

## Creating Signs for Culturally Relevant Plants

**Overview:** Having signage in your garden can help visitors feel a sense of belonging, inspire curiosity, and reinforce learning. Just like the garden space itself, signs can represent both the creativity of your learners and who they are as individuals and as a collective. Through this lesson, kids will grow plants with cultural connections AND create signs for them.

**Grade Level/Range:** 4–12th Grade

**Objective:** In this lesson, learners will:

- Share about their cultural backgrounds and plants to which they feel a cultural connection
- Learn about their peers' cultures
- Research plants
- Make creative signs to represent researched plants

**Time:** 1+ hours

### Materials:

Seed catalogs or regional plant lists

Sign-making materials such as:

#### Option 1: Hand-painted sign

- Flat pieces of wood or aluminum sheets for signs
- Posts (pieces of wood, cut branches, etc.)
- Flat or filbert paint brushes in a variety of sizes/styles appropriate to the sizes of your signs
- Cans or jars of acrylic or latex paint in a variety of colors
- Clear-coat spray
- Hammer and nails for attaching sign to post

#### Option 2: Hand-drawn sign

- Paper or cardstock with a printed template
- Drawing materials (e.g. colored pencils, markers, etc.)
- Laminator
- Wooden post for sign
- Stapler or small nails for mounting the sign

#### Option 3: Digitally-created sign

- Paper
- Computer and your choice of software to create a imagery with text
- Laminator
- Wooden post for sign
- Stapler or small nails for mounting the sign



Translation reference resources. Depending on the languages spoken by your students, we encourage you to make bilingual (or even multi-lingual) signs.

### Background Information

For kids, culturally-relevant foods are foods that are prepared by their families at home and usually reflect ethnic tradition. While some foods may have unique value to certain cultures, such as Hawaiians making Poi (a fermented dish) from Kalo (Taro) root, different children may have varied connections with the same plant. For example, the smell of Thai basil may remind a Vietnamese student of Phở soup while a Thai child may think of Pad Krapow Gai (Spicy Thai Basil Chicken).



Growing foods that kids are connected to through food, culture, and tradition can help them form a deeper appreciation for what they eat and cultivate a sense of pride for their own unique identities. Creating signage that represents these foods celebrates diversity, emphasizes the importance of learning about different cultures, and ultimately helps instill pride and ownership in young gardeners.

### Laying the Groundwork

The most important step for showcasing culturally-relevant plants in your youth garden is to learn about the specific plants that are important to your students and their families. In a share-out activity, ask them questions such as:

- What are your favorite foods to eat at home? What plant ingredients do they have?
- If you, your parents, grandparents, or caregivers cook at home, what do they make?
- What holidays do you celebrate and what do you usually eat?
- Where are your ancestors from? What foods did they traditionally grow?

Once you collect this information, your class will need to investigate which of these plants you may already have in your garden. If they are not currently growing there, which of these plants would thrive given your growing conditions (the square footage of your garden space, climate, season, soil, sun exposure, etc.)? Regional plant lists and seed catalogs can be helpful resources for determining this information.

Conclude your activity by make a list of all the plants you would like to grow in your garden space and could be successfully grown in your conditions.

### Exploration

Task students with conducting additional research about the growing conditions and the cultural significance of the plants on your list. This can be done as individual, group, or class projects depending on your students and the time available. Here are suggestions for information to ask them to collect:

- Research different plant names (scientific and/or common) and needs (harvest period, hours of sunlight needed, etc.)
- Research plant origins. Were any of these plants native to your area and/or cultivated by indigenous people of the region? Is there information available related to how they were introduced to your area?
- Find out what specific varieties of the plant are traditionally used.
- Find out the name of the plant in different languages.

Although this information can be collected using online and print resources, also encourage them to asking their family or friends' families about traditional food preparations, growing practices, or interesting cultural associations related to the plant(s). Consider asking local gardeners who are knowledgeable about culturally significant crops to speak to your class.

