

Funding a School Garden Program

Once you know what's needed to make your garden program plan a reality, it's time to map out a plan to obtain it. There are a number of ways to acquire the materials and funds you will need to sustain your school garden program. While the prospect of raising funds to start up or sustain a school garden may seem daunting, this challenge can provide opportunities for learning and help develop a sense of ownership and commitment to the garden on the part of students and volunteers. The good news is that there are many different ways to acquire the materials and funds you will need. Successful kids' gardening programs frequently incorporate several strategies rather relying on one source of funding to cover all expenses.

If you begin by estimating the costs for the entire project and preparing a realistic budget, you'll have a good fundraising target. Remember to include expenses for site development and improvement, routine maintenance, curriculum materials, and miscellaneous items. Additionally, before you get started, you need to create policies and procedures for handling money and donations that come in. Consider setting up an account for your project with the PTO or school business office to ease the process. If your program can not fall under the supervision of an existing organizational structure, you may need to establish a new garden committee with executive positions and bylaws to provide you with the oversight needed to handle funds and allow you to open a checking account. Whether you fall under an existing organization or a new one, make sure to create a record-keeping system for revenues and expenses and establish who has the authority to collect and spend money.

SOLICITING DONATIONS

When properly organized, collecting donations can be a very effective way to support your school garden program. Before soliciting donations, make sure you can complete this statement: "Our garden is a good investment for you because...."

Start by asking for donations from parents. They have the potential to be your biggest supporters; even if they cannot donate directly, they may have connections to businesses within the community that may be willing to offer support for your program. Next expand to local groups and businesses. Generally, the closer the businesses are to your school, the stronger the connection they will feel and the more likely they will be to donate. Take time learn a bit about each business before you visit so you can ask for appropriate items and services. Soliciting donations from local groups and businesses can be more than a way of obtaining needed money and materials. It also serves to publicize and develop support for your program and to actively involve the community in supporting education.

Here are some helpful tips to remember when requesting donations:

- Have a specific plan and set of needs in mind before approaching potential donors. Create a list of the items you'd like from each donor.
- Businesses receive requests for donations all the time, so be professional, organized, and specific. Ask for only appropriate amounts of cash or materials.
- Meet with potential donors in person, if possible.
- Create project folders that you can leave with each potential donor. This folder will show that your effort is well organized and that the program has the full support of the school. This presentation does not need to be flashy but should include the following: endorsement letter from an administrator or program director, one-page project description, garden plan, list of people who support the project, photos or students' quotes or drawings.
- Know the tax status of your school or organization and the name businesses should use when making out checks.
- Money may be the first gift that comes to mind, but other donations can be just as valuable. These may include plants and seeds, lumber, soil amendments, fencing, tools, release time for employees who wish to participate, and in-kind gifts (use of equipment and printing, for instance).
- Celebrate and acknowledge your donors in word and print. This might include student-produced certificates, banners, press releases, and so on.

FINDING SCHOOL FUNDING SOURCES

Consider potential sources of funds from within your school. Begin by contacting your school's PTO/PTA. Request that a permanent garden committee chair position be created to establish strong ties between parents and the garden program. Also check to see if the garden can become an annual allocation in the budget.

You can also look for funds within the school budget. If your administrators are supportive of your program and if you make sure that the garden activities are closely aligned with the required curriculum, they may be able to find district funds that can be used to meet garden needs.

FUNDRAISING PROJECTS

Another way to raise funds for your garden program is by selling a product or service. You can do this using a traditional fundraising project or by starting your own school garden business.

There are many companies out there that offer packaged fundraising projects for schools to implement by selling everything from candles to cookie dough. A great way to tie your garden and your fundraising efforts together is to choose a fundraiser that features garden products. A number of seed companies, including High Mowing Organic Seeds, Seed Savers Exchange, and Renee's Garden Seeds, offer fundraising projects for schools. Flower Power fundraising is another program for schools that sells bulbs. You could also search locally for nurseries and garden centers willing to supply you with plants at a wholesale rate that you could then resell at a higher rate.

Fundraising projects can require a lot of time and energy, but they can also be used to bring curriculum goals to life. For instance, consider a school seedling sale. Students who create flyers or write articles about the event hone language arts skills. Economic and math concepts have meaning as students price products and track expenses and profits. Raising healthy seedlings requires a growing understanding of life science concepts. Such projects can also create school and community enthusiasm for and a sense of ownership of the garden project. Cultivate team spirit around fundraising, set goals, and celebrate the results. Be sure that students recognize and thank volunteers, donors, and sponsors whenever possible.

