

Sustaining Your Program

School gardens are a significant investment of time, energy, and resources, so you want them to last beyond one growing season! Gathering support, creating a garden committee, setting realistic goals, designing the garden and the garden program to meet these goals, obtaining necessary resources, and using gardening techniques to make maintenance as simple as possible will all contribute to the longevity of your garden. Here are some additional tips to make sure your school garden thrives over time:

Use your garden regularly and purposefully

If students only visit the garden for planting day and harvest day, they will not feel connected to the program and will not reap the true benefits of a school garden program. Students need to be able to visit their garden often, ideally daily, and participate in related lessons frequently to make it worth the time and money to install a school garden.

Re-evaluate goals annually

Take time either at the end of the year or the beginning of the new school year to closely evaluate the goals of your program. Are you meeting your goals? Are the existing goals still relevant to the curriculum? Brainstorm ways to improve the program, and either craft new goals or refocus the existing ones to meet new challenges.

Recruit new committee members and volunteers

Continually attract new supporters. It is easy to get bogged down in doing things the way they have always been done, but new volunteers bring in fresh ideas and excitement. Regularly adding additional volunteers to help get the work done also helps prevent burnout by spreading out responsibilities among more people.

Add a new feature each year

As much fun as it is to be involved in a successful existing program, people like the excitement that comes with doing something new and unique. Add a new feature or a new activity each year to help students and supporters feel like they are making a significant contribution to the school garden. You can add new equipment like a weather station, try planting a new crop, or add a new outreach program or special event. Large or small, adding something new bolsters feelings of pride and ownership.

Document and share your efforts

Take pictures, collect student journals, write articles for the school newsletter or local paper, post to a blog, share updates via Google Groups— these are just a few ideas for sharing the success of your program. Promote the garden whenever you can to attract new supporters and increase the pride participants feel in the program.

Establish measures for success

Based on your goals, determine measurable signs that you are achieving them. You can weigh and track the amount of produce harvested, conduct surveys of students, teachers or parents, collect data such as test scores and food diaries, or track attendance or behavior issues. This information will help build support for your program.

Thank everyone involved

This includes educators, volunteers, staff, students – anyone who helps in the garden. Thank them informally through frequently words of appreciation and also formally by writing thank you letters, giving gifts of the fruit of your labors, or recognizing them at a harvest banquet.

Enjoy!

A garden program that seems to be focused on weed pulling will quickly lose the interest of students and volunteers. Make sure kids have ample time to simply observe and explore in the garden, not just do “chores.” Also, plan time for fun activities like harvest parties and scavenger hunts, or host crafts days to make garden accessories like stepping stones or homemade plant labels.