

CHAPTER 2

Steps to Starting a School Food Garden Program

The key to a successful garden is to ensure it is part of a well-planned youth garden program. Before you begin designing and planting, determine how the garden will be used by educators for instruction and how it will be used by your young gardeners to explore and learn. Establishing a sustainable program also requires building a framework of supporters and plans for long-term funding and maintenance.

The following steps provide the structure and support needed to create a successful and sustainable program:

- 1 Develop a Support Network
- 2 Craft Goals to Guide Design of Your Garden and Garden Program
- 3 Identify Needs
- 4 Obtain Supplies and Recruit Volunteers
- 5 Plan and Manage Installation
- 6 Organize Maintenance of the Garden
- 7 Sustain Enthusiasm and Support for the Garden Program

Although youth gardens evolve along many different paths, and flexibility is another key to longevity, our experience shows that following these steps will get you off to a strong start.

Although presented in a linear fashion, these steps may be done concurrently and may

need to be repeated. For instance, identifying the needs of your audience is not a one-time event. You will want to continually review their needs and adapt as new needs arise, especially if you expand your program to include additional youth. You'll also need to continuously add to your support network since school garden programs often lose volunteers each year as students (and their supporting families) move on to new schools or graduate, and educators retire.

In this chapter we provide you with an overview of each step. At the end of this chapter are worksheets for each step to help guide you through the planning process. By the end of this chapter you should be able to answer the questions:

- Who should we involve in our school food garden?
- How do we plan a sustainable school food garden program?

KidsGardening.org related resource:

[Starting a School Garden Program: Overview](#)

Develop a Support Network

Think of your support network as the root system of your school garden program. Just as strong roots are critical to the health of a plant, a strong support network is vital for the health and longevity of your program. Start with your organization's leaders. Support from your

school's key administrators is essential for a successful garden initiative so you'll want to be prepared to make your case. Practice sharing your message and rationale for developing a kids' gardening program so you can help them understand its importance and the many benefits it will offer. By involving administrators early on, you increase their investment in the project, and they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over the planning process and ultimately the garden itself.

"I LOVE vegetables!"

"This is the most fun I ever had!" "I can't wait to eat the kale!" Children gave up recess time to work in the garden—watering, weeding, and admiring their garden. The students devoured the fresh spinach and chard we harvested this spring, and even wanted more fresh garlic to add to the salad dressing they prepared. It was astonishing to see 9 and 10 year-olds asking for seconds and thirds of salad!"

**— MAGGIE CONNOLLY
F.P.G. CHILD CARE PROGRAM, NC**



Once you have secured approval from the top, broaden your network and involve as many community members as possible. The size of your support network should match the size and scope of your planned garden and garden program. The more people involved, the more likely it is that your program will be successful.

A structured brainstorming session open to the community is one way to reach out to

potential supporters. Invite administrators, educators, caregivers/parents, youth/ students, school nurses, food service personnel, school or facility staff (including custodians), current volunteers, neighbors of the potential garden site and other perspective community volunteers (pre-service teachers, Farm to School educators, Master Gardeners, garden club members, green industry employees, etc.). You may want to present your idea at pre-established gatherings such as faculty, school board, or Parent-Teacher Organization meetings. When planning a school food garden in particular, consider digging into community connections related to health, nutrition, and food systems. Examples include medical practitioners, hospitals, community health organizations, local farmers and farmers markets, and grocery store representatives.

In addition to gathering feedback and ideas, use this first meeting to help you identify people to serve on a garden planning or steering committee. This group should be composed of diverse, yet focused, individuals who are willing to meet regularly and share in the responsibility of getting the garden started by outlining and meeting the visions, goals, and needs of the program. Specifically, the committee will be responsible for compiling the project objectives, finalizing the project plan, preparing the budget, identifying donors, and fundraising.

Throughout the planning process, be sure to involve your future youth gardeners. Educators across the country have discovered that when students are involved in all stages of the process, they are more invested in the project's success and inspired to care for and respect their schoolyard oases. By valuing the opinions of your target audience



and encouraging them to make decisions, you will cultivate motivated, confident, and collaborative learners.

After the garden is installed, your planning committee should evolve into an active garden committee to sustain the program and share the work of maintenance. The members of this garden committee may include some of the same folks as your planning committee, but some initial members may want to step down so you will most likely need to find a few new recruits. Effective garden committees include at least three or four members so that responsibilities don't fall entirely on the shoulders of one champion. Regular meetings and clearly expressed expectations for participation are key for building a successful leadership team. Committed leaders are well organized and capable of encouraging kids, parents, teachers, and community volunteers to participate. Create a constant rotation of members to make sure you do not overwhelm those involved.

As valuable as your garden leadership team will be, remember that your support network should be much broader than your garden committee. Finding ways to engage and communicate with your supporters is no small task, but you garner many benefits from having a solid support network including:

- decreased likelihood of vandalism because more people have a stake in the success of the program.
- ample connections to potential volunteers and donors of labor, money, and products.
- encouragement of cross-generational mentoring and friendships among students, teachers, and a diversity of community members.

- infusion of needed expertise and fresh ideas to the project.

Use the **“Develop a Support Network”** worksheet at the end of this chapter to help you gather names and contact information.

Craft Goals to Guide Design of the Garden and Garden Program

It is hard to chart a path without knowing where you want to end up. The next step is to answer the “what” – what do you want your school food garden and garden program to accomplish? Although it is tempting to start drawing up landscape plans once a gardening committee is organized, take the time to determine both how you want to use the completed garden and ultimately what impact you want garden participation to have on the youth involved.

Define your goals and objectives, write them down, and review them regularly to keep your planning on track. Start by answering these questions:

- Do you want the garden to improve the nutritional attitudes and eating behaviors of the youth?
- Do you want to have enough harvest to offer tasting samples to all students?
- Do you want to grow enough food for cooking classes and/or to allow students to take some home?
- Do you plan to grow fruits and vegetables that rely on pollinators, so you'll need to incorporate flowers and native plants into your plan?



- Would you like to start your own school farmers' market?
- Do you want the garden to be integrated into your curriculum or do you want to use it for extracurricular activities?
- Do you want your garden to raise funds or grow produce to donate to the local community food bank?

A purposeful garden program will be a worthwhile and long-lasting garden program.

Select a Garden Site

Once your garden program is clearly defined you are ready to work identify a location for your garden and begin the design. The ideal location is one that is convenient to visit, has easy access to a water source, and gets adequate sunlight. (Most fruit, vegetable, and herb plants need at least 6 to 8 hours of full sun each day.) Screen potential sites to ensure that the soil does not contain any hazardous chemicals or substances, such as lead; most county extension offices can help you test your soil.

Although having your garden and educational programs at the same site is ideal, there are other creative options. If your outdoor space is limited, consider an indoor garden program using light gardens or sunny windowsills. If your site does not have an appropriate space, don't give up on your goal of having a youth garden program; rather, search your community for an alternative space that will work.

Beyond a school, some potential locations for youth gardens include:



- community gardens
- city parks
- libraries
- churches
- vacant lots
- rooftops
- nature centers
- museums
- retirement centers
- residential institutions
- housing developments

If your potential garden site is not located on your property or the property of your school or organization, your first step is to get permission to use it. Ask if the owner has plans for the site, such as the construction of a building, and if so, the timeframe. Inquire

about a long-term arrangement to use the space. Even if a short-term arrangement to use the space is your own option, knowing this up front will help you plan and determine what types of materials to grow. Explore insurance needs and coverage.

Growing edibles involves additional safety and environmental considerations:

- The soil must be free of contaminants (for in-ground beds) or you must have a source of high-quality soil for raised beds or container gardens.
- The area should also be protected from pests and animals, such as rats, that may spread diseases.



- There must be an easily accessible source of potable (safe-for-drinking) water.

Explore Design Options

After a location is selected you can choose the type of garden you want to plant. There are many different garden options depending on the space and time available to you, including in-ground, raised bed, container, and indoor gardens.

With so many options, the design step can be overwhelming. To help maintain your focus, remember – a youth garden should be fun and functional. Keep it simple! Start SMALL! Plan big, but start small. A large garden project can exhaust the enthusiasm of your students and volunteers. Let them get excited about the joy of a bountiful, FUN, small garden, then expand as your confidence and experience increases.

Following these suggestions will help you create a useful and successful design. Since garden design is an important part of the planning process and a big contributor to the success of your program, extensive design details are presented in Chapter 4.

Use the “**Develop Garden Goals**” worksheet at the end of this chapter to help guide you as you work with your support network and planning committee to identify program goals and objectives.

Identify Needs

With your plans in hand, you are ready to ask yourself what you need to accomplish these goals by identifying the supplies you will need to make your garden a reality. In addition to

listing the obvious gardening tools, soil, and plants, this is also a good time to also think about the volunteers and the educational materials/resources you will need to support your garden program goals.

Basic Garden Tools and Materials

Every garden project will require the use of some tools, of course. How many and what types of tools you'll need depends on the scale of your project and how many kids will be working in the garden at one time. Although tools will be shared, it is best if you can be prepared with enough supplies to keep everyone busy. There is nothing more frustrating for young gardeners than to watch others garden when they are anxious to dig in.

When selecting tools, look for durable, well-made, properly sized products. Avoid cheap plastic tools that were crafted to be toys because they break easily. Consider purchasing kid-sized tools for your students, especially for preschool and elementary school gardens. Make sure to have supplies like clean baskets/containers and clippers available for safely harvesting fruits and vegetables. See sidebar at left for a list of essential tools and materials. As your program grows you may need additional items such as a storage bin or shed, trellis or other support structures, benches or picnic tables, and a compost bin. If you are installing indoor gardens, you will need additional supplies such as grow lights, pots, and soilless potting mix.

Volunteers

Before you recruit volunteers, it can be very helpful to define the jobs you will need your volunteers to fulfill. Most garden programs



can use both one-time volunteers for the garden installation and special events, along with ongoing volunteers who help with chores such as daily weeding and watering. Drafting volunteer job descriptions can be a great tool to help you with your recruiting efforts. People are much more likely to agree to help if they know what is expected of them and they clearly understand what they are committing to in advance.

Educational Program Materials

Just as you need to consider the goals of both the garden and the garden program, you will also need a second list of resources needed to conduct your garden educational programming. KidsGardening.org has a wealth of materials available to help with the implementation of food-related garden lessons and activities. Visit The Kids Garden Community to search for free online activities and lesson plans from other resources, and to get recommendations from fellow garden educators.

Common garden tools needed:

- Hand trowels – for digging planting holes and removing deep-rooted weeds
- 3-pronged hand cultivators – for weeding and cultivating soil in small areas
- Shovel – for turning soil, building beds, digging planting holes
- Hoe – for weeding, making planting furrows
- Rake – for smoothing soil
- Hose – long enough to reach easily from spigot to far end of garden, with a wand or nozzle to direct water flow
- Watering can- small enough for kids to carry when full
- Buckets – 3- or 5-gallon plastic buckets for moving soil, collecting weeds, storing tools, and/or serving as temporary seating
- Containers and clippers for harvesting – Note: keep harvesting equipment clean for safe handling
- Garden cart or wheelbarrow – for moving compost, plants, mulch, etc. Depending on storage options, this is an item you may want to borrow rather than own.

Common garden materials needed:

- Soil – invest in high-quality soil to support healthy plants and decrease pest and disease problems
- Compost – to build soil fertility and quality
- Garden stakes and row markers – to keep track of where and what you plant
- String and tape measure – for measuring space between rows, beds, seeds, etc.
- Mulch material – to cover beds and pathways
- Fertilizer – to maximize plant health and crop yields
- Plants

Once you have fully explored your needs, create a written wish list that includes your tools/materials, volunteer needs, and program supplies. Estimate the costs for the entire project and prepare a realistic budget. Remember to include expenses for site development and improvement, operation, curriculum, and miscellaneous items.

You can use the **“Identify Needs”** checklist at the end of this chapter to help you gather the list of supplies you will need to build your garden program.

Obtain Supplies and Recruit Volunteers

Wish list in hand, your next step is to gather supplies and recruit volunteers. Before you begin asking for donations of money and supplies, make sure you have a means for processing these donations. For monetary donations, you may want to work within an established checking account such as through a PTO or your school’s or nonprofit’s business office. Another option is to create a new account just for the garden. If you choose to open a special garden account, you will need to create a record-keeping system for revenues and expenses and establish who has the authority to spend money from the account. Either way, make sure to know the tax status of your organization and the name donors should use when making out checks. See the Funding Your Garden section in Chapter 4 for more tips on gathering supplies and support.

Similarly, you should be prepared to accept and utilize volunteers before you begin recruitment. Make sure you have a way for



them to contact you, and be ready to provide them with information about the garden, including dates for training and implementation. Once you pique their interest, you want to follow closely behind with action items.

Recruiting Volunteers

Volunteers contribute a wealth of experience and enthusiasm to a kids' gardening program. They also bring an abundance of skills and fresh ideas. Most importantly, volunteers provide support to the project leaders. This increases the adult-to-child ratio and makes the program much more likely to succeed since it doesn't rely on the efforts of only a few people.

Where can you look to find volunteers? Most organizations and schools already have a small group of really active volunteers, so you want to begin by recruiting from the folks that are already committed to your audience. Additional target groups to recruit from include:

- parents/caregivers
- grandparents/extended family members
- school neighbors
- teachers/retired teachers
- Extension Master Gardeners
- community service organizations (such as Rotary Club and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts)
- students and faculty in the education and horticulture departments at local colleges or universities
- garden club members
- senior centers
- agriculture industry employees such as farmers or landscapers

Before you reach out to potential volunteers, check with your school or organization to determine their volunteer policy. Many organizations require volunteers to complete a background check prior to working with youth. Comply with all regulations and inform your potential volunteers about the process during recruitment.

Here are some tips for getting volunteers involved and keeping them interested:

- 1 People like to be asked in person. Requests for volunteers in group emails, a newsletter, or local newspaper will make people aware of your garden's needs but may result in only a few responses. Follow up with phone calls, personal email communications, and announcements during events or regularly scheduled meetings.
- 2 People like to feel appreciated. Here are some ways to show enthusiasm for volunteerism throughout the garden season:
 - Always provide an informal thank you every time someone volunteers.
 - Follow up events with volunteer participation by sending individual written thank you notes. Ones written by children are always a big hit.
 - Recognize volunteers through newsletter articles or photos.
 - At the end of the garden season, recognize volunteers more formally with a small gift or a volunteer appreciation awards ceremony.

- 3 People have different reasons for volunteering. Communicate with volunteers to find out why they have agreed to participate in your garden project. Some may simply have kids in the program; others may want to be more involved in their communities, meet new people, or make a difference in children's lives. To keep volunteers interested and motivated, it is important to understand and meet their needs as much as possible while still meeting yours.
- 4 People like to feel capable and competent. Make sure volunteers know how to do what you are asking them to do. If they don't, have a training session, either one-on-one or as a group. This will guarantee success and make the experience more gratifying.

As you recruit and manage volunteers, it is helpful to remember that although you do not provide a monetary payment to a volunteer, volunteers are not free. You pay them by offering them organized, high-quality volunteer experiences, respecting their time, and appreciating their service.

Use the “**Sample Garden Program Volunteer Job Description**” worksheet at the end of this chapter to help you define volunteer needs and recruit potential volunteers.

Plan and Manage Installation

After creating a solid foundation for your garden and garden program and gathering the resources you need to make it a success, you will finally reach the step of installing your garden.

Although planting and maintaining a garden will be an ongoing activity, your initial installation often involves a larger community effort. A special planting day event provides a wonderful opportunity to recognize the contributions of sponsors and volunteers who helped in the planning process, attract the attention of the media and government officials while promoting the garden to the community, and, last but not least, actually get the plants in the ground. Although hosting an event can seem a little overwhelming, if properly planned, the planting day can contribute to the sustainability and long-term goals of your garden program. Here are some elements you may want to think about including at your initial garden installation event:

- 1 **A short presentation.** Provide a brief background of the effort, words of thanks to donors and volunteers, and recognition of special attendees. Keep it short. Young and old gardeners alike will be ready to dig in.
- 2 **Planting.** Although it takes some creativity to accomplish, the best planting day events provide opportunities for everyone in attendance to get their hands in the soil. Offer structure and proper instruction so that you don't spend the next few weeks fixing work done improperly on planting day.
- 3 **Chronicling the event.** Whether or not the local media can attend, take plenty of pictures and video. Post on your website and create press releases.
- 4 **Refreshments.** Providing snacks and drinks contributes to a jovial atmosphere and provides time for networking. Fresh fruits and vegetables are the best choice, of course!



⑤ **A party favor (optional).** Devise a small, youth-made gift for attendees to take home, such as a seed ball or pressed flower bookmark, and attach it to a brochure that recognizes sponsors and details needs of the program. In addition to bringing smiles to guests, they're also a great way to keep the garden in their thoughts.

Creating a dedicated celebration to mark the transition of your garden from a dream to a reality is exciting for everyone involved, especially the young gardeners. It helps attendees feel connected to the program and increases their investment in seeing it succeed. The event can serve as a springboard for attracting additional sponsors and volunteers.

You can use the **“Planting Day Event Checklist”** at the end of this chapter to help keep you on track while planning your garden installation event.

The fun is just beginning once the garden installation is complete! Chapters 4 through 6 offer extensive details about planting and maintaining your garden.

Sustain Enthusiasm and Support for the Garden Program

School food gardens are a significant investment of time, energy, and resources, so you want them to last beyond one growing season! Continually moving through all the steps in this chapter will help you create a strong garden program with the organizational structure, supplies, and the human-power needed to sustain it over time. Here are some additional tips for a sustainable program:

Garden Installation Day

KidsGardening has been involved in many garden installation days over the years. Here are some tips for a successful planting day:

- **Start planning early.** Planning a successful event does not happen overnight. Choose the date carefully to avoid competing with other major events in the community. Make sure the date is open for local government officials, administrators, and other honorary attendees you hope will attend.
- **Get the word out.** Send invitations; use social media, newsletters, newspapers, radio stations; and post flyers. These communications can serve double duty and include appeals for needed donations and support.
- **Be persistent, especially with local government officials and media.** Follow up written invitations with personal phone calls. Even better, have youth and parents (a.k.a. voters) contact them.
- **Properly recognize partners and volunteers.** During planting day events, put the spotlight on donors and volunteers. This can be done with posted signage, printed brochures, or through your presentation.



Use your garden regularly and purposefully. If youth 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 food garden program. Students need to be able to visit their garden often, ideally daily, and participate in related lessons and/or activities frequently to maximize the impact of the program on their lives. Providing tasting or cooking opportunities using the garden harvest is also an important element to include in all food garden programs.

Re-evaluate goals and needs annually. Take time either at the beginning or end of the garden season to closely evaluate the goals and needs of your program. Are you meeting your goals? Are the existing goals still relevant? Brainstorm ways to improve the program, and either craft new goals and related needs or refocus the existing ones to meet new challenges.

Communicate with your support network. Maintain a mailing list or e-mail list of caregivers, teachers, administrators, neighbors, directors, garden volunteers, community leaders, local nonprofit

organizations, city and town officials, businesspeople, and legislators who can provide support for your garden. Keep the members of this list informed about the garden program and ask them for help when needed.

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 fresh ideas and excitement. Regularly adding volunteers to help get the work done also helps prevent burnout by spreading out responsibilities among more people.

Create a garden calendar. Develop a detailed calendar of activities, garden committee meetings, fundraising efforts, work projects, and special events for the entire year. Include a schedule for planting and maintenance. It is easy to get caught up in the activities of the season, and you want to make sure to get plants in the ground in time for a bountiful harvest. An organized garden program is a successful one.

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 youth and supporters feel like they are making a significant contribution to the school garden. You can add new equipment like a weather station, plant 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 your garden. Take pictures, collect youth journals, create a notebook/

scrapbook or Google Drive folder that includes news articles, letters of support, and an archive of all your plantings for the future. Saving this information not only provides a guide for the future, it also helps you measure your impact.

Share your efforts. Create a website, brochure, or project folder that shares the documentation you have collected and provides interested supporters with information on how they can contribute. 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 and is useful when applying for grants.

Thank everyone involved. This includes educators, volunteers, staff, and students – anyone who helps in the garden. Thank them informally with frequent words of appreciation and 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 youth 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.

See the **“Sample Year-End Report Form and Surveys”** for ideas on how you can chronicle and measure your garden program’s impact and help you in planning for the next garden season.

In Summary

Carefully planning your garden and garden program is key to creating a strong foundation for a successful and sustainable school food garden program. As enticing as it is to just start digging in, time spent planning will result in significant benefits over the long term.

