

SCHOOL GARDEN Checklist



Information provided courtesy of USDA's People's Garden Initiative.

Evaluate Your Available Space

Tarmac, dry earth, mud and empty fields can be turned into green grounds, outdoor laboratories, vegetable plots, herb gardens, play spaces and study areas. Who is your garden serving? What are the needs? What kinds of space are available?

To help determine the best uses for the space available, evaluate:

- Is the site easy and safe for both students and teachers to access?
- Is there a nearby and dependable water source?
- Is the site protected from vandals, rodents or other potential threats?
- Is the area big enough for future growth?
- Is the site exposed to sunlight at least 6 hours a day, if planting flowers, herbs and vegetables?
- Is the soil contaminated with lead or other heavy metals?

Parking lots, courtyards, rooftops, greenhouses and schoolyards can all be potential sites. Also consider options within the community like city parks or vacant lots, places of worship, nature centers, retirement centers and community gardens. Avoid locations that are exposed to nearby pollutants – highways, airports, industry smokestacks or brown-fields. If space is very limited, consider gardening in containers.

Finding Resources, Making Partnerships

Forming local partnerships is an excellent way to leverage resources and gain access to needed materials, tools, funding, volunteers and technical assistance. USDA's People's Garden website has how-to's filled with garden-based learning guides, free seed and funding sources, and healthy gardening practices. The USDA's national educational network offers Cooperative Extension Offices in communities around the country, where Extension Master Gardeners can give you advice on what grows best in your area.

Checking Soil Health

Good soil is an essential for a healthy school garden. It's important to collect soil samples to identify soil quality for the proposed site. Have your soil tested for pH, nutrients and lead contamination by a soil testing laboratory. If your site is contaminated, the simplest solutions are: to find another site or to try container gardening with different soil.

Contact a local Cooperative Extension Office to learn how to take a soil sample and where to send it for analysis. With expert staff and practical and research-based guidelines specific to your region, these offices are a great resource.

Design Challenge

Get the entire community – parents, students, teachers, administrators, food service staff and local partners – involved. Hold a brainstorming session; get everyone's ideas and design concepts and develop one design plan.

School gardens provide:

- food for improving children's diet and nutrition
- healthy influences – physical activity, ingredients for school meals
- an area of learning – about nature, agriculture, nutrition, math, and other subjects
- a place of pleasure and recreation – flowers and shrubs, play areas, shade, eating areas
- a continuing lesson in respecting the environment and taking pride in one's school
- a gathering spot for your community to socialize

Plant Palette

Choose a palette of plants that are safe, healthy, low maintenance, desirable in size and shape, and suitable to your climate. Have older students survey younger students about what plants to grow.

Helpful hints: Do you know your growing zone? Find it by using the USDA's Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Try selecting plants based on a theme, such as a storybook or science lesson, to connect with what is being taught in the classroom.

Build and Use Your Garden

Encourage students to share their ideas and include them in the building and planting of the garden – get their hands in the soil every step of the way. Their participation will instill a sense of ownership, pride and responsibility among students. Use the garden to connect students to the source of their food. Plant herbs, fruits, and vegetables that are easy to grow, pick and cook.

