School gardens have been popping up like little pea plants in schools all over Florida. Not only are they an excellent way to get fresh produce into classrooms and cafeterias, but they also provide students with a living classroom where concepts related to science, math, agriculture, and nutrition can be learned and applied. If you have ever thought about starting a garden at your school, this document will answer some questions and list a few important points that need to be considered before you begin.

**How do school gardens benefit children?**

Fruits and vegetables have many health benefits and are a key part of a child’s diet. These benefits include protection against obesity, heart disease, and certain cancers (Robinson-O’Brien, 2008). Unfortunately, less than half of children and teens eat enough fruits and vegetables every day. Studies have shown that children who work in a school garden are more likely to try new fruits and vegetables (McAleese & Rankin, 2007; Ratcliffe et al., 2011). This is key. As many parents can tell you, getting a child to try a new fruit or vegetable is half the battle of getting a child to eat more fruits and vegetables regularly. In addition, many school cafeterias now serve fruits and vegetables grown in their school gardens, giving children a chance to eat local, fresh, and in-season produce.

Working in a school garden gives children a chance to explore and nurture their curiosity. They also learn to work as a team and discover more about the source of their food. Life skills, such as leadership, decision-making, and self-awareness, also develop in children who work in school gardens (Robinson & Zajicek, 2005).

Most children love to work in a school garden. It gives them a break from the normal school day and offers a “senses rich” classroom that engages all five senses. Children also enjoy preparing and eating the food they have grown (Heim, Stang, & Ireland, 2009). This hands-on part of a school garden makes learning more fun.
How do school gardens benefit teachers?

A school garden is a great teaching tool. A garden can be used to teach children about nature. Children can learn about bugs found in the garden, water and sunlight’s effects on plant growth, and wild animals that visit the garden. School garden lessons can also be tied to math, writing, science, and history. For example, students can calculate how many seeds should be planted in each row or learn how plants convert light energy from the sun into a form of energy that can be stored and used later. Links to free lesson plans are listed below.

School gardens allow children to form ties with their school and with their fellow students in spite of differences in language, culture, and ability (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009). School gardens also help disabled or special needs children gain and refine motor skills in ways that classroom lessons may not (Rye et al., 2012).

Different Types of School Gardens

The type of garden you choose to plant will affect other parts of your plan, such as the budget and the supplies you need, so it is one of the first things you should consider. These are the main types of school gardens:

In-Ground Garden

This is a classic garden in which plants are grown directly in the ground. It has the lowest initial cost, but requires lots of open space with healthy soil. It is important to make sure the soil is not polluted. If your school is tight on space, another type of garden may work better.

Raised Bed Garden

Raised beds are a good idea if dirt quality or foot traffic are potential concerns. Plants in raised beds need more water, and the wood and supplies needed for this type of garden may increase costs. But think outside the box—even old pallets have been used to make raised beds.

Container Garden

Container gardens work well in schools that lack the space for a regular garden. Examples of suitable containers are plastic pots or a garden tower. Even an old bathtub or wheelbarrow can be used.
Hydroponic Garden

Hydroponic systems allow you to grow plants in water instead of dirt. There are many simple and cheap hydroponic systems that provide a fun learning opportunity for children.

Planning a School Garden

Before any seeds can be planted, the school garden has to be “grown” on paper. The following are important questions to consider before you start a garden and are discussed in more detail in the UF/IFAS Farm to School Grow-to-Learn Guide (Prizzia, 2014).

- **Who is going to be in charge of planting and keeping up the garden?** Gardens are usually not successful unless there is a champion at the school who takes responsibility for garden maintenance throughout the year. Typically, this is a science or agriculture teacher who incorporates the garden into lesson plans; however, any teacher or parent with a talent for gardening would make a good leader and caretaker.

- **What kind of plants should I grow?** This depends on your location, the kind of garden you have, and the plants that grow best during your location’s growing season. Select plant varieties that are disease- and pest-resistant. You also can choose to plant seeds or buy seedlings. Seedlings will help reduce the amount of time you have to wait to harvest; however, they tend to be more expensive than seeds.

- **What supplies do I need and how do I raise money to buy them?** The supplies you need depend on the type of garden you choose. However, the main things you will need are seeds (or seedlings), fertilizer, hoses or watering cans, and basic gardening tools (hoes, shovels, gloves, etc.). Check with your school or school food service department first to see if they have funds for a school garden. From there, ask parent/teacher organizations or community partners if they would be willing to contribute or hold a fundraiser for your garden. Also, there are state and national grants available for school gardens. Links to sources that offer grants are listed below.

Putting It All Together

School gardens are full of benefits for children and teachers. Working in the garden can improve a child’s health and learning. A garden also is a great teaching tool that ties nature to reading, math, and science. Additionally, school gardens can be used to engage all types of students and make learning fun.

School gardens require planning, so do not skip the research and planning stages. Proper planning will help make your school garden a success. For more information on planning, finding funding, and using a school garden as a teaching tool, visit the links below. Before you know it, the students at your school will be enjoying the fruits (and vegetables) of your labor!

Growing a Successful School Garden—Links


The USDA’s Team Nutrition website offers grants and free lesson plans (if your school is part of the USDA’s Child Nutrition Program) that tie gardens to science, math, and more. [http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition-garden-resources](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition-garden-resources)

The Let’s Move website has a checklist that will help you plan your school garden. [http://www.letsmove.gov/school-garden-checklist](http://www.letsmove.gov/school-garden-checklist)


The Florida Agriculture in the Classroom website offers grants and workshops in Florida. They also offer lesson plans and fun online garden games just for children. [http://faitc.org/grants/](http://faitc.org/grants/)
References