Here are a few fundraising project suggestions:

- Sell garden-related items such as seeds, transplants, indoor plants, dried herbs and flowers, sachets, potpourri, herbal vinegars, pressed flower stationery, produce, zucchini bread, or certificates for an hour of weeding.
- Host a silent auction or raffle. These events can build community partnerships featuring promotional donations from local businesses. Auctions and raffles can be combined with a dinner or special event.
- Build small worm composting setups, butterfly houses, or other garden-related products and sell them along with directions for use.
- Hold a spring garden sale with plants started by the students or donated by local gardeners and nurseries.
- Try a harvest market event with produce, cut flowers, salsa, herbal soaps, and garden crafts.

SCHOOL GARDEN BUSINESSES

A hydroponic basil business that markets to restaurants . . . a weekly farmers' market . . . a fresh salsa venture . . . butterfly garden consulting services. In schools and classrooms across the U.S. and Canada, students have addressed funding dilemmas by using their gardening savvy as a springboard for green business ventures. Some are as small as a one-time school seedling sale, and others as involved as a salsa business that supplies restaurants and grocery stores. For inspiration, check out *Strategies for a Growing Business*.

LOCAL CORPORATE FUNDING AND FOUNDATIONS

Many corporations and foundations reserve funds specifically to donate to nonprofit and educational institutions. To find sources of educational funds available in your area, talk with your principal, subject area coordinators, or district grant writer. Although many national companies require a more formal grant process, you may find that some local foundations accept more informal requests for donations and are more flexible about what they are willing to fund. Look for companies or foundations that have natural links to gardening, environmental education, or nutrition education such as utility companies, hospitals, and health insurance providers, as well as private foundations with horticultural ties.

GRANTS

Grants are awards designed to provide funds or materials to support specific projects or programs. Funders typically have guidelines for award eligibility and an official application form. Some have specific deadlines for applications and others accept them throughout the year. It pays to research the background of the granting agency or foundation so you can make sure your objectives meet its goals. You can often find this information in a grant announcement, descriptions of previously funded projects, or annual report. Keep in mind when applying for national grants, especially, that the number of applicants is usually much greater than the number of grants available.

Do some research to learn about grants available from foundations and organizations that are interested in school gardens and habitat projects, science and environmental education, or other areas related to your project. For instance, if an ethnic garden is part of your plan, look for funders who support multicultural initiatives. Local or regional foundations are usually your best bet. You'll find information on many regional and national grants in the Kidsgardening Grants + Sponsorship Directory.

GRANT WRITING TIPS

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Most granting organizations request at least the following types of information:

- goals
- objectives (outcomes)
- need statement
- project description
- evaluation (how you'll assess your success)
- budget
- (District or educational foundation grantors also typically want to know how the project will meet learning standards.)

Your proposal should convey enthusiasm, while also stressing the excellent organization and broad base of the gardening program. Most foundations are not interested in funding a short-term affair. You will probably be asked for documentation of strong leadership, community support, and the sustainability of your program. Emphasize why your project is unique and worthy of funding. Create a vivid image by describing what teachers and students will actually do and detailing the outcomes for students, teachers, and/or the community.

Be sure to follow these cardinal rules of grant seeking:

- Be certain you meet the grant funding criteria. Do not apply for grants that don't relate to your project.
- Follow all the guidelines detailed in the proposal.
- Make requests as short as possible. Real people have to read each proposal, so be concise.
- Make simple and straightforward requests. Do not assume complexity adds credibility.
- Avoid the following: acronyms and professional jargon, small type or a hard-to-read font, irrelevant appendix materials.
- Show appreciation when your organization receives a grant!
- Know when to quit. If rejected, it is appropriate to ask why, but do it in a way that leaves a good impression.
- Be a good non-winner. Do not argue with a foundation representative. Try again later with another project.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Don't underestimate the power of keeping the community informed about your project for securing ongoing donations, involvement, and funds. Here are some tips for reaching out.

- **Calendar** – Develop a detailed calendar of activities, committee meetings, fundraising efforts, work projects, and special events for the entire year and use that in your public relations efforts.
- **Publicity** – Develop a plan for publicizing your garden to a broad audience. Compile a media list with contact information for local newspapers and radio and TV stations. Talk with reporters, send press releases, and invite the media to special events.
- **Promotion** – Create a brochure or project folder that describes your project and provides interested supporters with information on how they can contribute.
- **Documentation** – Have students create a scrapbook that includes news articles, color photos of kids working in the garden, letters of support, and dreams for the future. Display this scrapbook at public gatherings, school open houses, library exhibits, and county fairs.
- **Mailing list** – Start building a mailing list or e-mail list of business people, parents, teachers, administrators, garden volunteers, community leaders, local nonprofit organizations, city and town officials, and legislators who support arts, education, and environmental programs for kids. Keep the members of this list informed about the gardening program, and ask them for help when needed.
- **Newsletter** – Publish a newsletter about your program. Include a section listing and thanking sponsors and contributors. Make your goals, mission, and wish list known to readers. Network. Cultivate community partnerships with local garden clubs, 4-H clubs, Master Gardeners, scouting groups, service organizations, businesses, and conservation organizations.