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School Gardens: Dig In!

WHAT is a School Garden?

School gardens are an integral part of farm to school programs and offer a multitude of educational opportunities. They are wonderful instructional tools and engaging spaces in which to explore the entire curriculum. Whether they are container gardens or school farms, fruit trees or herb gardens, school gardens serve as hands-on, interdisciplinary classrooms for students of all ages.

Getting Started

Below are some suggested steps for getting started with a school garden project. Each step is a learning opportunity.

- 1. Collaborate for School Garden Success:** Involve school administrators, facilities staff, food service staff, students, teachers and community throughout the planning process. Together, develop a vision for the school garden including how it will benefit the school, community and students; how the garden can be incorporated into existing school activities and curriculum; a plan of action; and list of supporters and commitments.
- 2. Identify goals and design:** As a group, identify goals for the garden. Consider these questions, which will serve as the foundation of your school garden:
 - What purposes will the garden serve (education, food productions, etc.)?
 - How will students engage with the garden?
 - Who will plan and maintain the garden?
 - What will happen to the garden when school is not in session?
 - Will the garden have a theme?
- 3. Designing the School Garden:** This is a great step for engaging students. A school garden can be many shapes and sizes. Consider the size of your space, existing features, soil, sunlight, water sources, water drainage, security and safety, and plant selection. This is a good time to enlist the help of a local farmer, master gardener, or other expert in the community. Dream big, engage imagination and consider possibilities, but also remain practical. A few containers in a courtyard can provide as much hands-on educational experience as a large garden. Identify your garden manager/coordinator—this point person will keep things moving forward.

Benefits of School Gardens

- ✓ Increase academic achievement.
- ✓ Create a positive learning environment for teachers and students.
- ✓ Increase children's consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- ✓ Enhance psychosocial development of youth.
- ✓ Serve as a valuable tool in educational engagement.



4. **Secure Funding and Resources:** Consider donations, grants and specific fundraising events. Ask school administrators and parent groups for contributions from their budgets. Hardware stores and other local businesses often donate gardening supplies such as gloves, plants, soil and gardening tools. Consider a school garden fundraising activity/event such as seed or plant sales; hosting a garden dinner, silent auction or raffle; a craft or art sale with a garden theme; or create a "Donate a Tool Day."
5. **Plant the Garden:** The fun begins! This is usually the quickest step in the process, but one that children of all ages (and adults) can take part in. Consult experienced gardeners and regional planting guides to help decide when and what to plant. Planting day is a great way to raise awareness about your project, so get the word out through newsletters, flyers and other avenues.
6. **Maintaining and Sustaining Your School Garden:** It is important to continue to care for the garden year-round so that students can enjoy the garden for years to come. Develop a garden sustainability plan. Communicate your successes. Engage teachers by providing training and resources. Encourage connection of the garden to curriculum, Consult with your health department. Create a schedule for watering, weeding, thinning, mulching, fertilizing, composting and other activities involved in caring for and nurturing the garden. Students can do many of these tasks as part of a lesson plan, and you can reach out to community members and parents for support when school is not in season.
7. **Most importantly, have fun!** All of you work will pay off come harvest time when everyone can enjoy the fruits of their labour!

Math: Measure growth rates of plants and display results on different types of charts and graphs.

Science: Investigate the functions of different plant structures.

Language Arts: Keep daily garden journals documenting observations in the garden such as plant changes, weather conditions and classroom activities.

Art: Create beautiful artwork using paints derived from plant pigments or stamps formed from plant parts.

Health and Nutrition: Explore the many edible components of plants, the nutrition of different plants and create delicious recipes to sample.

History & Social Science: Investigate cultural or ethnic differences in food consumption and gardening practices.

This resource has been amended from the National Farm to School Network in the United States:

www.farmtoschool.org

Farm to School programs are a part of growing momentum across the country to bring more healthy local and sustainable foods into hospitals, campuses and other public institutions. Check out the national conversation at these Farm to Cafeteria Canada links: