STEPS IN STARTING A SCHOOL GARDEN

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Creating a successful and sustainable school garden does not happen by accident. It requires months of planning before planting can begin! These steps will help facilitate the planning process and ensure that you are ready to start your garden.

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STEP ONE

ASSEMBLE A GROUP OF ENTHUSIASTIC TEACHERS AND STAFF.

To develop and sustain a school garden, you will need help. Ensure that school administrators are aware of your goals, and create a committee of like-minded teachers from various grade levels and different subject areas. Incorporate custodians and school support staff who may be interested in the project. If you are pursuing a food garden, include the cafeteria's nutrition personnel in your group.

Committee members should decide what type of garden they would like to have and how they will incorporate the garden into their curriculum. There are many possibilities for doing this—school gardens should be creative! Pollinator gardens and food plots are popular, and a rectangular raised bed that can be divided and subdivided into smaller areas is a good teaching tool for math. Planting gardens related to literature brings the stories to life. Gardens containing historical plants are a way to incorporate social studies.

Review UGA's school garden resource page. This website contains hundreds of lesson plans and ideas that make it easy to use a school garden to teach required Georgia Performance Standards for each grade and topic area, including language arts and social studies. The site also has tried-and-true horticultural information for school gardeners in Georgia.

If possible, have your group visit a nearby school with a successful garden. This can inspire your group and give you ideas. Experienced school gardeners can also help you avoid start-up problems and pitfalls.

Figure 1. Girls showing their dirty hands while working in the Brooks Elementary School garden.

STEP TWO
DRAFT A PLAN.

Now that your group has an idea of what they want to create, how do you turn these ideas into a garden? Create a plan that includes:

- Supplies – Estimate needs like garden tools, compost and other soil amendments, raised bed materials, irrigation, fencing, plants/seeds, and signs.
- Budget
- Timeline – See sample timeline on page 6 for an example.
- Time requirements – Determine how much time is required from staff and volunteers.
- Personnel needs – Consider how many volunteers will be needed.
- Garden space requirements
- Curriculum connections
- Community support ideas

STEP THREE
GARNER ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT.

Meet with your administrative staff. Have your plan organized and explain what you want to do in detail. The administration will want to know how the garden will benefit the students and not be burdensome for the teachers, and it's important to get them excited about the project! After you answer their questions, learn whether the garden could be allocated time or resources.

STEP FOUR
GATHER PARENTAL SUPPORT.

Ideally, a parent group, perhaps through a Parent Teacher Association or Organization (PTA or PTO), will be interested in helping with the garden. Parents can help find volunteers to assist with garden maintenance, help you get support from the community, and organize workdays in the garden.

Some schools have "garden angels" or "parent partners" who are trained in basic horticulture to head up garden maintenance. You will need people to care for the garden, both during the school year and when school is not in session. Summer garden maintenance is imperative! Realistically, one teacher alone cannot maintain the garden. You should aim to create a committee of parents that are able to assist.

School parents may have connections to free, or reduced price, garden tools and landscape materials. An active PTA or PTO school garden committee can also plan events (like fundraisers) in the garden. A committee-planned ribbon-cutting ceremony is a great first event to invite the community.

STEP FIVE
CHOOSE YOUR GARDEN SITE.

For most garden types, you will need full (6+ hours) sun and a water source, as hauling water is generally not sustainable. Installing irrigation at the site is ideal. Learn whether an area of the school grounds meets these requirements. If the grounds lack sun exposure, consider a shade garden. It is preferable to start small. Consider starting with one to three small raised beds as you build interest, expertise, and connections.

To determine the nutritional needs of the soil and the soil pH, take a soil test. Your local UGA Cooperative Extension agent can help with this process. Do your research and plan your site using plants that will both do well in your area and meet your instructional needs. Determine to use best horticultural practices in planting and maintaining your garden. Follow the recommendations from your soil test report and plan on mulching your plants to give your garden the best possible start.

STEP SIX
NOTIFY LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE CREWS.

Landscape maintenance crews will need to know your plans. If they are accustomed to spraying herbicides or other pesticides, you will need to educate them about your garden. You do not want someone accidentally mowing down a garden area, applying herbicides too close to vegetables, or spraying for insects in a pollinator space.

STEP SEVEN
CONNECT WITH THE PROFESSIONALS.

In addition to helping with the soil test, your local UGA Cooperative Extension office is a wonderful source of additional garden information. Extension personnel often offer free—or low cost—classes of interest. Ask about the Master Gardener Extension Volunteer program. These experienced and trained volunteers may be able to provide educational support and expert advice for your garden.

Subscribe to the regularly updated UGA Community and School Garden blog for timely garden tips, and connect with other teachers and gardeners through the UGA Community and School Garden Facebook page.

STEP EIGHT
GET OUT YOUR SHOVELS.

Once you have gone through these steps, you should be ready to move forward in creating your school garden. Remember that your local UGA Cooperative Extension Agent is available to help along the way.

Figure 2. Boys digging in the Canon Street Elementary School garden.

Sample timeline for starting a school garden

SEPTEMBER

Step One: Create a group of enthusiastic teachers. Schedule a visit to an established school garden.

OCTOBER

Step Two: Draft a plan.

NOVEMBER

Step Three: Garner administrative support.

DECEMBER/JANUARY

Step Four: Gather parental support.

FEBRUARY

Step Five: Choose your garden site, and

Step Six: Notify landscape maintenance crews.

MARCH

Step Seven: Connect with the professionals. Use UGA Extension resources to determine the plant varieties that are appropriate for your area and garden use plans. For food gardens, the UGA Vegetable Planting Chart lists reliable varieties for Georgia and gives planting dates.

APRIL

Next Steps: Get your shovels out. Promote your garden installation day. Invite the local newspaper and appropriate local officials. For food gardens, plant plots of leaf lettuce, spinach, kale, and radishes to make a wonderful spring garden that will produce food that can be used before the school year ends.

MAY

Enjoy using the garden. Make sure you have plans in place for garden care over the summer. Use your parent volunteers! For annual food plots consider planting popcorn, sweet potatoes, peanuts, or a warm-season cover crop. These plants require less summer care than other food crops. The last thing you want to come back to in the fall is a weedy, overgrown garden.

JULY/AUGUST

For food gardens, plan for your fall cool-season crops like broccoli, kale, lettuce, carrots, and spinach. Again, the UGA Vegetable Planting Chart will be helpful. Use what was planted in May in your curriculum.

Figure 3. Two students in front of a garden plot at Lake Park Elementary School.

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Circular 1101 **Reviewed September 2026**

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