

## Getting started on the school plot

You don't need much to start a garden. Probably the most important component is the desire to grow. Just remember that any new skill takes time to learn and accept that mistakes will be made whilst you learn.

Gardening is a skill everyone can develop. All around the country, we want to see children getting their hands dirty and learning how to grow, nurture and harvest fresh, seasonal vegetables. Children learn best by doing, through positive examples, through trial and error. By letting them 'do', their interest will be raised, their natural curiosity and energy will be activated and hopefully their appetites will be wetted!

Once the desire is there you need to decide where on the school site the garden can be built. The following points should help you decide where plants will grow best:

- Sunshine - A vegetable garden needs 5-8 hours of good sunshine every day for plants to be healthy. (Leafy vegetables like lettuce need at least 5 hours. Fruiting vegetables like tomatoes need at least 8 hours.) The sun changes during the seasons, but in general a garden that is on the south or west side of a building will do better for vegetables than one on the north or east side.
  
- Water - Water is a basic requirement necessary to the growth of plants. A well-watered garden has a better chance of producing a good harvest. You will want to build your garden as close as possible to a water point. Ideally a hose reel should be installed next to your garden site.
  
- Soil and drainage - Most plants will die if they sit in damp soggy soil. Make sure that the site you choose isn't the lowest place on the school site. Watch where water sits longest after it rains and you'll know where you don't want to build your garden. If the low spot is the only place you can make your garden, then there will be a need to modify the site by bringing in gravel to assist with drainage or look to raise the ground level, and use raised beds. Raised beds should not be wider than 90 – 120cm (3-4' ) so that children can reach plants from both sides without stepping into the garden, or if the raised beds are located next to a wall with access only from one side then should not be more than 60cm (2' )wide.  
  
If there is no suitable area for starting your garden off on soil, it is possible to build a garden on a concrete or Tarmac base by using raised beds. To do this you would have to buy in a suitable top-soil with its added cost.
  
- Access - The garden needs to be close enough to classrooms that it can be used regularly. A garden that is out of sight is hard to monitor, maintain and enjoy!  
  
Consideration should also be given to the provision of a fence around the area to avoid or minimise vandalism and theft.
  
- Fertilisers - If using fertilisers, be careful not to use too much or you can damage tender young plants, and different plants prefer different fertilisers. Also, if using something like 'Blood, fish and bone' it may cause problems with parents of children with differing religious beliefs.
  
- Tool Storage - Choose a location to store and secure tools that is close to the garden so that transporting tools isn't a chore.

Probably one of the first challenging points that you may come across when starting your school garden is that most garden tools available are made for adults, these are largely inappropriate for children being too large and heavy. Tools appropriate for a range of children should be sought; these are likely to be forks and spades, rakes and hoes, trowels and hand forks, and possibly wheelbarrows. Rakes and hoes can have their shafts reduced in size to make them suitable. Border spades and forks may be suitable for older children and firms such as Spear and Jackson and Joseph Bentley tools do make forks and spades suitable for children

over 6 years. As well as providing the tools children should be taught to clean the tools after use, to ensure they are kept in good condition.

### **Potential challenges**

Tying the growing cycle of plants into the school term system will have many challenges and particularly maintaining a school garden during the long summer holidays would test even the best gardener. You will want to enjoy the long Summer break and recharge your batteries, but you don't want to see all the hard work on the school garden transform from a beautiful garden into a matted tangle of weeds.

Covering the growing area with a thick layer of mulch reduces weed growth and maintains the moisture levels in the soil. This can be bark, straw or even shredded paper from the school. Mulch also has the added advantage that as it decays it will increase the organic matter and improve the soil structure. As a guide you would need to add a 4 to 6 inch layer of mulch to see the real benefit. The mulch will naturally break down over the summer and provide organic matter and enrich the soil for next year's crops.

If you choose to leave your garden empty over the school break why not plant a crop of 'Green Manure'. Green manures are fast growing plants, and during the summer the best are such as fenugreek, phacelia red clover etc. In general, Green manures are usually sown in late summer or autumn and are primarily used to capture any nutrients in the soil, preventing them being washed away by winter rain. When dug in, they release these nutrients back into the soil. Some green manures are sown specifically to overwinter. Also, some green manures that are members of the legume family have the ability to collect and store Nitrogen from the air in nodules on their root systems which is valuable to the plants. The growing of a green manure crop will minimise the compaction of soil from rain.

### **A return for your efforts**

Most gardeners would know that even in a relatively small garden it's easy to produce more vegetables, flowers, and herbs than any one family can use. This may not be the case in schools, although with some careful planning it is possible to produce plants in excess. These excess plants can be sold on to parents or the local community such as a spring seedling sale where tomato, sweet pepper and chilli pepper plants and herbs can be sold to help fund your school garden project.

I know of primary schools where hanging baskets, and planters are made and sold to parents and relatives of pupils as well as to a wider public at the school summer fayre. Creating a small business venture such as those mentioned, will definitely motivate and inspire pupils of any age. The concept of creating a small return on the efforts of staff and pupils and the lessons learned can be used in all sorts of lessons within the curriculum.

All of this is alongside the opportunity to taste and understand the growing process behind many vegetables the pupil will have thought only came from the supermarket, and some of the vegetables you choose to grow the pupils may not even know existed.

### **Overcoming possible problems**

Anyone gardening will experience problems with their plants at one time or another. Diagnosing what is wrong with your plant is often a difficult task. There can be many different causes for a given symptom, not all of them related to insects or diseases. The health of a plant may be affected by soil nutrition, weather conditions, quantity of light, or a host of other environmental and cultural conditions, including the interaction of the gardeners. Here on the NVS website there are lots of members who will have come across the problem before and are likely able to suggest a solution, you only have to ask!