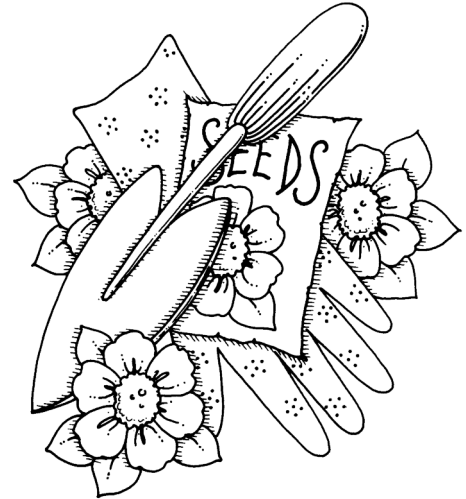


BENEFITS OF A SCHOOL GARDEN

By Marika Bergsund of *GrowingGreat*



A tiny leaf pushes up through the soil where a seed was planted just days before. It is the magic of nature before a child's eyes. Tending the tiny plant teaches responsibility and teamwork. It provides an opportunity to bring science, math, social studies, and language and visual arts to life through hands on learning. Vegetable gardens let children taste the wonders of fresh food. And all enjoy the growing feeling of community that comes from sharing a new adventure. The benefits of adding a garden to your school are endless and easily available, no matter what type, size or style of garden your site can accommodate.

Nature as Teacher

Experiencing the magic of seed, soil, water and sun becoming a tiny plant is a lesson in itself, and one not soon forgotten. Learning to appreciate the wonder and power of nature is the core of an environmental education. Planting a seed teaches about the need to protect our natural resources—clean soil and water for the plant to grow. Children learn that we need to preserve open land to grow crops for food, trees for oxygen, and fields for playing. By taking care of their environment, they see that they are helping nature make the magic happen.

The Law of the Farm—Responsibility and Teamwork

The fundamental law of the farm is that growing a garden takes responsibility and good teamwork. If you don't water your garden, your plants will die. If you don't weed the garden, the weeds get worse and you have to work harder later to get the job done. Children learn how to be responsible for taking care of something, and learn through natural consequences when they don't do the work. Gardens also provide a wealth of opportunities for student teamwork. The old saying "Many hands make light work" applies in the garden. Students need to work together to prepare the soil, plant the seeds or plants, do the regular watering and stay on top of the weeding. These opportunities to take responsibility and work with others builds students' self esteem. Watching their garden grow is the sign of their success.

Opportunities for Hands-On Learning

Gardens provide a wealth of opportunities for kids to get their hands dirty while learning their lessons in all curriculum areas. Learning plant anatomy and botanical life science is just the beginning. Young scientists can experiment by changing variables in the garden (such as watering frequency or plant spacing). They can collect growth data weekly, chart their data, and write up their analyses and conclusions. A creative class in Manhattan Beach, California once tested whether watering lettuce with water dyed blue changed the color of the lettuce (answer: no). Perimeter and area in math can be taught as students design and layout planting beds. Even the youngest students can learn basic measurement when they use a ruler to measure proper spacing when planting their seeds or plants. Gardens make children's literature come alive when you plant a Peter Rabbit Garden or scatter lupine seeds like Miss Rumphius.

And students get to walk the talk in social studies when they plant a traditional Native American Three Sisters garden of corn, beans and squash, or plant a garden of tomatoes and exotic spices brought back from the New World to Europe by the explorers. For many students, such hands-on learning experience is a vitally important learning tool, contributing to greater classroom successes for some students.

Sneaking in Nutrition Education

A vegetable garden gives you all of these benefits while sneaking in valuable nutrition lessons on the importance and joys of eating fresh fruits and vegetables. New studies and media reports continue to show the alarming rise of nutrition-related health conditions (such as diabetes and obesity) in children and adults across the US. And yet, with severe budget cuts in education and increasing demands on teachers, the amount of nutrition education being taught in schools continues to decline. Teachers simply do not have the time or the resources to add another content area to their day. The garden is a double blessing. It lets them enrich their curriculum lessons while also providing an opportunity to teach nutrition when students sample their harvest. Children are much more likely to taste a vegetable that they have grown—and vegetables always taste better straight from the garden.

School gardens can take variety of forms—from the simplest containers outside a classroom to a multi-plot, in-ground garden featuring seating areas and a greenhouse. But the size of your garden should not limit its potential to contribute to the learning environment. The benefits and magic are readily available to all. So go and plant that seed!