

Maintaining a School Garden in Summer

In many areas of the country, much of the growing season occurs outside of the regular school session. Maintaining a school food garden during the summer is a common challenge for many school garden programs. Here are some tips to help you keep your garden thriving over the summer months, ready for more learning and fun when kids return to the classroom in late summer.

- **Enlist volunteers** – Recruit summer volunteers to care for and harvest from the garden. In addition to students, parents, and teachers, approach community members and service organizations like Scouts, 4-H, or church youth groups about donating time to care for the garden. Some volunteers may be willing to adopt a bed for the whole summer; others will be interested in helping on a more limited basis. If possible, have one volunteer serve as overall garden coordinator for the summer. Create and distribute a written schedule so that someone is checking on the garden on a regular basis. Email or phone call reminders will likely be needed.

Also, make sure to provide adequate instructions and guidance if the volunteers are not familiar with the garden procedures.

You might hold a work day one Saturday per month to knock down weeds and or complete other tasks such as making mid to late summer plantings for fall harvest. Reward volunteers by letting them harvest and take home any ripe produce on the day of their service. You might also consider organizing volunteers to donate garden produce to a local food pantry or other community organization. Be sure to check with the organization first to make sure it is able to handle donations of fresh produce.

- **Tap into summer youth programs** – If your school runs a summer session or hosts a summer camp program on school grounds, get in touch with teachers or summer camp counselors to see if they are interested in taking advantage of your outdoor garden classroom during the summer months in exchange for upkeep. Or you might consider pairing up with a nearby local organization that runs a summer youth program, such as a library, parks and recreation department, or day camp for periodic summer garden care and learning.
- **Install irrigation** – Drip irrigation equipment is available at most home improvement stores for a reasonable price, and you can set it up to run on inexpensive timers. It might be worth your while to search for someone to donate an automatic irrigation system.
- **Use mulch** – A layer of organic mulch reduces weed growth and maintains soil moisture, while adding organic matter to the soil as it breaks down with time. In vegetable beds use inexpensive organic mulch such as sheets of newspaper topped with straw. If you also have flower gardens on your school grounds, use a 2- to 3-inch deep layer of more durable organic mulch, such as shredded bark in these beds.
- **Harvest in the spring** – Another approach is to focus on crops that can be planted and reach harvestable size by late spring while school is still in session. The warmer your climate and the earlier your spring frost date, the easier this option will be. Cool season crops that mature quickly, like spinach, lettuce, beets, and radishes are all good choices for spring and early summer harvest in many parts of the country. Once your plants have been harvested, cover the bare soil with a thick layer of mulch to discourage weeds and prevent soil erosion. The mulch will gradually break down over the summer and winter, adding organic matter to enrich the soil for the following year's crops.
- **Plant in late summer for fall harvest** – It's also possible in many parts of the country to plant fast-maturing crops in late summer, as soon as students arrive back for the start of a new school year, for harvest in the fall. Or summer volunteers can start crops that need more growing time in mid to late summer; then returning students can take over the care and harvesting. The longer the growing season in your area and the later your fall frost date, the more options you'll have in terms of suitable crops. You can also extend your fall growing season with cold frames, row covers, or hoop houses to protect crops from the cold.

- **Build soil during the summer** – If you are not growing plants in your garden over the summer, plant a summer cover crop to suppress weeds and add organic matter to your soil. Fast growing buckwheat is a good summer cover crop in most areas and is great for keeping weeds down. Cut the plants down about a week after they begin flowering so they don't set seeds. On a small scale, plants can be cut down with hedge shears. Cut the shoots down in layers from top to bottom so they are chopped into relatively small pieces as they're cut. You can then leave the chopped shoots on top of the soil as mulch. If you plan to plant vegetables for fall harvest, just pull the chopped shoots aside and dig holes for transplants. To prepare a seedbed for planting, turn the chopped shoots into the soil with a shovel; then let them decompose for a few weeks before planting seeds. Check with your local Extension Service to for more information on other summer cover crops that are well suited to your area.