

Edible Schoolyards:

An Overview for Getting Started!

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The term “community” is the key to community gardening. Gardening is a favorite pastime for many people and a necessity for others. Food security often requires that we grow our own food to be able to feed ourselves, and our families. What better way to eat healthy food, get fresh air, sunshine and exercise, than gardening with other people who want the same things.

“Edible Schoolyards” provides students, faculty and parents an opportunity to grow food in community while incorporating skills and facts learned in the classroom. The application of math, sciences, social studies, art and team building are only a few of the applications of the “Edible Schoolyard” program.

The style and function of community garden as an edible school yard vary according to the goals and vision of the people coordinating the projects. Community gardens could be large farms maintained by a group to share the harvest, or a field divided into sections where each team does their own garden, or a small vacant lot, or in other spaces in a neighborhood or school, where neighbors grow food and improve the neighborhood environment. There are endless styles and purposes all with the same motivation of feeding people, getting in touch with the natural world around us.

We will discuss the ways to begin a community garden, and then keep it going. There are books and other resources available for those people who are managing the garden, as well as the gardeners. The experience of other people who have participated in the adventure of community gardening is a very valuable resource. Never underestimate the value of information available to us from those who have gone ahead of us in some way.

We begin with an idea to use a piece of land, to grow food and to bring people together. From there, a plan needs to be made as to how to get that done. There is a variety of questions to ask before the project gets very far. The following questions are numbered for reference, not for order of importance.

1) Does the site for the garden have full sunlight all day?

This may be determined by setting up a “shadow pole” to monitor the shade produced and the direction of the sun at various times of day. A “shadow pole” could simply be any stick, stake or pole about six feet high and hammered into the ground to be a sturdy guide to follow the movement of the sun. This will also help to plan the rows of the vegetables to prevent shadows from hindering growth. This project can take from a few days to a week.

2) Is it accessible to future gardeners?

Will many students, faculty and family be able to view the progress? Will those students with limited physical abilities be able to work in the garden?

3) Who owns the land?

4) Is it a privately owned, town or state owned?

5) Who needs to be involved in the process to acquire or plan the use of that land?

Include the principal, facilities director, grounds director, superintendent of schools and any other officials that need to be contacted. Sometimes the department of Parks and Recreation need to be consulted, as well.

6) Is there enough interest in the community to support it?

A minimum of three adults need to be actively involved with the students. This is not only for safety, but for motivation throughout the project and to sustain the project into the future.

7) How will it be advertised, and who will be the target audience?

Consider contacting faculty, staff and parents personally, as well as email, or fliers for take home. Personal contact goes a long way. Once there is a plan, the newspapers will want to know about it.

8) Who will be responsible for the project?

There needs to be a core team of two or three people to be responsible for decisions and contact by interested people.

9) Who is the final authority; an individual, a town committee, an association of the gardeners of the season, or school group?

10) Who will be the contact person for questions and applications for sections?

11) Who will have insurance for the property?

Check with your school to be sure.

12) What is the purpose of the garden; will it be to support a food bank, or individuals, or a school educational resource, or a combination of many of these purposes?

13) What is the style of the garden?

Framed raised beds are an expense worth encoring, as maintenance of the garden is minimized, accessibility is maximized and plantings are healthier. A standard 4 foot by 6 foot bed, built of 2X10 boards will run from \$40 to \$80 each. Grants are available; donations of materials are often available.

14) Will it be handicap accessible?

With framed raised beds, 48 inch paths between beds will work well. These can just be a grass pathway.

15) What is the quality of the soil?

A soil test can be done as part of a science class, as well as sending out to the Connecticut Soil lab for \$15, or less. The University of Connecticut soil testing lab website is included in the resources.

16) Who will break the ground?

Students from 6 to 18 rarely get to use real tools. This is a great way for students to learn to use shovels, pick axes, sifters and more. Students will learn many skills while getting exercise in a fun and functional way.

17) How will ground be broken to prepare the soil for planting”?

Again, when students have a hand in the soil preparation, they gain a sense of pride and ownership with the garden.

18) How will the garden be maintained through the season?

With a school based garden, cold weather crops can be planted in September, then harvested in late October through November and into March. Again, cold weather crops can be planted in March and April, and then harvested in May and June when both the garden is done in time for school classes to be over.

19) What will be the “season” for growing? Will it be March to November, May to September, or all year long?

With summer school or summer day camps, the growing could go throughout the year.

20) What will the gardeners responsibilities be for each season? What is the responsibility of the coordinator or group?

22) Questions of security (people and animals) must be addressed. Consider things such as a fence, gates and signage.

Animals could be cats and dogs, or deer and woodchucks, to name a few. Consider what your needs will be. Every garden is different.

23) What rules will be established for the garden? This keeps order and a reference in times of conflict.

24) How will people be motivated to continue through the summer into the fall?

Spring is for high energy and hope. Mid summer is hot, often dry and sometimes discouraging. In the fall, people do not usually think of planting. This in itself is an educational opportunity.

25) What kind of resources will be needed at the garden? Water, tools, soil improvements, plant supports, among other things, need to be considered.

26) Will there be a shed to store tools and equipment?

If so, who will have access?

27) Will a “gathering space” be provided for the gardeners to rest and communicate with each other?

28) How much funding will be required per season?

29) What staff will be hired as resources? A staff person would answer questions about gardening, or protocol in the garden, or keep track of supplies and other for the garden. A staff person might also recruit new gardeners, or other resources. There are other purposes for staff at a community garden.

30) Consider a grant writer to acquire funding.

31) Where is the nearest water source and how will it be acquired for the plants?

These are just some of the questions we should ask when thinking about a community garden or edible school yards. In the 1970's there were only 100 known community gardens in America. Now in 2010 there are thousands of established community gardens with more sprouting up so rapidly, it is hard to keep track of them all.

“Edible School Yards” began in California to educate and encourage students, as well as adults to learn about the sources of food and their value. As children grow their own food, they make healthier choices in what they eat. This makes healthier families. Their website is included in the resources.

Think big, but start small. A small garden is easier to manage for the first year. This gives more opportunity to succeed and grow from small beginnings.

For a list of some of the community gardens in Connecticut, as well as some resources, go to...

- The Connecticut Community Gardening Association website
www.ctcommunitygardening.org
- American Community Gardening Association website
www.communitygarden.org
- Knox Parks Foundation
www.knoxparks.org
- Connecticut NOFA
www.ctnofa.org
- Life Lab: Garden-Based Learning Activity Guides
www.lifelab.org
- Bettylou Sandy of Bettylou's Gardening
Email: bettylous.gardening@snet.net
- Cooperative Extension Centers
www.soiltest.uconn.edu
- Edible School Yards – a universal idea
www.edibleschoolyard.org
- The Farm-Based Education Association
www.farmbasededucatio.org