

Training Youth Garden Mentors

Overview: Companion planting takes on a different meaning when younger and older students are paired for shared gardening experiences. Garden-based mentoring programs can provide a plethora of educational and social-emotional benefits for both age groups. This lesson outlines steps for engaging older students in planning events for younger student participants.



Grade Level/Range: 7th – 12th Grade

Objective:

Students will:

- Plan a garden-based activity/program for younger gardeners (one-time or ongoing).
- Prepare supplies and learning space for the planned garden experience.
- Host and then reflect on the event.

Time: 3+ hours

Materials:

- Journal or paper and pencils/pens
- Dry-erase board or easel paper and markers
- KidsGardening planning worksheets
- Supplies needed for activity/program

Background Information:

As educators know, if you want to expand your comprehension of content or skills, take on the task of teaching them to others. Providing older student gardeners with the opportunity to share their gardening knowledge with younger gardeners can be a powerful educational and service-learning experience offering a wide array of benefits, including:

- Deepening the knowledge, skills, and confidence of older students.
- Increasing enthusiasm of younger students for garden activities and tasks.
- Supporting small group interactions and learning experiences in the garden.
- Providing opportunities for social and emotional growth for both age groups.
- Strengthening community connections.

To reap these benefits, it is important to remember that creating a successful mentor program requires proper planning and preparation. The garden offers a unique space for mentor programs. In the garden, both mentors and mentees have the opportunity to participate in hands-on, real-world experiences where they can see how the impact of their actions improves their community. Youth mentors should be integral in the planning and delivery of the event so they feel engaged and confident. They need to take time at each step of the way to reflect. Additionally, the activities planned must be well thought out and age-appropriate so that younger gardeners find success and are comfortable and safe as they learn. Thoughtful

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consideration must go into the pairings, and there must be time reserved not only for the learning activity but also for social interactions and, most importantly, FUN!

Advanced Preparation: Before planning the mentor program, lay a solid foundation by finding the right mentor/mentee match. Search for a classroom and/or afterschool group of younger students who truly has the time and interest to partner with your older students. Although activities and events can vary from a one-day planting event or garden demonstration to an ongoing regular garden club program, commit to a schedule ahead of time. Knowing their planning efforts will be used will provide mentors with motivation and meaning.

Laying the Groundwork:

Begin engaging your older student mentors by asking them to reflect on learning experiences from their childhood that they remember being impactful and fun. These experiences do not need to be garden-related, although it would be great to draw from some gardening activities if possible (even if they have not participated in school garden programs before, they may have home gardening experiences to draw from). Prompt them to also consider special in-school or after-school activities, field trips, and camps.

On a piece of paper or in a journal, ask them to brainstorm why they think they remember that experience and why it made such an impression on them. **Ask:** How did it make you feel? Who was involved in the experience with you? What did you learn? What do you think made it so special that it still sticks out in your mind today?

As a group, compile a list of the attributes that made this experience memorable for them. Share with students that you are going to use these attributes to create a meaningful garden program for younger students.

Exploration:

1. Introduce students to the assignment: to create a garden experience for younger students. Share overview details about the younger gardeners you will be working with, the time frame for the programming, and any predetermined learning goals. Next, lay out the steps you will go through to plan this program:
 - Complete a needs assessment
 - Set goals
 - Plan the program
 - Brainstorm
 - Review
 - Finalize
 - Develop a schedule
 - Obtain necessary supplies
 - Practice and prepare
 - Implement the program
 - Reflect and recommend

They can use the KidsGardening planning worksheets provided to guide them through each step.

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2. Complete a needs assessment. Share with students that the first step in creating a successful educational event is understanding their audience and their teaching space. Either as a class or in groups, they can complete the Garden Program Needs Assessment Worksheet. If possible, ask the teacher of the younger students/mentees to be a guest speaker to provide additional background information and to be available to answer questions. If working in small groups, set aside time for each group to share and discuss their answers together.
3. Set goals. Reflecting on the information compiled in the needs assessment, guide students to create specific goals and objectives for their educational program. Again, they can begin the brainstorming in small groups using the Mentor Program Goal Worksheet and then work together to finalize goals.
4. Time to plan the program.

