

# sustaining your garden

Completing the installation of a school garden is a huge feat. Take time to appreciate your accomplishments and acknowledge the contributions of others to the garden effort. Bask in your success and take the opportunity to recharge your batteries. Appreciating the moment will help energize you for the next stage of garden development – adopting a plan for sustainability.

In addition to establishing a schedule for garden maintenance, your team needs to plan intentional activities to help sustain the garden. The garden should play an important role in the academic lives of your current students and also be a useful tool for future students. To truly sustain the garden program, you must tie it closely to your curriculum, maintain the approval of your administrators, attract additional garden team members and volunteers, and find new sources of financial and material support. Most importantly, the garden should continue to inspire excitement in your students, their parents, other teachers, administrators, volunteers, and the community.

This chapter offers suggestions for activities to help maintain the momentum and sustain the school garden program. As with the previous stages of garden development, you would do well to create a plan for sustainability, outlining specific steps to take and a timeline for their execution. Garden activities promoting sustainability do not spontaneously occur. They must be carefully planned and purposefully implemented.

## USING YOUR SCHOOL GARDEN

It seems obvious, but in order to sustain the garden, your team must actively use it. Plan garden time into the weekly schedule. Implement lessons around garden activities and experiments. Encourage other teachers and youth groups to use the garden, too (after establishing some basic guidelines for use). Increased involvement will add value to its role as an educational tool. To use the garden effectively, make sure to match lessons and activities with your curricular goals, adopt good outdoor classroom management techniques, create measurements for success, and document all your efforts.

## INTEGRATING THE GARDEN INTO THE CURRICULUM

In today's educational climate, teaching mandatory curriculum standards and passing related standardized tests are top priorities. A school garden can be a natural tool for teaching these standards, and promoting that use of the garden



helps to secure administrative support. Review Chapter 3, Linking Gardens to School Curriculum, to remind yourself of the possibilities. Share your activities with other teachers and your principal on a regular basis so they are informed of the academic benefits of the garden.

## OUTDOOR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Working with students in an outdoor learning environment is different from teaching in a traditional classroom setting. To make sure your time in the garden is both productive and enjoyable, here are a few tips on classroom management:

**Establish garden rules.** Create a set of simple rules and share them with students before you go out to the garden. Additionally, post the rules in the garden as a reminder. Try to phrase them in a positive way. Rules may include items like remembering to walk on paths, asking before you pick, and remaining in the garden area during class. Keep the list short so rules are easy to remember and follow.

**Train students on using tools.** Before going out to the garden, show students all the different tools they may use and demonstrate the proper way to use them. Make sure they know to carry the working end of the tool below their waist and not to run while holding tools. Also discuss proper storage of the tools and why it is important not to leave them lying in pathways.

**Recruit help.** You will need at least one other adult in the garden to be prepared for emergencies (if one child needs special attention, you cannot leave the rest of the class outside alone). Depending on the size of your class, it may be preferable to have three or four adult volunteers. Keeping the activities hands-on is an important aspect of learning in the garden, and this is hard to accomplish without plenty of volunteer support.

**Divide your class into small groups.** Smaller groups allow for more hands-on experience. It is best if you have a volunteer to lead each group, but if that is not possible, provide clear instructions for what each group should



accomplish. Choose the groups carefully, taking care to match up students who will work well together.

**Provide a comfortable sitting area.** If you are planning to talk to the class as a whole for an extended time in the garden, use an area where they can comfortably sit to listen. Trying to talk to the group in a small space with obstructed views turns into a frustrating experience, and students quickly lose interest. It is best if this area allows them to sit in a circle or semicircle so they can clearly see you and feel connected to the rest of the group. Some schools create sitting areas with benches, hay bales, or even a well-maintained lawn area. If you do not have a good sitting area in your garden, deliver all group presentations or demonstrations in the classroom and reserve the garden for the smaller group activities.

**Be prepared for emergencies.** Always have a first aid kit in the garden. Know if any of your students have special health concerns, such as asthma or an allergy to bee stings.

## CREATING MEASURES FOR SUCCESS

It is important for you to measure the impact of the garden on your students, as with any other education program. In the early planning stages, you developed a list of goals for the garden. In the sustaining stages of the program, review these goals and develop a method to determine whether your efforts are meeting them. Create two or three different measures of success. For example, if one of your goals was to improve science achievement, consider creating a pre- and post-knowledge test for your students or compare student science grades. Written test scores are the most common way to quantify achievement in our society, but you can also use methods like tracking change in disciplinary actions and attendance records (signs of personal behavior change) or recording changes in the amount of fruits and vegetables discarded from lunch trays (signs of nutritional behavior change). Consult with expert school district personnel and local researchers for ideas on ways to measure the benefits of the school garden.

## DOCUMENTING EFFORTS

In the midst of an active garden program, it is easy to neglect the job of recording your efforts. But keeping track of your progress is critical. Keep a notebook of your activities with detailed descriptions and photos. Track all donations of funds and materials along with the names of the donors. Also log all the positive feedback you receive from students, parents, and community members. You will draw on this information as you share your work with administrators, look for additional funds, and recruit new volunteers.



## COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR SUPPORT TEAM

Clear communication with administrators, parents, the garden team, additional volunteers, and donors will play an important role in sustaining your gardening program. All of these stakeholders were integral to the creation of the garden, and they will continue to be strong supporters as long as they feel that their contributions are valuable and that they know how they can continue to support you. Clear communication gives them a sense of ownership of the garden, and in turn they will feel responsible for keeping it alive.

A way to foster this connection is to set up a regular system of communication. Some ideas for communicating with your group:

- › Write a monthly or quarterly newsletter (sent through mail or email) with summaries of the recent events and a calendar of upcoming events. Be sure to include student-written articles and photos.
- › Establish a garden website that is updated regularly. Send out a monthly email to notify supporters of updates and remind them to visit the site.
- › Hold monthly or quarterly garden workdays to provide hands-on involvement.
- › Hold a semiannual or annual garden party to recognize donors and volunteers.
- › Find a way to communicate with supporters that is comfortable for you and is accessible to your audience, and then stick to it on a regular schedule. If possible, decrease the workload by finding a reliable volunteer to help you develop your communication pieces.



## PROMOTING THE GARDEN TO THE COMMUNITY

In addition to communicating with your support team, communicate success with community members who are not directly involved in the garden. Promoting the school garden in the community helps to establish a solid reputation, which not only validates the efforts of your current team, but also helps with recruitment of new members. You cannot rely on a small number of volunteers and donors to sustain your gardens year after year because interests and time or funding availability may change. Also, if you expect too much from your supporters, you risk burning them out. Be on a constant lookout for additional partners. What's more, by promoting your garden, you may inspire other schools to begin gardening and increase the enthusiasm and support for school gardening throughout the community. To promote your garden effort in the community:

- › Write press releases and send them to local media outlets.
- › Invite the press and government officials to special garden events.

- › Use your students' new horticultural expertise to help with a special community beautification project or service project.
- › Host annual garden tours open to the public (this can also become a fundraising event).
- › Network and share your story everywhere you go!

## GARDEN PROGRAM EXPANSION

All the items mentioned so far will help to maintain excitement and momentum around the school garden program. However, nothing is as powerful as adding a new element to the program each year. People love to be involved on the ground floor of a project. It gives them a special opportunity to contribute ideas and join in without feeling like an outsider. As time goes by, envision a dynamic garden program that you can cultivate and grow to ensure sustainability.

You may have established a sense of evolution by dividing the original design into stages for implementation over several years. As you add each new section, review the plan and let current garden team members be involved in revising it so that they will be invested in its implementation.

If you did not begin with a multiyear plan, let each year's garden team brainstorm a new project. Perhaps there is a new curricular requirement you would like to teach through the garden, and the team can work to provide the necessary resources. For instance, maybe you originally constructed a butterfly garden to teach about habitats, and now you want to expand to teach nutrition too. Depending on space, you can install new raised beds or containers to grow vegetables. Or maybe the initial garden focused on one grade level, but after seeing its success, additional grade levels would like to get involved.

The new program element does not need to be large in size or scope to stir people's excitement. A special stepping-stone workshop could be conducted to add art to an existing butterfly garden, or a new trellis could be built for a vegetable garden. The main thing is for new team members to know their efforts are adding to existing resources and feel that they are making valuable contributions to the garden.



## FINDING FUNDS AND SUPPLIES

Many school gardens struggle with finding funds for garden maintenance. Two ways to bolster funding efforts have already been mentioned: actively promoting the garden in the community and adding a new element each year (it is often easier to find funds for new projects than for existing projects). A third way to secure funding is to establish an annual fundraising event.

Establishing a consistent fundraising event can provide you with a secure source of money each year. Look for a garden product that can be created from your existing resources and will be valued by your community. For example, have children collect and package seeds, then sell them at a garden tour. Linking garden activities and moneymaking opportunities increases the educational value of the fundraiser and adds an element of enthusiasm and pride because students feel connected to their product. Also, if the event is something that can be repeated each year, it will gather a strong customer base.

Fundraisers must be designed to meet the unique needs and audiences of each school. What works for one school garden may not work for another. There is great value in investigating existing fundraising ideas, but spend time accessing your own resources to find a good fit. Your school may try several different projects before finding the right one.

## ATTRACTING HELP TO SUSTAIN THE GARDEN

The need for a large support team to sustain a garden program cannot be overemphasized. A garden is not an individual endeavor. You will need lots of help when planning, raising funds, planting, conducting activities, and maintaining the garden. Active volunteers are an important component of any school garden program, and as you work to sustain your garden you will need to find ways to keep current volunteers as well as attract new volunteers. Chapter 10, Working with Volunteers, covers this topic in more detail.

In addition to volunteer support, many schools have discovered the benefits of a part-time or full-time paid garden coordinator position. A paid coordinator has



more time to devote to planning and teaching in the garden. Often, volunteers are drawn in many different directions, but a paid employee is able to focus on specific job responsibilities. Along with the paycheck comes a stronger obligation and higher expectations. A paid coordinator can often provide more continuity and commitment than a volunteer.

A garden coordinator should have both an education background and horticulture experience. The coordinator helps to alleviate some of the workload associated with the garden, such as communication with volunteers, planning of fundraising events, and purchasing of supplies. However, the hiring of a paid garden coordinator does not mean classroom teachers are not involved in the garden experience; instead, it allows them to focus their energies on the lessons.

Some garden coordinators are based at one school. Others work with multiple schools in a school district. Talk to your principal and local administrators to explore possibilities and resources.

