



## Creating a School Garden Checklist

Wed, 12/19/2012 - 14:15 -- Roger Doiron

Starting a new school garden is one of the most rewarding projects a gardener can undertake, but like everything else in life there's a right way and wrong way to do it. Dorothy Mullen has done a lot of homework for us by preparing this comprehensive checklist of people and things that need to be in place to achieve success. You can download a printer-friendly copy of this list [here](#) [1].

Check off or fill in the blanks. Any place you don't know the answer is where the trouble is likely to come from.

### STAKEHOLDERS

School gardens rise and fall on the relationships of the people who make them happen. Cultivate the relationships like you take care of the soil. We have found that the best way of being is to become water and flow into the areas where it is possible to start. Particularly where administrators have had bad experiences like parents making a garden, moving on, and leaving a weed patch fighting or pressing will just make things worse. If they don't care about nutrition but they're into history, start with a colonial herb garden and teach colonial times, the kids will find plenty to eat while they're out there.

\_\_\_\_\_ Administrator: Non-negotiable. Principals can approve or deny teacher training time, determine use of space, dedicate funds. It is very important to know what he/she cares about and communicate effectively.

\_\_\_\_\_ Teachers: At least a few with buy-in is non-negotiable. Even if teachers do not drive the garden, they will decide if the children will use the garden. It is very important to know what they care about and make sure the garden provides what they need to be successful.

\_\_\_\_\_ Students: Assumed. Students bring the energy and excitement that make the garden a natural for

hands-on learning. Old enough students can be a great source of labor. Request parents or other adults volunteer some time assisting at after school garden club and work days to learn with and from the children, their excitement is contagious!

\_\_\_\_\_ The Coordinator: The buck-stops-here-person, non-negotiable. Who is the identified person or small group that will deal with the life or death issues of a living classroom when details fall through the cracks or assignments are not clear.

\_\_\_\_\_ Parents: At least a few are helpful but may not be necessary. Many of the tasks can be performed by anyone who is willing to devote the time, but only teachers and administrators decide if the children will use the garden. Parents can provide moral, technical, and labor support through the PTA and volunteering.

\_\_\_\_\_ Cafeteria staff or food service: May not be necessary for sustaining the garden, but should be on the team if food and nutrition education or garden-to-table are priorities.

\_\_\_\_\_ School Garden Network Coordinator: Provides on-site consultations, community gardening resources, and workshop trainings. Can be a liaison between your school and the countywide school gardening community.

\_\_\_\_\_ Local Farmers: Again, they may not be necessary to sustaining an instructional garden, but if improved cafeteria food is part of your vision, farm to school is in your future.

\_\_\_\_\_ Community Volunteers: Helpful but may not be necessary. Gardens attract attention from the community. There may be a lot of talent in the form of garden clubs, Master Gardeners, potential donors of gifts and services. If none of the school insiders understand the horticultural needs of the garden, this will have to come from the community.

\_\_\_\_\_ Custodian: May not be necessary, but he or she should be on the team to be sure certain maintenance requirements are met.

\_\_\_\_\_ Nurses: Not necessary, but potential great allies of the process. School nurses and health teachers will find a lot of good curriculum connections for health, safety, nutrition, and hygiene in the garden.

\_\_\_\_\_ Librarian: May not be necessary, but the librarian is a great ally of the process.

\_\_\_\_\_ School and community gardeners in neighboring schools and other towns: Connect to the people who

have what you want and find out how they got it. Make a list for your area. You can share resources. You can form a cooperative. You can create your own non-profit and act as your own fiscal agents. You can use each other as precedents to show the people in power how the Joneses are doing it next door.

## **PURPOSE**

\_\_\_\_\_ Articulate what the garden is for. If several people are in it for different reasons, can they agree on the purposes of doing a garden. Are the priorities science curriculum, food production, waste reduction education, watershed education, beautification, improving nutritional status, learning where food comes from, history lessons, or spontaneous learning? What does each of the stakeholders want out of the process?

\_\_\_\_\_ Articulate the values that drive the garden. For example, will it be organic, will commercial fertilizers be allowed. You may need this later to help decide from whom you will or will not accept donations.

## **LOCATION**

\_\_\_\_\_ Space, flat is best

\_\_\_\_\_ Be sure there is no problem related to wells, septic systems, in-ground tanks.

\_\_\_\_\_ Call 811 for utility companies to mark underground line locations.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sun, at least 6 hours a day.

\_\_\_\_\_ Water, the closer the water source the better.

\_\_\_\_\_ Proximity to classrooms, the closer the more its used.

\_\_\_\_\_ Shelter: Protected by walls and fences best to reduce vandalism and deer damage.

\_\_\_\_\_ Area for containers, if space is very limited.

\_\_\_\_\_ 8 hours of direct sun for fruiting crops and 6 hours for leaf crops and herbs. Place a sheet of paper in what you think is a sunny spot and record the sunlight hours through the day.