Brainstorm: Begin with a brainstorming session where all students are encouraged to participate (if working with a large class, you may want to split into smaller groups) and emphasize that all ideas are good at this stage. Since students may be new to this concept, they may need some inspirational ideas. Possible programs or activities may include:

- Planning a guided garden workday where older students break the younger students into small groups to demonstrate basic gardening techniques and practice them together.
- Setting up garden stations around a theme (i.e., pollinators, plant parts, plant needs). Students can select a theme and set up activity stations for younger students to rotate through.
- Leading a garden storytime. Students can pair off to read different garden-focused stories and then participate in a shared activity together.
- Creating a regular garden club. If an ongoing experience is possible, students can begin a weekly or monthly garden club.

Once all ideas are listed, have students select the ones they think are most feasible considering the audience, time, space, and resources available and select their favorite 5 to 10 ideas to flush out with more details. Small groups can work to complete a Garden Activity Planning Worksheet for each idea from this list.

If students need additional inspiration, check out [KidsGardening's Activities](#) or [LifeLab's School Garden Resources](#).

Review: After this initial planning, bring in a few experts (including the teachers of the younger students) to review and provide feedback about the students' ideas.

Finalize: Students will discuss the feedback and make a final selection of one or more activities proposed. Complete a revised Garden Activity Planning Worksheet for each.

5. Once the educational programming is set, have students create a schedule for the day. In addition to the main

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activity or activities selected, encourage students to decide on an opening activity to set the stage for the event, instructions to share, and a closing activity to provide time for conclusions and reflection. Have them consider logistics such as travel from a classroom to the garden, clean up, and breaks. They can use the Event Planning Worksheet to help them plan.

6. Obtain necessary supplies. Using the Supply Worksheet, have students make plans to gather all necessary supplies. They may need to reach out to friends and community members for donations.
7. Practice and prepare. Set aside time to do a run through of the event. Have students practice teaching and leading the activities with each other. Consider any questions or challenges that may come up. Revise the schedule and activity plan as needed.
8. Event day! Implement the program. Remind students that their attitudes and excitement will be contagious.

Making Connections:

After the event, set aside time for reflection. Students can write in a journal or pose specific prompts such as: What did you learn? What went well? What surprises did you encounter? What would you change?

Branching Out:

As a class, compile a resource documenting your experience that can be shared with future youth mentors to assist them in planning a similar event. This may include a short video, a slide presentation, a scrapbook, or a manual.

Related Resources:

Garden Mentorship Program:

<https://kidsgardening.org/resources/designing-a-school-garden-garden-mentorship-program/>

Service Learning: Helping Kids and Communities Grow: <https://kidsgardening.org/resources/digging-deeper-service-learning/>

Organize a Garden Clean Up: <https://kidsgardening.org/resources/create-sustain-a-program-organize-garden-cleanup/>

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Garden Program Needs Assessment

When will the program/event take place?

Will it be one event or ongoing programming?

How long should the program or each program be?

Who will participate in our garden program/event? Do they have any special needs we need to meet?

Where will the event(s) take place? How is the space currently equipped/organized?

Are there any existing gardens or resources we can use?

Are there any subjects or existing learning goals that need to be addressed by the program?

Additional Notes:

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Mentor Program Goal Worksheet

Goal = What we want students to learn.

Objective = The activities we will conduct to achieve the learning goals.

Goal #1:

Objective 1:

Objective 2:

Objective 3:

Goal #2:

Objective 1:

Objective 2:

Objective 3:

Goal #3:

Objective 1:

Objective 2:

Objective 3:

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Garden Activity Planning Worksheet

Name of activity:

Brief description:

Time needed to complete the activity:

Is this a small or large group activity:

How many mentors will be needed:

Goal/objectives it will achieve:

Materials needed:

Brief steps for the activity:

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Event Planning Worksheet

*Remember to include an opening and closing activity.

[illegible]

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Supply Worksheet

Material/Supply	Amount Needed	Source	Date Obtained

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