

Cultivating Ownership

Creating excitement for a new youth gardening program is an easy endeavor. Everyone likes to be involved in “ground-breaking” experiences benefiting youth in the local community. Participants enjoy planning, rife as it is with opportunities to dream and share their thoughts and opinions. Planning is followed by installation and the great satisfaction of watching an empty plot — in many cases, a neglected, trash-filled spot — transform into a beautiful outdoor learning laboratory. But many school garden coordinators tell us they’re challenged to keep students and volunteers involved after the initial phase. It’s true that the energy driving a garden’s creation can dwindle over time without careful and deliberate planning. You can avoid this pitfall and sustain strong levels of support and enthusiasm by carefully nurturing the seeds of ownership.

When students, parents, teachers, and community members feel ownership in a garden project they are willing to dedicate time and invest resources in its growth. Here are some tried-and-true ways to cultivate ownership in your gardening team, a spirit that moves them to say proudly, “This is *my* school garden!”

CULTIVATING OWNERSHIP

Cultivating people is as much a requirement for sustaining youth gardens as building the soil. It’s about more than just coordinating and directing activities - people, whatever their age or level of involvement, have to feel that they themselves somehow grow in the garden. This may take the form of being attracted and attached in some way to the physical space, the plants they help install, the children they guide there, the relationships they build with other team members, or the community that a school garden helps brighten. Here are some ideas for how to build this spirit of ownership.

COMMUNICATE!

If you remember only one thing, let it be this: Communicate clearly and frequently with your garden team, including the students. Participants who stay informed about the plans and progress of the school garden possess the strongest sense of ownership. In contrast, poor communication leads to frustration and a quick decrease in support.

How can you maintain good lines of communication?

- Write a special youth garden newsletter or add a column to an existing newsletter.
- Maintain a web page.
- Create an e-mail list.
- Start a phone tree.

Make a list of the people you need to communicate with, evaluate the options and resources available to you (including time), and let that guide the communication plan. Make sure everyone is aware of how you plan to communicate with them and then stick with it. This is very important. Communicate!

EXPAND AND GROW

Add a new element to your youth garden each year. It keeps your garden dynamic and gives the current year’s participants opportunities to be part of the planning process. People love to be involved on the ground floor of a project. It gives them a special opportunity to contribute ideas and join in without feeling like an outsider. This doesn’t mean starting over from scratch each year, rather to add to or improve the existing youth garden. Additions can be as small as a bench where students can sit and read, or as large as adding a new school garden space.

HOST AN ANNUAL PLANNING EVENT

At the beginning of each year (either the school year or the growing season) plan a brainstorming meeting. Invite everyone you think might have an interest in your youth garden: students, parents, teachers, school administrators and custodians, and community members (e.g., neighbors, business owners).

New gardens probably attract the most interest, but each year you can brainstorm ideas for additions to the garden and/or new programs/projects for the garden. Although you'll need a smaller team to handle the details, a large brainstorming session builds a foundation of ownership. Even if the planning session participants do not continue to be actively involved, when supporters see the garden, they will know they helped contribute to its creation.

SCHEDULE REGULAR WORKDAYS

Holding regularly scheduled events such as workdays or open garden days helps establish a routine, giving participants a comfortable way to be involved. Because participants know what to expect after attending the first event, they will approach future events with a sense of familiarity and belonging.

ENGAGE THE KIDS

Kids are the impetus and energy behind every youth garden. Adult volunteers and educators work with youth gardening programs because they enjoy the fascination and excitement of the children involved. By ensuring youth feel a strong sense of ownership, you also motivate and cultivate feelings of ownership in adult participants. To make sure youth are engaged, use inquiry-based learning techniques and make sure kids have a say in what is grown and how the garden is used. Keep the garden accessible for exploration outside of class hours. Involve students in all aspects of the garden including planning, installation, maintenance, and harvest. And don't spend all your time weeding!

SAY "THANK YOU!"

Recognizing participants for their work acknowledges their importance to the school garden. Use a variety of ways to show appreciation, including verbal praise, written notes, and formal events.

PERSONALIZE THE SCHOOL GARDEN

Think of activities and garden features that give youth participants a chance to add a personal touch to the garden. Kids love to point out "their plants" by putting a name label next to them. Kids' art objects are another expression of connecting to the garden.

PROMOTE THE YOUTH GARDEN TO THE COMMUNITY

Most of the ideas above apply to regular youth garden participants, but to keep the rest of the neighborhood engaged and fresh energy flowing in, you need to reach beyond the core group. Send updates about the garden program to local print and broadcast media. Invite municipal officials and community members to events or to just stop by and see the youth garden. This way you cast a wider net of ownership, which in turn can boost donations and financial support for the garden, decrease vandalism, and help you recruit additional active volunteers. Your garden is a youth program that everyone in the community should be proud of — so make sure they know about it!