

# Gathering Support

Who will you involve in your school garden program? The answer should be, “Everyone!” Key supporters for your program should include administrators, educators, food service directors and cafeteria staff, school support staff, school neighbors, community volunteers and most importantly, your students.

Assembling a strong group of excited supporters is as important to starting a school garden program as obtaining the basic supplies of soil, plants, and tools. Supporters may turn into volunteers who help with installation of the garden; they may assist behind the scenes by donating funds or supplies, or they may just serve as cheerleaders, recognizing your efforts and bolstering your motivation. Regardless of the role they play, many hands are needed to ensure a successful, sustainable garden program. Work to get supporters involved in your efforts as early in the process as possible.

## Here is a list of key players to recruit as supporters for your school garden program:

### **Administrators:**

Administrators can make or break a school garden project. A school principal who is excited about your program will help find space for the garden and funds for supplies, approve time for gardening, and offer positive feedback and recognition for educators and staff who contribute. The key to gaining support from administrators is to reinforce the benefits it provides to the students and to closely align garden programs with required curriculum. Evaluation and tracking of the impact the garden has on the school community helps to maintain their support over the long term.

### **Educators:**

High demands on educators’ time and energy often leads to a natural reluctance to try something new. It is not uncommon for one educator to catch the gardening bug and try to take on sole responsibility for a garden program. Unfortunately this is also one of the surest signs that a garden will not be sustained over time. It is important that the garden program have the support of a team of educators to share the responsibilities and oversight. To gain their support, make sure all educators are actively involved in identifying the goals of the program and have a say in the size and scope of what will be planted. Identify ways to use the garden as a tool to enhance existing curriculum and offer teacher training to increase their comfort level working with students in an outdoor classroom. Clearly relay expectations and outline responsibilities up front so that teachers feel comfortable making the commitment and knowing how the garden will fit into their schedules. At every turn, try to make sure the garden is a useful addition to educators’ arsenal of teaching aids rather than a burden on their time.

### **Food Service Director and Cafeteria Staff:**

If the ultimate goal of your school garden program is to positively impact the eating habits of your students, then gaining the support of the food service staff is essential. If you hope to serve the produce from your garden at school, your district’s food service director can help guide you through the proper harvesting and preparation procedures to make sure all fruits and vegetables are safe to consume. Even if your garden does not produce enough food to serve to students, the food service director can still support your efforts by making sure breakfast and lunch menus contain fresh fruits and vegetables that complement what you are growing in the garden. Connecting with your cafeteria staff can ensure they promote garden produce to students. They may even have suggestions for the types of fruits and vegetables you should consider growing; they see what the kids eat every day, after all!

### **School Support Staff:**

Office staff, custodians, librarians, counselors, and school nurses also have a lot they can contribute to a school garden program. Gaining the support of custodians should be at the top of your list. They often control the access to outdoor water and may be able to help you carve out useful storage space for tools and other equipment. Not only that, their tolerance of a few dirty foot and hand prints for the greater good of the garden goes a long way in making sure the garden program does not become an annoyance to school administrators.

Office staff can help direct volunteers and provide access to locked gardens during non-school hours. Librarians can direct students in garden research and help promote the garden by making sure both nonfiction and fiction gardening books are available to the students. School nurses can help tie nutrition education into programming efforts. Getting the whole school involved builds excitement and also spreads out responsibilities, which helps to support the long-term sustainability of the program.

### **Students:**

Every school garden should be developed with active participation from as many students as possible. Although participating adults will guide the process, students need opportunities to share their ideas and opinions during the planning and planting process. If the students are not involved until planting day, they miss out on a very important part of the gardening experience, and they will not feel as strongly connected to the program. True feelings of ownership in the garden will create a strong sense of responsibility and will result in students that respect the garden space and are eager to learn there.

### **School Neighbors:**

Depending on the location of the garden, neighbors to the school might get to enjoy it at it as much as the kids. They make a great target audience for finding volunteers to help water and maintain the garden during school breaks, and if nothing else, they can offer to keep an eye on it to keep vandalism down to a minimum.

### **Additional Community Members:**

The key players listed above have the strongest ties to your school and will be directly impacted by its presence. However, there are other individuals in the community who may be interested in helping either because of a love of children, a love of gardening, or both. Some community groups you might consider contacting for support and as a potential source of volunteer assistance include Cooperative Extension Master Gardener volunteers, college students (pre-service teachers/graduate students), seniors organizations, Boy and Girl Scouts, garden clubs, service organizations like Rotary, high school students, local farmers, local businesses, and local plant nursery staff.

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## **Connecting with Your Supporters**

So what is the next step after you have identified potential supporters for your garden program? Reach out! Effective communication is critical for connecting with potential garden supporters (and for keeping them informed once you have the garden in place). Communicating clearly and frequently and keeping them informed about the plans and progress of the school garden makes them feel invested in your program.

One way to introduce your program to the community is to host a brainstorming meeting. To get the word out about your event, send home flyers with students, post the event on your website, add notices to community bulletin boards (virtual and physical), and personally invite individuals you really want to attend. Begin the meeting by providing background information about your efforts and existing plans, but then leave time to gather feedback and ideas from attendees.

Interacting in-person is a powerful way to build relationships with your supporters. However, hosting even informal events is time consuming and finding one time that works for everyone is often difficult, so it is something you probably only want to do once a year. Here are some additional ideas for getting and keeping in touch with your supporters:

- Create a web page or blog that you update regularly. If possible, get your students to write the blog entries. Create a subscriber list so that it is easy to let followers know when new updates are made.
- Create a discussion group using service like Google Groups to make it easy to email updates, ask for help, and share success stories.
- Submit articles and pictures to your school's newsletter and to local newspapers, TV stations and online publications.
- Invite the community to help with seasonal clean up or regularly scheduled work days. Combine with harvest parties, educational programs and other social events to attract more participants.
- Identify important garden days, like planting and harvesting, and share these in advance with your school, community, local newspapers and TV stations to build excitement around the garden.

There is no right or best way to connect with your supporters. The important thing is to pick a method (or methods) that works for you and is comfortable to maintain. Decide on your plan for communicating the information; let everyone know how you plan to follow through and then stick with it. Consistency is important.

With a strong support network established, your garden program will have a solid foundation, making it easier to implement and sustain your garden program. Your next step is to identify a few of these supporters to take on leadership roles and establish a formal Garden Committee.