impacted or who will benefit from the project, including 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 that contribute ideas, the better it is for your garden's short- and long-term success.



BUILD UP THE TEAM

Following conversations with stakeholders, schedule an interest meeting for everyone that is interested in helping with the school garden. Advertise the meeting in advance by using campus-wide flyers, emails and announcements and best of all, personal invitations. At the 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.

GOALS OF INTEREST MEETING

1. *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 around the school garden program will help ensure sustainability of the project. People enjoy working towards something that inspires them.
2. *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.
3. *Garden Location and Design:* Discuss with the group 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.
4. *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 to decide on a direction so the energy generated by the interest meeting does not diffuse.
5. *Organize Teams:* Think about implementing different teams into the school garden strategic plan.

PEOPLE ENJOY WORKING TOWARD SOMETHING THAT INSPIRES THEM.



SCHOOL GARDEN LEADERSHIP

Education and Curriculum Team

This group is tasked with finding and 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 manage its available money and budget.

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.



SEE A SUCCESS

Set up a tour of one to three gardens, preferably school or community gardens, to see a few working models. Be sure to schedule the 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 the 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 garden champions and local gardeners to learn from. A field trip is often the cornerstone in moving from a couple of people with an idea to a team project that won't be derailed.

NEED FUNDRAISING IDEAS?

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 the vision, 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!





GETTING TO WORK

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

- Review the resources, skills and connections of your teams.
- Determine a location and refine the garden design.
- Develop a school garden proposal for administrative approval and fundraising purposes.
- Engage additional targeted audiences or stakeholders.
- Create a garden maintenance schedule that integrates work times for all interested teachers and volunteer groups.
- Create a seasonal planting plan.
- Begin fundraising.
- Attend garden trainings and curriculum development sessions.
- Finalize the strategic plan for your school garden program.

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. Consider partnering with groups such as these.

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?





TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATION

- Connect with other school or community gardens to learn about institutional assistance, grants, workshops and training opportunities.
- Partner with other garden projects. You may be able to purchase materials at a discount by making a bulk or wholesale purchase.
- Your school garden team can never have enough members. These advocates are vital to continued support from administration, school staff, parents and the community.

BUILDING THE GARDEN

Lastly, schedule and plan your school garden build. Make sure it's a public, participatory event. Invite local media, and spread the word in your community about your exciting new project. Builds are great opportunities to engage young people in the excitement and to recruit future volunteers. School orientation and open houses are great days to schedule garden builds. Even though lots of people and organizations may be interested in helping, be sure to include the school garden team in the build. Keeping the team engaged throughout the year will help them remain motivated by seeing the community grow.

CELEBRATE SUCCESS

Continue to celebrate the success of your school garden throughout the year. Create a social media page for your garden, keep a blog on the school's website, post weekly updates to a garden box bulletin board or start circulating a monthly newsletter for your garden program. Encourage the entire school to become involved in the success of your budding garden program. The more you celebrate success, the more likely you are to engage the entire school community to take ownership and pride, ensuring the sustainability of your school garden program for years to come.

FREE GARDEN CURRICULUM RESOURCES

Harvest of the Month
FDACS.gov/FarmtoSchool

Gardening for Nutrition
faitc.org

Great Garden Detective
fns.usda.gov/tn/great-garden-detective

Dig-in!
fns.usda.gov/tn/dig-lessons

Grow it, Try it, Like it!
fns.usda.gov/tn/grow-it-try-it-it

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Division of Food, Nutrition and Wellness
FDACS.gov
InfoFNW@FDACS.gov
(800) 504-6609





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REV. 2/20