

Starting a School Garden

Tips and Resources from the North Ed Farm to School Team



One: Assemble a Garden Team

Your garden team will work together to design and plan the implementation of your garden, and organize garden care through classrooms and volunteers. Potential stakeholders to include: administrators, custodial staff, PTO/parents, teachers, kitchen staff, community members, and students.

Two: Plan Your Garden



LOCATION: You want your school garden to be in a place that is easily accessible to students and community members.

- Water: It must be close enough to a water source that a hose can reach the garden with good pressure. (Ask your maintenance staff.)
- Sun: Most vegetable crops need direct sunlight for at least 6-8 hours per day, so make sure the location is not heavily shaded by trees or buildings.

SIZE depends on your space and capacity to care for it. A school garden does not need to be huge to be successful. However, there are ways to approach your garden to make it more manageable. For example:

- Cover cropping on portions or all of your garden will improve soil fertility and prevent weeds. This requires little to no maintenance.
- Wildflowers/Beneficial Mixes for Pollinators (insectaries)/Perennial plants will attract pollinators to your garden and provide educational opportunities about native plants while being a source of beauty. Most wildflower and insectary mixes don't require much weeding or watering.
- Low-maintenance crops require minimal maintenance to produce a yield. For example, corn, beans (especially bush type), squash (known together as the Three Sisters), potatoes, melons, grains, etc.



- Mulching reduces the need for weeding. Options include straw mulch, living mulches such as clover (which also improves soil), and things such as cardboard or burlap sacks in pathways. Mulching plants also greatly reduces the need for irrigation as the mulch helps the soil from losing water to evaporation.
- Irrigation requires a small initial investment, but it can save time and ensure that the garden is getting the water it needs in the summer. Irrigation systems of all kinds can be put on timers, from simple ones to solar powered ones with multiple settings.

DESIGN Choosing the type of garden depends on your budget, soil quality, and space.

- **In-ground Garden:** This is the cheapest option. You'll want to make sure that you have decent soil (you can take a soil test through [A & L Great Lakes Labs](#)) and you'll have to till the ground and incorporate compost into the soil.
- **Raised Beds:** a great option if you have poor soil, want a smaller garden, or want to assign different beds to different classes or groups. Raised beds can be built from untreated lumber, brick/pavers, corrugated steel, or recycled materials. They will need to be filled with a **50/50** topsoil & compost mix, which can be purchased from plant nurseries or landscapers.
- **Hoop House:** a much more expensive and involved option, but great for extending the growing season into the early spring and late fall to coincide with the school year. Nifty Hoops is a great company based in Ann Arbor that offers a "community build" option. There are cheaper options, but just be sure that whatever you get is durable enough for the winds and snow that we get here in the winter.

PLANTING

- **Choosing plants:** choose vegetables that your students and community will want to eat! Don't forget to include some flowers as well, for aesthetics and to attract pollinators. Herbs are also great, low maintenance plants that are great for sensory explorations.
- **Planting times** are based on the last frost date for your region. In Northern Michigan, it's usually around the end of May. You can go to the [Farmers Almanac](#) to look up your specific last frost date estimate.
- **Seedlings:** Some plants do best when started indoors or in a greenhouse and then transplanted into the garden when it is warm enough. Plants need to be slowly introduced to their new environment over a few days, a process called hardening off.
 - This can be a great classroom project - use a grow light for best results. Or you can purchase seedlings.
- **Direct Sow seeds:** Certain types of plants do best when planted directly in the soil. Check the seed packet for planting dates.





Three: Caring for Your Garden

STUDENTS AND TEACHERS: The school garden should be used as an educational tool by teachers to engage students in the planting and care of the garden.

- You can find vetted lessons by grade involving students in health, cooking, and gardening on our website: farmtoschool.northwested.org (under classroom>farm to school in the classroom>learning activities)

PARENTS AND COMMUNITY: The school garden can be a wonderful gathering place to bring the community together. Parent and community volunteers are imperative in the summer months.

- In the spring, the Garden Team should put together a summer garden care plan and recruit volunteers to care for and use the produce. Excess produce can be donated to local food pantries
- Consider hosting a spring planting day and a back-to-school harvest day to get kids, parents, and community members involved in the garden.

Four: Record Keeping

It is a good idea to keep garden records for a few reasons:

- to learn from mistakes and improve your garden each year
- to show impact data when seeking funds
- for educational purposes in the classroom

Create a spreadsheet or other data log and collect the following information:

- Planting dates & varieties
- Harvest dates & quantities
- Use of harvested produce (used in cafeteria, sent home with students, donated, etc.)
- Pest or disease issues - date noticed, which varieties affected
- Community volunteer log
- Classroom/student participation log
- Garden expenses

Supplies and Expenses

COMPOST For sandy soils, spread 2-3" of compost on the garden in the spring before planting.

- Use an online compost calculator (<- link) to determine how much you need
- You can have bulk compost delivered, and it usually costs about \$50-70 per cubic yard

GARDEN SUPPLIES: below is a list of basic supplies you'll need for a school garden

- Hose(s)
- Sprinkler w/ timer
- Trowels
- Shovels
- Wheel barrow
- Stakes and labels
- Hand rake
- Tubs/crates/baskets for harvesting
- Garden gloves

SEEDS

- Seedlings:
 - It is most cost-effective to grow them yourself. For best results, use a grow light.
 - You can also purchase seedlings from hardware stores, garden centers, or nurseries. You may also be able to get seedlings donated from local stores or farms.
- Direct Sow seeds:
 - Purchase at hardware stores, grocery stores, and garden stores OR order seeds online from companies like Johnny's. There are more varieties available, and you can order larger amounts for cheaper.
 - As your garden program grows, you can save your own seed!