Make a final list of the plants that will be featured in your garden and decide what kind of signs would work best for your garden space and are best suited to your students' abilities. Lead students through each of these steps for sign creation: planning, painting/printing, planting/posting. Here are some tips to consider as you walk through each step:

### **Planning**

Because these signs are intended to be relatively permanent in the garden, remind kids that the signs will be on display for many others to see and read. Therefore, careful planning for each sign's design is important. Assign kids to pairs or groups for them to create the design and research what they want to portray on the sign. Have them first draw out a design for a predetermined sign size on a separate sheet of paper. If you are making bilingual/multilingual signs, make sure both/all languages are easy to see.

### **Painting/Printing**

Depending on the types of learners you are working with, think about the type of sign media that would be most suitable for them. While painting is an accessible activity for all ages, making legible signs can get tricky. Giving them the correct tools and framework will help ensure readability of signs while still involving kids in creating them.

For signs that will include anything in addition to the plant's name and simple visual, it's best to go with option 2 or 3 below.

If working with middle or high school kids, a digitally-created sign would be a great way for them to hone their technology and creativity skills, as well as use the computer to do research about the plant.

### **Planting/Posting**

If you are planting new crops in your garden, installing the signs at the same time will help you keep track of what is growing. If you are posting the signs where existing plants are growing, make sure to consider placement that will still allow the plants to grow, doesn't block sun, and will be visible to garden visitors.

### **Option 1: Hand-painted sign**

1. With each precut sign, make sure to first apply a base coat of paint. Kids can help with this and the signs can be left to dry while they begin designing.
2. Have kids first draw out a design for a predetermined sign size on a sheet of paper. Will they include an image of the plant? What colors will they use? Will they be adding any decorative accents?
3. Emphasize that labeling the plant is the most important, so the letters should be as large as possible.
4. After receiving feedback on their design, they can trace out an outline on the sign. Having cutout letter templates is another option, or you can write out or outline the names of the plants and allow them to paint over them or fill the letters in.
5. Give kids appropriately-sized paint brushes to paint each sign.
6. If you are creating a two-sided sign, be sure to allow the paint on the first side to dry enough so that it doesn't smear when flipped over.
7. After kids are done painting, allow the paint to fully dry.
8. Apply a clear-coat spray to each sign to protect it from the weather.
9. Secure the sign to a post by nailing it at the top and bottom.

### Option 2: Hand-drawn sign

1. Create a blank template of what you want each sign to look like with space for kids to draw or write in information. As an example, basic sign could have any of the following:
  - A box for kids to illustrate the plant
  - Common name for the plant
  - Scientific name for the plant
  - The name of the plant in another language
  - Ethnobotanical origins of the plant
  - Growing and harvest times
  - Description of the plant
2. This sign option serves both as a worksheet where they can write in their research and as a display of what they learned. They may have to create a draft and a final version that will be displayed.
3. Laminate the paper.
4. Mount it to a post using a staple gun, flat thumbtacks, or small nails.

### Option 3: Digitally-created sign

1. Give your tech-savvy learners free rein for how they will design their garden sign.
2. Depending on what they are familiar with, Microsoft Word, Photoshop, InDesign, or Canva are all great options for creating visually-appealing signs. For visuals, they can find photos of the plants online or illustrate them digitally.
3. Once the final version is approved, follow steps 3-4 from the previous activity.

### Making Connections

After completing your signs, dedicate time to allow the young learners to continue to explore the cultural relevance of the plants in your garden. Some discussion topics may include:

- Facilitate discussion about what plants each culture has in common, as well as how they are used or treated differently.
- Learn about what dishes and in what context the students have consumed or tried the plants. Encourage the students to share their favorite recipes.

### Branching Out

- Plan a cooking lesson using culturally-relevant ingredients and encourage kids to try new foods!
- Plant a garden that grows the ingredients you'd need to create a culturally-relevant dish and create a recipe sign:
  - Salsa: tomato, onion, cilantro, jalapeño
  - Chinese stir-fry: broccoli, carrots, snow peas
  - Baba ganoush: eggplant, garlic, parsley
  - Chimmichurri: oregano, parsley, mint, pepper
  - Pizza: tomato, genovese basil, rosemary
- Plant tour – invite another class or families to take a tour of the garden and learn about the plants students are growing and view the signs they've created. Individually or in groups, students can present information about their culturally-relevant plant.