

New Directions in Sustaining School Gardens
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For centuries, school gardens have strengthened students' relationships with the environment and broadened their scientific knowledge. Today's school garden programs are evolving to play an increasingly important role across the curriculum while helping to reconnect youths to the land.

School Garden Trends

Although school garden lessons have traditionally focused on science and environmental education, growing numbers of educators are using gardens as a teaching context for math, language arts, and social studies. Integrating school gardens throughout the curriculum, and implementing activities designed to achieve goals laid out by mandatory teaching standards, will help to ensure that school gardens remain effective and relevant. While research and anecdotal evidence has documented the benefits of school gardening, solid scientific data continues to be vital in justifying program time and expense to administrators and policymakers.

Closely linking hands-on garden programs to nutrition education initiatives is another school gardening trend. With the increasing distance between population centers and agricultural production, studies have found that many youths lack a basic understanding of food origins and the labor required to grow crops. The physical health of children is a national concern as data documents rising rates of obesity and poor nutrition. Through gardening, students establish positive connections with their food, learn skills that increase their access to healthy foods, and find opportunities for regular exercise.

School Garden Initiatives

California provided a boost for school garden organizers when the Department of Education launched the *Garden in Every School* Initiative in 1995. Excitingly, California is no longer alone in establishing a statewide school garden network. In 2005, the Rhode Island Children's Garden Network was created along with a plan—*Campaign 2010: A Garden at Every School*. To kick off the campaign, a federal appropriation of \$280,000 has provided seven schools and youth organizations with training and technical assistance to support successful and sustainable garden-education programs that will serve as a model for future garden development.

School Garden Design

Schools have recognized that to plan for long-term success, interest, and support, the garden space needs to be carefully and thoughtfully designed. For many educators, school garden design can be a daunting task because the garden by nature will be in a constant state of evolution and change. A well designed school garden presents a visual presence year-round, even during dormant periods. Ideally the garden site will be located in a space that can be adequately

maintained and have sufficient light, water access, gathering areas, and storage. To maintain healthy soil fertility and safeguard children's health, organic gardening practices are essential.

Community School Gardens

Organizers are often challenged to sustain the motivation of teachers, parents, and students after the initial interest in establishing the school garden starts to wane. As time goes on, guiding and maintaining a school garden can often become the role and responsibility of a shrinking group of teachers, students, and community members.

In Vermont, a trend of creating "school community gardens" has picked up momentum during the past two years. The key concept is that school garden programs are inherently more sustainable if based on principles similar to those used by community garden organizers. School garden organizers are encouraged to integrate community stakeholders in garden planning, cultivate mutually beneficial community partnerships, and create garden-based service-learning opportunities for students and community members.

Through the Vermont Community Garden Network, more than \$10,000 in mini-grant support was awarded to 22 school gardens in 2006 and 30 school gardens in 2007. Mini-grants were used to fund service-learning projects geared toward garden improvements that created a sense of identity, ownership, and long term sustainability.

Several Vermont schools have thriving community-based gardens located on school grounds or adjacent to their campuses. The gardens offer common ground for hands-on learning, summer food programs, and community gatherings. Garden organizers are linked through the Vermont Community Garden Network, which provides technical assistance, regional trainings and workshops, and a sense of belonging to a statewide movement. When established by and with the community, school gardens can mesh well with the tradition of local schools serving as community centers.

Future of School Gardens

In a recent National Gardening Association survey, ninety-seven percent of respondents indicated that they felt schools should provide gardening. Yet many school gardens face challenges as they compete for the limited time and financial resources of educational institutions. Sustainability lies in close integration with the curriculum, careful tracking of outcomes, positive academic, health-related and social benefits, and building strong school-community partnerships.