



10 Challenges to Sustaining a Youth Garden Program

With Ideas on How to Meet Them

Compiled by Sherri Chasteen, Irma Marsh Middle School, Fort Worth Texas, August 1998 following a workshop facilitated by Jim Flint at the American Horticultural Society Children's Garden Symposium.

Challenge #1: Institutionalizing the Garden Program

- Get support of principal and parents' association
- Offer a set time for the garden program in a daily or weekly schedule
- We enlisted support from our school district's head of maintenance. After all, we are reducing what ground he has to maintain, and we may reduce his outside watering bills. He has let us use tools, equipment, money, and some of his men have helped with construction.

Challenge #2: Getting Started

- Don't be afraid to start small and build. If what you do initially is well received, you'll build support and interest. Form committee of teachers to determine how they might use gardens.
- Read books, take courses, involve the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.
- As a group attend on site trainings at local, community, and school gardens and ASK QUESTIONS.
- Just do it! Call people together to gather ideas, find land, advertise—and they will come.
- I was overwhelmed with how much has to be done to build a garden large enough for the school. I finally figured out I had to take it one small step at a time. Once there were visible signs, such as landscape timbers, people began asking what they could do to help.

Challenge #3: Maintaining the Garden

- You need some type of structure--people are often willing to help if they know what you expect of them and have specific defined tasks--but let them be involved in planning, too so they buy into whatever they agree to take on.
- Involve parents and create a PTA committee to oversee the Garden Volunteer Program
- I have gotten new ideas on how to motivate teachers and children to participate from attending youth gardening conferences.
- Write for grants to get interns, high school students, or . . .

Challenge #4: Avoiding Volunteer Burnout

- Treat your volunteers the way you would treat contributors of money—make them feel wanted, useful, appreciated.
- Identify an enthusiastic parent to chair the PTA committee and keep volunteers motivated.
- Use a rotating schedule for volunteers
- Unfortunately, you may have to recruit new people each year.
- Get parents involved.

Challenge #5. Dealing with Administrative Hurdles

- Request a portion of science budget and PTA budget
- Invite the principal to attend outdoor session. Keep him/her abreast of activities. Do inservices for teachers.



- We had a planting activity for teachers on inservice day. During a break, teachers were able to plant seeds for the first batch of plants. We used the jiffy pots (we got them very cheap on clearance) so that it was as simple as possible. Teachers who had been saying "I can't garden" walked away saying "Is that all it is? I can do that!"
- Share web sites with your principal.
- Get one teacher from each grade to commit to start a small project and share at a staff meeting.
- Science department chairperson at the secondary level can be very helpful.

Challenge #6. Maintaining program consistency

- Curriculum should lead the garden program—incorporation is a must!!
- Ask for volunteers. Do not force anyone to participate.
- Be willing to help teachers with activities they can do that fit with their curriculum. Many of our teachers wanted to participate but didn't know how to match garden activities with their course requirements.

Challenge #7. Proprietary attitudes

- Work with those involved towards compromise that all can live with.
- Give teachers plants to adopt and care for until they are large enough to plant. Then they will want to visit them in the garden.

Challenge #8. Outdoor classroom management

- Classroom teachers should take the lead. Parent volunteers can be given discipline/activity guides.
- Use stories to stimulate interest. Give students/children a definite task and responsibility.
- Put learners in groups with peers they normally get along with.
- My students have defined roles in lab and definite procedures such as they must remain in their assigned lab area. When they don't fulfill their responsibilities or behave in an unsafe manner, they lose lab privileges. I tell them that garden time is lab time and lab rules apply; and I follow through when they don't do what they are supposed to do.

Challenge #9. Marketing the garden program

- Have parents association lead this effort along with committee of teachers.
- Involve the media when children are working. Call in speakers to see and spread the word.
- At every school event, such as meet-the-teacher-night, open house, orientation, etc. I have a table with info about our garden that includes a list of items we still need and photos of the kids working. I usually ask students to staff the table--they are the most aggressive about getting the word out. They are proud of what they are doing and want to tell about it.
- Slide shows, slide shows, slide shows.
- Local businesses are great contacts.
- Newspapers are a great resource—Keep them posted on all events.
- Write stories for school newsletters and community newspapers if possible.

Challenge #10. Fundraising

- Have parents' association lead this effort along with a committee of teachers.
- Apply for grants. Ask for sponsors.
- Ask the kids what fundraising items they would want to buy, and sell them.
- Have a donation container with you every time there is a school function. When you talk to a group etc., students can "work" the crowd (their idea, not mine). Very few can resist the freckles, smiles, and "Please, please, please" when a 12 year old is asking. I take students with me to speak with groups, and I let them talk as much as they like about the garden.