

Forming a Garden Committee

Behind every successful school garden is a dedicated team of individuals willing to make a commitment to planning, planting, and maintaining it. Although you want to attract an enthusiastic group of supporters, from that larger group you need to find six to 12 people who are willing to roll up their sleeves and really pull the garden program together as part of a garden committee. Ideally this group would include at least one representative from each of your key players, including an administrator, an educator, your food service director (especially important if the goal is to feature garden produce in the cafeteria), a support staff member, a parent, a student, and a community volunteer. Having diverse membership will result in a creative group with connections to a variety of resources.

Once the committee is selected, to be truly effective you need to begin by appointing one person willing to lead the group and serve as the committee chair. If the job seems too big for one person to fill, you may want to consider selecting co-chairs. The committee chair will be in charge of organizing regular meetings, communicating details from committee meetings to non-committee members, and generally keeping the group moving in the right direction. A good committee chair will not do all the work alone but rather will inspire and engage the other members, delegate responsibilities, and then follow up to make sure the work gets done.

Additionally, your committee chair may take on the role of the garden coordinator after the garden is installed. The garden coordinator oversees all the activity in the garden and helps coordinate the different groups using the space. In some cases, the garden coordinator takes on full responsibility for planting the garden and delivering the educational programming. Although certainly not solely responsible for actually completing all the work that needs to get done, this person makes sure that everything is taking care of and provides gentle reminders to participants who need it. This job usually starts out as a volunteer position, but as programs grow, sometimes it can turn into a paid position.

Beyond the committee chair position, your group will need to decide if they want to assign specific jobs to the rest of the group or if they want to take on responsibilities on a case-by-case basis. For instance, your committee could adopt the structure of a typical volunteer board and have a treasurer to handle finances, a secretary to keep minutes, vice-presidents in charge of special projects, etc. Alternatively, as a group you could come up with a list of jobs that need to be completed and then have members volunteer to complete them as the needs arise. Generally speaking, the larger the garden program, the more important it will be to have a formal structure to keep everyone organized and to spread out tasks evenly.

A few things to keep in mind to ensure that your garden committee runs as efficiently and effectively as possible:

- The committee needs to have a regular meeting time and also a way to stay in touch, either by email, a specific list serve, or by some other means. Communicate, communicate, communicate! Good communication is the key to a successful school garden committee.
- Your committee must work within the structure of the school. In other words, the principal needs to be consulted and give approval to all the committee's activities.
- Members need to feel like they are making valuable contributions to the committee, that their opinions are respected, and that their ideas are thoughtfully considered.
- The committee needs student involvement, either by having a student as a member or by soliciting student feedback about the garden on a regular basis. Students will see the garden from a different perspective, and since the garden is for them their thoughts need to be taken into account when making decisions about the garden program.
- The committee needs to take on an appropriate amount of work. Comprised of volunteers, it is important to have realistic expectations for accomplishments.

- Committee members should be asked to participate for a specific length of time. Their participation can certainly be extended beyond their initial term, but defining the expected commitment is a valuable recruitment tool. People are more likely to volunteer for responsibilities with clearly stated parameters.
- New people should be recruited to serve on the garden committee on a regular basis. New members bring new ideas, new connections, and most importantly, new energy. Without new members, the committee will grow stagnant and volunteers will burn out.

In summary, while excellent soil and plants may be important factors to the foundation of a garden, dedicated people are the foundation of the garden program. Your garden committee is the sunshine, water, and nutrients that will help make your school garden program grow.