



# Checklist for Starting a School Garden

Use this document as a reminder of what to consider and prepare for before submitting a garden project.

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## Site Selection

Choosing the best location for your garden project will require some investigation. Use these questions to guide your thinking, and then decide on the garden locale accordingly.

- Is the site easy for both students and teachers to access?
- Is there a nearby and dependable water source?
- Is the site protected from vandals, pests or other local threats?
- Is the area big enough to allow for future growth?
- Is the site exposed to sunlight at least 6 hours a day, if planting flowers, herbs and vegetables?
- Is the soil contaminated with lead or other heavy metals?

Parking lots, courtyards, rooftops, greenhouses, and schoolyards might be potential sites. If there's no possibility of having a garden at the school, consider options within the community like city parks or vacant lots, church properties, nature centers, retirement centers, and community gardens. You want to avoid locations that are exposed to pollutants like highways, airports, industry smokestacks, etc. If space is very limited, consider gardening in containers or straw bales. You might find that the ideal spot is indoors instead of outside.

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## Soil Health

Soil is the foundation on which gardens are built. It's important to collect a soil sample to identify the soil texture of the proposed garden site. