

People Resources – Valuing Volunteers

Obtaining equipment and supplies is just the first step of preparing your garden for planting. Volunteers are another crucial component of a successful school garden program. They nurture the garden in many ways such as helping secure supplies and donations, offering extra supervision during lessons so that classes can break into small groups for more hands-on gardening opportunities, and providing assistance maintaining the garden during breaks.

Garden Coordinator

As mentioned in the *Forming a Garden Committee* article, once the garden is established, it is extremely helpful to appoint an official garden coordinator to oversee all the activity in the garden and ensure the successful implementation of the garden program. The coordinator should be a member of the garden committee and needs to have excellent communication skills. Gardening experience is not necessary as long as he or she has the enthusiasm to learn and the time and energy to seek out garden experts (such as Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners) who can provide guidance as challenges that arise. Although this job usually starts out as a volunteer position, as programs grow, sometimes it has the potential to turn into a paid position.

Recruiting Volunteers

The garden coordinator cannot do it alone; additional volunteers are needed. There are two different categories of volunteers —ongoing volunteers and occasional volunteers. Ongoing volunteers can be called on for regular help in the garden. Look to parents, Cooperative Extension Master Gardener volunteers, neighbors, college students (pre-service teachers/graduate students), and seniors organizations to find volunteers to fill this role. They want to be involved on a regular basis and may even be willing to take on some leadership responsibilities.

The second group includes one time or occasional volunteers. Although you may not see them regularly, they can still fill important roles. They can be called on to help with special events, especially large jobs such as initial construction or beginning of the season garden work days. By pitching in an extra hand when things are at their busiest, they also help prevent burnout of your ongoing volunteers, who may feel overwhelmed with heightened demands. In addition to the potential volunteer groups listed above, you can also reach out to Scouts (many gardens have benefited by serving as a site for an Eagle Scout project), garden clubs, service organizations, high school students, local farmers, local businesses, and local nursery staff.

Recruiting and working with volunteers is not an easy job. Here are a couple of common misconceptions to clear up about working with volunteers:

- **Misconception #1** – Volunteers are free. Volunteers may not cost you money, but they are not free. For payment, they expect to be given jobs that use their time and talents wisely, treated with respect, and most important, appreciated and properly thanked.
- **Misconception #2** – People volunteer solely because they want to help. Although wanting to help is a primary reason for volunteering, most likely the volunteer opportunity will fulfill other personal objectives too. For example a college student who volunteers is probably hoping for job-related experience.
- **Misconception #3** – Anyone can fill any volunteer job. Just like searching out the right person for a paid position, you must search for volunteers that are the right fit for your volunteer opportunities. To do this, you have to take the time to clearly understand what roles the volunteers need to fill in your program and then learn enough about the potential volunteers to see if they are a match to fill your needs.

With these facts in mind, you are ready to recruit volunteers. This process includes finding them, using them, and keeping them.

Finding Volunteers

Begin your search by creating job descriptions for the volunteer positions you need filled. For ongoing roles, create detailed descriptions that specify things such as the task, time, date(s) and skills needed. Although you may not want to be as exacting with one-time opportunities (such as searching out volunteers to move soil into new raised beds), this process will be a big help in finding volunteers willing to take on tasks that require more responsibility.

Once a job description is written, you are ready to put out a request for volunteers. There are many ways to post volunteer opportunities including: through the school newsletter, school website, and email/text updates from the PTO. Reaching beyond the school, you may want to contact your local Extension Service office to find out the availability of local Master Gardeners, post to community bulletin boards or online discussion boards, and local businesses. With social media today, the opportunities to reach out abound, but despite technological advances, most volunteer are recruited through word of mouth. Nothing works better than personally asking someone if they would be willing to volunteer. Acknowledging someone in this manner makes them feel valued and engages them better than any other tool available.

