

working with volunteers

Volunteers contribute a wealth of experience and enthusiasm to a gardening program. They also bring abundant skills, fresh ideas, and extra hands to help with garden activities. There are a number of best management practices to adopt when working with volunteers, but communication is the key. If you effectively communicate your needs and expectations, provide volunteers with the information needed to complete their assignments, and follow up with clear words of appreciation, you will have strong volunteer relationships.

ESTABLISHING ROLES FOR VOLUNTEERS

Before recruiting, define the role you want volunteers to play in your garden program. Create a list of specific jobs you need help with and also when these activities should take place. Do you want volunteers who can be there on a weekly basis or just for special events? Do you want them to help plan and prepare garden programs, or do you just want them to help with the activities?

Keep in mind that people volunteer for different reasons, and any group of people will have a wide range of talents. If you communicate the jobs available for volunteers to complete, then they can determine whether your opportunities match their interests and skills. The time you spend preparing for volunteers and establishing clear responsibilities will help you create an effective and efficient volunteer team.

All volunteers want to feel that they are contributing in a meaningful way. Involve them in as much of the planning and decision making as possible to create a sense of ownership and independence. Although you will certainly need help with some “grunt work,” as long as volunteers know their efforts are helping the program, they will feel like valuable team members.

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

Once you know how you are going to use volunteers, begin the recruiting process. Look for volunteers who will encourage exploration and inquiry-based learning during garden activities and who will approach the garden with a fun and adventurous attitude.

Most schools find their strongest volunteers through parent groups. Reach out to parents in newsletters, on the school website, at parent meetings, and at open houses. Additionally, search for volunteers through local horticulture clubs (garden club members, college horticulture departments), “green industry” businesses



(garden centers, landscape design firms), senior citizen organizations, and service organizations (Cooperative Extension Service Master Gardeners, Rotary, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and local corporation's volunteer service programs). The garden team members who helped plan the garden will often be transformed into a core of strong volunteers. Another possibility is to recruit older students to provide support for garden activities. Elementary school students love to interact with middle school and high school students. A mentoring relationship provides an excellent learning experience for the older students, too.

Some volunteers will be available only for special events. For instance, a Boy Scout might develop an Eagle Scout project at your garden. Other volunteers may be available to help on a regular basis, for example, a stay-at-home parent with a horticulture degree. Garden programs benefit from a diverse set of volunteers.

As you reach out to potential volunteers, schedule a special meeting to share information about the program and the opportunities available. If possible, hold this event during the same hours you typically need volunteer help. If people are available for the informational meeting at that time, they may well be available to volunteer in the future during the same time frame.



In both written and oral requests, be sure to inform potential volunteers of your expectations, including time commitments and tasks. Be as specific as possible; give the dates and times their services will be needed. Also check your school's policy on volunteer recruitment procedures. Most schools require volunteers to complete a background check with fingerprinting before service can begin. Individuals should be informed of this type of requirement during the recruitment stage. When people sign up or indicate an interest in volunteering, follow up with a phone call or in person to reiterate these expectations and give them a chance to ask questions. Not all individuals are a good fit with a school garden program, and it is best for both parties to figure this out during the recruiting stage rather than in the middle of the program.

Although mass recruiting is less time consuming, keep in mind that people like to be asked in person. It is a first step in making them feel important; it conveys respect and builds confidence. Consider making phone calls or sending personal invitations to individuals you have met who would be good volunteers or who have been recommended to you by others.

The recruiting process may sound like a substantial undertaking, and it is. However, you will be rewarded by a supportive, dedicated, and informed volunteer group who will help sustain your garden efforts.

ORIENTATION

After recruiting volunteers, you need to continue strong communication skills through orientation followed by appropriate training. You will begin by orienting the volunteers to the program, the students, and the school. Start by once again reminding them of your expectations. Next, brief them on school policies. For example, let them know where to park, where to sign in, and what the procedures are for screening. Introduce volunteers to key school personnel like the principal and office secretaries. After this overview, provide the group with a tour of the garden and school. They need to know things like the locations of bathrooms, how the students will travel to the garden, where tools are stored, etc. In addition to an in-person orientation, provide this information in writing for later reference.

