



Checklist for Starting (and using) a School Garden

While there are many useful guides for school garden, this checklist is meant to serve as a guide to developing new edible school garden programs in DC. It was developed with DC in mind, and is meant to help schools get their gardens started, but it is also useful for existing school garden programs as a “check in” with where they are. The checklist was compiled based on data collected from over sixty site visits through the OSSE School Garden Program, numerous conversations with DC school garden organizations, and the wealth of teacher, parent, and administrators experience with school gardens.

Stakeholders

- Share your vision with your administrator(s)

The school leadership should be the first stop when starting a new school garden, as the garden matures, they will be your biggest supporters. Take time to nurture this relationship from the beginning.

- Survey Teachers Interest

Even if teachers do not drive the garden, they will decide if the children will go out there. It is very important to know what they care about and make sure the garden provides.

- Form a student group

Whether it's your class, or an afterschool club, they should be involved in as many decisions as possible from the beginning of the design process.

- Identify a School Garden Coordinator

This person will handle the technical challenges of teaching in the garden, collaborate with teachers, and care for the garden. They should have dedicated time and be compensated for their efforts. See some sample garden coordinator job descriptions [here](#)

- Convene an Advisory Board

The steering team to makes sure that tasks are divided up and the skills of the community are best utilized. This team should be diverse, consisting of : students, staff, parents, teachers, community members, food staff, and administrators. Meetings do not need to happen frequently, usually 3 times per year.

Garden Vision

- Create a MOU or a one pager that clearly outlines the purpose of the garden, values that will drive the garden, and how the garden will be used among all stakeholders.
- Bring the school community together for a brainstorming session where design vignettes can be generated and shared. Serve good food.



Design and Construction

- Measure your space, draft a scaled drawing that can be used throughout the design process.
- Meet with the advisory board to list the common themes found in the design vignettes and how they may be applied to the space. You may want to bring in technical support for this piece.
- Call Miss Utility before you dig at 811 or visit here: <http://www.missutility.net/washingtondc/>
- Soil has been tested for heavy metals including arsenic and lead. We recommend using UMass for soil tests. More information can be found here: <http://www.umass.edu/soiltest>. Lead levels must not exceed 300 ppm, and arsenic levels may not exceed 20 ppm. You only need to test your soil once every three years. *If DCPS send soil test results to food.dcps@dc.gov.*
- Monitor the space to ensure it has 8 hours of direct sun for fruiting crops and 6 hours for leaf crops and herbs.
- Water source is accessible and convenient.
- Assess the drainage. *Avoid damp spots and steep spots. If drainage is not good, do raised beds.*
- Check to see that there is no competition from trees and roots for water, soil and sun
- Garden is highly visible. You want the public to see your garden, and it's less likely to be vandalized.
- Located close to the school or teachers may not use it as readily
- The garden is Protected. What might threaten the gardens, people? Soccer balls? pests? Plan for protection from whatever the local threat is.
- The garden is small, with room to grow.
- Bring the advisory board together to finalize the design- be sure to have someone with technical expertise on hand.
- Make a map of the final design.
- Make sure you can afford the design you want or have a means of raising the money.

All School Gardens should include these basic physical features:

- Garden beds, 3 (at most 4) feet wide, with clear wide pathways for trampling feet
- A sitting area, including tables, preferably out of the harsh sun
- Clearly defined walkways and planning spaces
- Compost area
- Tool shed or storage area
- Good signs including rules and garden name at entrance
- Fencing if needed

Fundraising:

- The PTO, if it's a 501(c)3, is set up to receive grants as it's usually an easier transaction.
- Sign up for the DC Schoolyard green listserve, a great resource for all things including garden grants: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dcsge/>
- Reach out to local the Whole Food, Chipotle, or ACE hardware store closest to your school. They have a history of supporting school gardens.

Budget: "Must-haves"

- Expenses related to locating it (making water reach the garden, clearing land, tilling the first year)
 - ✓ Soil test kit and amendments



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- ✓ Organic material to improve soil, compost
- ✓ Tools (kid sized and adult sized)
- ✓ Water access and delivery method (hoses)
- ✓ Materials for raised beds, (if using)
- ✓ Seeds, starts, plants adapted to zone 7A
- ✓ Supports/ trellises
- ✓ Compost System
- ✓ Instructional materials, field guides, books
- ✓ Signage
- ✓ Mulch
- ✓ Celebrations (ribbon cutting)
- ✓ Expertise, contracted services or staffing
- ✓ Plant labels, UV markers
- ✓ Cooking supplies and utensils
- ✓ Garden Log Book (for work days and visitors)
- ✓ Garden Journal (for recording garden notes such as harvest weights, pests, problems, et c...)