Potential volunteers include:

- Parents
- Grandparents
- Neighbors
- Extension Service Master Gardener Volunteers
- Local Colleges (Horticulture and Education Departments, Service Organizations)
- Senior Centers
- Boy and Girl Scouts
- High School Service Organizations
- Garden Clubs
- Community Gardens Members
- Botanical Gardens or Arboreta
- Local Farmers and Farmers Markets
- Local Plant Nurseries and Garden Centers
- Landscaping Businesses

Working with Volunteers

Once you recruit volunteers, you need to find the right places for them within your garden program so that you can keep them. The fastest way to lose your volunteers is for them to feel like their time is not valued or used efficiently. Here are a few helpful tips to keep in mind:

- Provide an appropriate orientation to your program. An in-person training is best, but written instructions are also helpful. Include everything from how to sign in and where is the bathroom to programming details.
- As much as possible, let volunteers know what they will be helping with ahead of time so they can come prepared. Assign them an appropriate amount of work. Most like some responsibility, but do not want to feel overloaded.
- For ongoing volunteers especially, take the time to get to know them. Engaging them on a personal level helps build a relationship that fosters feelings of ownership in the program as a whole. You can accomplish this through conversation or you may even want to try collecting a Volunteer Interest Survey (see sample below). Finding out more about your volunteers helps you determine why they want to help. Some common reasons people volunteer for school garden programs and what jobs they might be interested in helping with include:

- Interest in learning more about gardening – put them on the planning committee, let them help with obtaining the plants, make sure they get out in the garden.
- Social – make sure they are in a job where they can work and chat with other volunteers.
- Like to work with kids – let them teach lessons or work with small groups of students in the garden.
- Building a resume –provide leadership experiences and offer to write recommendations
- Establish a consistent vehicle for passing along information such as a newsletter, regular email, monthly meeting or work day.

Keeping Volunteers

Having a core group of volunteers that knows the garden well and can jump in when needed is a major asset for any garden program. Engaging them and giving them appropriate jobs to fill as discussed above plays an important role in keeping them. Showing your appreciation is also important. You need to provide informal recognition such as saying thank you after they help each time and also formal recognition through things like thank you cards, notes in your newsletter, and through a seasonal or annual volunteer appreciation event or special gift.

Here are some more tips to help keep, manage, encourage, and reward your garden volunteers:

- **Ask volunteers for feedback on the garden program in a specific way.** Often a volunteer will not come out and tell you if something is a problem; they will just quit. Using an evaluation survey or scheduling a special meeting for feedback makes it more likely that a volunteer will feel heard and continue to participate as problems are addressed rather than leaving.
- **Be open to volunteers' suggestions for improvements and/or changes.** Try to find a way to incorporate some of their ideas. Installing new features or testing out new plantings and activities each season can bring life into your program. By incorporating some of the ideas from your volunteers, you are cultivating feelings of ownership in these important contributors.
- **Use social media and Google Groups to share achievements and keep your volunteers in the know.** These services keep volunteers connected electronically, enabling them to share photos, documents, and generally connect about any issues that arise. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media outlets provide a venue to publicly share achievements and show the student body, teachers, and donors how the school or youth garden is growing. Remember - not everyone likes to be recognized through social media, so use Google Groups as a way to share achievements of individuals within just the core volunteer base.
- **Pass along the perks!** Let your volunteers know they are appreciated by providing some perks. For example, volunteers who help with summer watering can take home ripe fruits and vegetables. If you have extra plants, let volunteers take them home for their own gardens. If your volunteers have home gardens, split perennials or offer up extra seedlings and seed packets.
- **Put gratitude in writing.** Encourage students to show their appreciation for volunteer efforts. Work with students to create artwork, cards, and notes to let volunteers know that their work is valued. Invite students to create images reflective of the garden and write letters that express their feelings about how the garden has helped or impacted them personally. Share these documents with your gardeners to let them know how their work is impacting the lives of children involved with the garden.
- **Encourage student volunteers.** At Academy One Middle School in Jersey City, New Jersey, students in the garden club have coordinated with several teachers and administrators to have access to the school building during the summer months. By signing up for weekly visits, students and teachers are making sure that the garden is watered and weeded. Keeping students involved in the garden over the summer months lets volunteers and teaching staff know that students are dedicated to the program, and it also gives volunteers an opportunity to work with students and share their knowledge.

- **Hold a volunteer appreciation day.** Host a harvest breakfast, lunch, or dinner at the garden site for volunteers, students, and teaching staff. Try using some food from the garden, and seek out donations from local businesses. At the event recognize the efforts of volunteers who have made significant contributions by providing a gift of garden gloves, flowers, or a plant.

As long as you remember the universal fact that everyone wants to feel needed and respected, and you work hard to not waste their time and keep it fun, your volunteer program will continue to grow along with your garden.