TRAINING

You will also need to provide training to properly prepare the volunteers for their jobs, whatever they may be. The most important thing is to always provide clear instructions as to what you want them to do and give them a chance to ask questions. To be successful, volunteers must know what is expected of them. Provide background on any specific skills or knowledge needed to complete tasks by sending copies of your lessons a week ahead of time, or links to information on websites or recommended books.

In addition to regular training and information related to activities and programs, it is a special treat for volunteers to attend “advanced training.” For instance, you can invite a guest speaker to introduce a new curriculum or teach volunteers about inquiry-based learning techniques. Depending on their level of involvement, certain volunteers might be invited to attend trainings conducted for educators by school districts and other organizations. Training is a powerful tool to motivate your volunteers and keep them excited about your program.

COMMUNICATING WITH VOLUNTEERS

As previously mentioned, clear communication with volunteers is essential. When communication is poor, volunteers feel uninformed, unimportant, and underappreciated. Disorganization and lack of communication will frustrate them, and they will quit. Here are a few communication tips for working with volunteers:

Keep a good record of volunteers with up-to-date contact information.

It would be unfortunate to accidentally miss someone.



Establish a standard method of communication that is delivered consistently. This may be a weekly email, a monthly newsletter, or a regular website posting.

Choose a method that works well for you and your volunteers. By establishing a routine, you remind yourself to communicate with your volunteers, and in turn they have a place to go for the latest information.

Create a written schedule of events that is accessible to all volunteers. It can be mailed out or posted on a website. Make sure you have an effective way to notify volunteers if any changes are made (via either email or a phone tree).

Hold a regular volunteer meeting either monthly or quarterly. Personal contact allows for more interactive discussions, and it is very important for volunteers to have a chance to provide you with feedback and suggestions for the program. This is also a great time for you to show your appreciation for their work.

Provide members of the group with comments about their job performance. Although a formal evaluation may not be possible, volunteers need constructive feedback so they can learn and grow during this experience.

With your busy schedule, it may seem overwhelming to find time for this level of communication. If you feel that you cannot maintain strong communication, seek out a volunteer willing to assume this role. Communication is not a task that can be neglected even briefly without negative consequences. It is the key to a successful volunteer experience (for the volunteers and for you)!

RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

All the suggestions mentioned thus far will contribute to the satisfaction of your volunteers and help you retain them. In a school setting, you will naturally lose volunteers as students graduate and families move, but by adopting good techniques, you can decrease the number of people who quit because of a negative volunteer experience.

If you are concerned about volunteer retention, take time to find out why people sign up. Volunteers often pitch in because they care about the project and its participants. Some may have children in the program with whom they want to spend more quality time; others may want to be more involved in their communities, meet new people, or make a difference. To keep volunteers interested and motivated, it is important for you to understand and meet their



needs as much as possible while still meeting yours. For instance, if someone volunteers because she wants to spend time with her child, but you never assign her to work with her child's class, she will not stick with it for long. Or, if someone volunteers in order to meet new people, and you always ask him to assist with individual preparation, he will get discouraged and quit.

Also remember that volunteers should support, not replace, educators. Although you may find volunteers who are willing to take on significant planning and educational delivery responsibilities, most volunteers will feel overwhelmed if left on their own to teach a full lesson, or will feel they lack proper guidance. Classroom teachers should be present during all garden activities.

As discussed earlier, not all individuals have the personalities and skills to be strong garden volunteers, so if you find your needs and their needs do not match, you may suggest other volunteer opportunities that would be better suited for them.

VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION

Volunteers need to feel appreciated. To be sure, contributing to the community is personally satisfying. Also, working with students and watching their curiosity and excitement bloom is motivational and inspiring. But in addition to these rewards, you should implement both informal and formal methods of thanking your volunteers.

Informal ways to thank your volunteers include simple thank yous and smiles when they come to help or a quick email after activities. More formal thanks include handwritten notes (from you and the students), small gifts from the garden (like pressed-flower bookmarks or herbal sachets), and recognition of volunteers in newsletter and newspaper articles. If possible, hold a special event each year focusing on volunteer appreciation, such as a ceremony in the garden or a luncheon. This event can be specifically hosted for garden volunteers, or you can work with other teachers to recognize volunteers in several programs.

Involve your students as much as possible in appreciation efforts. This helps them learn the importance of being grateful and showing respect for those who help them. It is an important life lesson that is often overlooked in our fast-paced society.