“Optional “

- ✓ Pest controls (organic)
- ✓ Material for walkways
- ✓ Cold frames, green house
- ✓ Containers

Planting Materials:

- Read the seed packet labels before planting.
- Everything is labeled with plant labels and UV resistant markers also record plantings in the garden journal
- Supports: What are your needs of trellises, ladders, etc.
- Harvesting and subsequent planting in the emptied bed
- Schedule orders (ex: potatoes in February, etc...)

Curriculum:

- Curriculum interests of the participating teachers are well represented in the design?
- A means of collecting, storing and sharing good garden lessons (binder, flash drive, etc..)
- Match to State education standards. The more of this that is done, the easier it is for teachers to participate
- Discuss what existing curriculum may work best for you, a list of curriculum is available here
- Extra-curricular activities are supported that will further the vision of the garden and enrich students

Types of Gardens:

- garden type determined (can be multiple)
 - ✓ Science Lab
 - ✓ Setting for spontaneous learning
 - ✓ Food production, “snack” destination, source for food service
 - ✓ History gardens (Shakespeare, colonial, Three Sisters)
 - ✓ Herb Garden
 - ✓ Shade plants
 - ✓ Native grasses and plants
 - ✓ Butterfly or pollinator gardens
 - ✓ Ecosystem
 - ✓ Heirloom
 - ✓ Nutrition and Health
 - ✓ Flowers
 - ✓ Math gardens, perhaps raised beds
 - ✓ Other



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Safety Rules:

Rules for people:

- Establish, post (at the entrance to the garden), and reference it each time you enter the garden.
 - ✓ Use of senses for plant identification
 - ✓ Don't eat anything without permission from your teacher
 - ✓ Know which plants have both edible and poisonous parts
 - ✓ No bare feet or flip flops, proper shoes to protect from cuts and stings
 - ✓ Add only plant materials to compost to keep out vermin
 - ✓ When using tools stay your arm's length plus the tool length away from the next person
 - ✓ Walk while holding tools and or identify which tools are for adults only
 - ✓ Keep feet on pathways
 - ✓ Use two hands to pick plants so you don't uproot them, one is to hold the plan and the other is to nip off
- Procedures in place to act accordingly in case of emergency
- A supply of sunscreen (know if anyone is allergic) is on hand. In high heat, have kids wear hats and shirts with sleeves
- All parents have signed off, all allergies recorded, a first aid kit on hand and drinking water
- Discuss chemicals such as gasoline for weed-wacker, pest control produces, ext. ID these as POISON in big letters on the outside of the container.
- Assign clear responsibilities such as: 3 kids on the hoses, and rotate positions so one is controlling the water and two are preventing the hose from knocking over the plants.
- There is no clear sign of pest infestation in the garden.
- No harmful pesticides or chemicals have been used in the garden (this includes fertilizers such as Miracle Gro).
- If serving food to students, the "Garden to Meal" liability waiver has been distributed to all parents. See here

Partnerships:

- Establish and convene a school garden advisory board to handle the outreach and coordination of volunteers.
- Create a wish list of items that community members would potentially donate.
- Check out the following websites for DC school garden support and involvement from the community:
 - OSSE School Garden Program: <http://osse.dc.gov/service/nutrition-program>
 - School Garden partnership list: [here](#)
 - DDOE Schoolyard Greening: <http://www.dcschoolyardgreening.org/index.html>
- Establish standards for involvement set ahead of time (how will you handle inquires)
- Establish a media liaison who will photograph, write media releases, and promote the garden
- Have signed media releases on hand for students.
- Establish a system that will effectively inform parents and the school community about garden activity.
- Consider your system for requesting and thanking donors (cards with pictures of kids in the garden are appreciated)



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- Present an exit strategy to your principal so he or she can feel comfortable with the garden.
- Seasonal events are planned to keep the community engaged: Scripted student led tours for the public, tomato tastings, pesto day, harvest dinner, poetry readings, garden cycle tours and fund raisers like plant sales and farmers markets

Maintenance:

- Summer care. Offer parents and volunteers picking rights and designate an area for them to grow food in exchange for summer volunteer hours. Or plant spring and fall but not summer harvest crops and vastly reduce the needs of the garden during summer break
- Maintenance schedule: watering, weeding, staking, fertilizing, pruning, bug picking, turning compost, mulching, cover crop planting in fall
- Schedule workdays for volunteers- they should be extremely organized, fun, and provide food. Keep a list of contacts and a garden log book so you don't forget to invite people.

Information Sources:

Center for Ecoliteracy. "Getting Started" <http://www.ecoliteracy.org/>
Junior Master Gardeners. Garden Lessons (Texas A and M): <http://jmgkids.us/>
Mercer County Master Gardeners. Fact sheets from Rutgers: <http://www.mgofmc.org/>
Princeton School Garden Cooperative Guide for Lessons:
<http://www.prs.k12.nj.us/GardenCoop/GardenCoopGuideNov07.pdf>
Dorothy Mullen: www.DorothyMullen.org, www.SuppersFor.org