\_\_\_\_\_ Water source, must be very convenient. Watering takes place ideally very early in the day, no close second. Consider mulching to reduce use.

\_\_\_\_\_ Drainage. Avoid damp spots and steep spots. If drainage is not good, do raised beds.

\_\_\_\_\_ No competition from trees and roots for water, soil and sun.

## **SIZE**

\_\_\_\_\_ Start small. Make it beautiful. Have a vision for how it will expand.

## **DESIGN**

The design will be driven by the purposes the garden is to serve, the desires of the team, the available space, and the needs of the plants you select. Most of the early effort should go into care of the soil, then any design will thrive.

\_\_\_\_\_ Make a map. It will have many uses including mapping crop rotation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Make sure you can afford the design you want or have a means of raising the money.

Elements for designing the garden as an outdoor classroom include:

\_\_\_\_\_ Garden beds, 3 (at most 4) feet wide, with clear wide pathways for trampling feet.

\_\_\_\_\_ A sitting area, including tables, preferably out of the harsh sun.

\_\_\_\_\_ Compost area.

\_\_\_\_\_ Tool shed or storage area.

\_\_\_\_\_ Cold frames or green house, if using them.

\_\_\_\_\_ Good signs.

\_\_\_\_\_ Fencing if needed.

\_\_\_\_\_ Scheduling classes.

\_\_\_\_\_ Instructional materials (lenses, books, field guides, seeds and starting materials, scales, measuring devices).

## **MONEY**

You can spend from \$300 if you get a lot of the material donated to \$16,000 for a perfect, commercially installed ready-to-plant garden. If you spend less money, you'll spend more time. If you spend more money, you may miss out on certain ecology lessons, like growing your own compost. In any event, if your funds are limited, the majority of the effort should go into the soil preparation. Every site is different, but be sure to cover the basic elements when making up the budget:

Expenses related to locating it (making water reach the garden, clearing land, tilling the first year)

Soil test kit and amendments

Organic material to improve soil, compost

Tools

Means of watering

Materials for raised beds, if using

Seeds, starts, plants

Supports

Protections, fencing, row covers

Fertilizers

Pest controls, if using

Instructional materials, field guides, books

Expertise, if the volunteers are beginners

Material for walkways

Cold frames, green house

Mulch

Containers

Labor

## **SOIL PREPARATION**

Decisions will have to be made that you'll have to live with for a while. You may want a few raised beds the first year while you start composting and working your own soil. You may want to plant a fall crop of green manure, like winter rye, to improve the soil. Attention to the soil is the most important point of starting a garden, unless you are purchasing perfect soil for raised beds. You will want to add lots of organic material (compost) and you will want to start with a soil test to guide your decisions. Rototilling may be necessary the first year. Soil preparation is beyond the scope of this checklist; take it seriously. Here is a good link: <http://www.mgofmc.org/docs/VegGardBasics08.pdf> [2]

## **HORTICULTURAL NEEDS**

In addition to the obvious sun, water, and space needs, each plant has specific requirements.

\_\_\_\_\_ Did you do a soil test? It will inform you about toxic materials in the soil and deficiencies. If not, do one, unless you are purchasing perfect soil for raised beds in which case you will still need to fertilize. The extension office for your county has kits. In most counties, Master Gardeners man a helpline and can interpret the results. In Guilford County: 375-5876.

\_\_\_\_\_ Do you know the needs for amendments, based on the soil test?

\_\_\_\_\_ Timing the start up. Don?t start working soil until a handful crumbles nicely in spring. If it is still in sodden clumps, it?s too early; you?ll ruin the soil structure.

\_\_\_\_\_ What is your zone? Know what grows in your geographic area and when.

\_\_\_\_\_ What is your last frost date and first frost date?

\_\_\_\_\_ How is the garden oriented? You want to face south, with tall plants on the north side and short plants on the south side to maximize sun light hours.

\_\_\_\_\_ Buy or order seeds and plants with consideration to planting dates and needs of different plants. Read the labels.

\_\_\_\_\_ Tools: Very few tools are actually required, but gadget lovers could go nuts on tools. Depending on how many children will be working at a time, you?ll need multiple rakes, shovels, trowels, clippers, scissors, hose, forks for turning soil and compost, a mallet for pounding in stakes, wire clipper, measuring tape, thermometers for air and compost).

\_\_\_\_\_ Supports: What are your needs of trellises, ladders, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ Maintenance schedule: watering, weeding, staking, fertilizing, pruning, bug picking, turning compost, mulching, cover crop planting in fall.

\_\_\_\_\_ Schedule workdays for volunteers.

\_\_\_\_\_ Harvesting and subsequent planting in the emptied bed.

\_\_\_\_\_ Crop rotation schedule.

\_\_\_\_\_ Schedule orders

## **CURRICULUM NEEDS**

\_\_\_\_\_ Must this garden provide a setting for learning things that have to be taught or is it more a setting for spontaneous learning, both?

\_\_\_\_\_ Are the curriculum interests of the participating teachers well represented in the design?

\_\_\_\_\_ Have a means of collecting, storing and sharing good garden lessons.

\_\_\_\_\_ Match to State education standards. The more of this that is done, the easier it is for teachers to participate. With variation by district, their lives are more or less driven by standards in the public schools.

## **TYPES OF GARDENS**

For elementary schools, the biggest bang for the curriculum buck is an herb garden. You can combine many elements into one garden. Your garden could be:

A science lab.

A setting for spontaneous learning.

Food production, ?snack? destination, source for food service.

History garden (Shakespeare, colonial, Three Sisters).

Herb Garden.

Shade plant garden.

Native grasses and plants garden.

Butterfly or pollinator garden.

Ecosystem.

Heirloom garden.

Nutrition and Health.

Flowers.

Math garden, perhaps raised beds.

## **SAFETY RULES**

\_\_\_\_\_ Set up the rules that protect the people. For example:

Use of senses for plant identification

Don't eat anything until you are sure it is food.

Know which plants have both edible and poisonous parts (leaves of rhubarb and the tomato plants itself)

Know which children have allergies to plants, pollen, or stings and act accordingly

Keep a supply of sunscreen (know if anyone is allergic).

In high heat, have kids wear hats and shirts with sleeves If there is an after school club when no nurse is on duty, have all parents signed off, all allergies recorded, a first aid kit on hand and drinking water No bare feet or flip flops, proper shoes to protect from cuts and stings Add only plant materials to compost to keep out vermin When using tools stay your arm's length plus the tool length away from the next person Walk while holding tools and or identify which tools are for adults only Discuss pest controls and why we use what we use

\_\_\_\_\_ Set up rules that protect the plants. For example

Keep feet on pathways

Use two hands to pick plants so you don't uproot them, one is to hold the plant and the other is to nip off

Discuss pest controls, keeping the gate shut

Have 3 kids on the hoses, and rotate positions so one is controlling the water and two are preventing the hose from knocking over the plants

## **COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND INVOLVEMENT**

\_\_\_\_\_ Consider what funds, goods, expertise, and services do not come from within the school community and whether you want the donation of a thing (for example, tools or machinery) or the service (for example, roto-tilling).

\_\_\_\_\_ If your garden is about food, see if you can get local restaurants involved with cooking, restaurant tours, tastings, and fundraisers.

\_\_\_\_\_ Reach out to the greater community to help meet these needs. Local green businesses in Greensboro have loved the PR value of supporting these projects generously.

\_\_\_\_\_ Have standards for involvement set ahead of time (Would you accept all donations, including grants from companies that sell pesticides you wouldn't use, or processed foods that are against the values of the project?)

\_\_\_\_\_ Consider who will take photographs and write press releases or letters to the editor. Be sure to follow school policy about parental permission to use images.

\_\_\_\_\_ Consider how you will inform parents and the school community about garden activity.

\_\_\_\_\_ Consider your system for requesting and thanking donors.

\_\_\_\_\_ Identify the talent in the community, garden clubs, Master Gardeners, environmental groups, environmental groups at the other schools in the district, 4-H, parents and friends with gifts for carpentry or other services.

## **EVENTS**

\_\_\_\_\_ Plan seasonal events, scripted tours for the public, tomato tastings, pesto day, colonial day fair, tea harvest and drying, harvest dinner, poetry readings, garden cycle tours and fund raisers like plant sales.

## **CHALLENGES TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU START (HAVE A PLAN!)**

\_\_\_\_\_ People move on. (If the garden is dependent on the good will of too few people, the principal may be left with a weed patch when those folks move on. Tell the principal up front what the exit strategy is so he or she can feel comfortable saying yes to a garden.)

\_\_\_\_\_ Bad Soil. Raise the beds. Even where there are toxins in the soil, a sufficiently raised bed with purchased soil produces safe food.

\_\_\_\_\_ Summer care. Offer parents and volunteers picking rights and designate an area for them to grow food in exchange for summer volunteer hours. Or plant spring and fall but not summer harvest crops and vastly reduce the needs of the garden during summer break.

\_\_\_\_\_ Payments. The P.O. system at school may be too slow to deal with the immediacy of garden needs. Consider store credit or an account at the local nursery. They may give you a discount. This method greatly reduces your bookkeeping needs.

\_\_\_\_\_ Curriculum. Different stakeholders may have different ideas about how much the garden must be driven by curriculum and how much it should provide opportunities for spontaneous, seasonal learning, or food. This needs to be discussed.

\_\_\_\_\_ Space limitations. Straw bale gardening (using a series of bales with 6 inches of soil on top as a raised bed) and containers (like Earthbox) provide options for schools with extremely limited space.

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