

Five steps to a successful schoolyard garden

Gardening can be a great educational tool for students

February 20, 2012 - Author: [Beth Clawson, Michigan State University Extension](#)



Children can learn a lot from their natural world. A small school garden can help them learn math and science, build social skills, strengthen the use of logic, and free their imaginations. School gardens give youth a chance to be engaged in caring for something that requires planning, more planning and a little bit of work. And the rewards are not only gratifying but tasty, too! Research shows that children who help to grow vegetables are more likely to eat vegetables.

Every successful garden, whether it is at home, in the community or at your school, all have the same five things that make them successful. The five steps for a successful schoolyard garden are surprisingly simple and can make or break a garden project.

1. A champion of the project: Every project needs a champion. That person is the one who not only gets everyone else fired up about the idea, they also tackle the tougher tasks of enlisting help from the maintenance department and seeking proper approval from department managers and principals. It is also common for the champion to seek additional funding from grants or other sources for the project. How is your garden going to be managed over the summer? Will it need tending? How many parents and teachers want to participate in your garden project? How about the cooks? Can the produce you grow be served?

2. A plan for success: It is OK to plan small, as you can always add on next year. If you are successful with a small space, you will feel much better about taking on a larger one later. No garden looks large enough until you must go out on a 90-degree day to pull weeds and water. Planning also includes thinking about how to ensure adequate sunshine (6-8 hours per day), and if there is a water source nearby. Maybe planning means growing your garden in a more creative way such as in raised beds, in buckets, or in bags. What are you going to grow? Are you going to grow flowers? Feed the butterflies? Grow food? Have a theme garden?

3. Someone who creates the garden: Once you've planned your work, now work your plan. This is where the fun begins. Make sure that that you planned for mulch. Mulch reduces water loss and reduces weeds. Mulching makes it easier to manage growing what you want instead of spending valuable class time getting rid of the things you don't want such as weeds.

4. Learning in the garden: There are many curricula available that outline lesson plans for garden learning activities. Knowing that students love to get their hands dirty is the easy part, but you must also consider the practical. Are you going to test the soil before you begin? Will students work in teams? Measure the area to be planted? Figure out how many seeds are in a bag and if they are planted eight inches apart how long of a row will that make? These questions relate to steps 2 & 3 above. [My first garden website at http://urbanext.illinois.edu/firstgarden/index.cfm](http://urbanext.illinois.edu/firstgarden/index.cfm) is a great place to start.

5. Maintaining the garden: Schools gardens often get neglected over the summer because a lack of dedicated manpower leads to a lack of maintenance. Starting the school year with a big square of weed is not appealing, and it can be daunting to clean before school starts. One way to avoid this is to use plenty of mulch, arrange for regular visits to care for it, plan a perennial garden, or plan a take-home garden such as a bucket or pot garden. Planning for fast-maturing or spring-maturing plants is also a great idea if you are growing vegetables. Working together with multiple grade levels works for returning students to revisit the garden in the fall.

For more information about school gardening go to the [National Environmental Education Foundation](http://www.nationalenvironmental.org/) for a great list of resources (http://eeweek.org/resources/garden_curricula.htm).

This article was published by **Michigan State University Extension**. For more information, visit <http://www.msue.msu.edu>. To have a digest of information delivered straight to your email inbox, visit <http://www.msue.msu.edu/newsletters>. To contact an expert in your area, visit <http://expert.msue.msu.edu>, or call 888-MSUE4MI (888-678-3464).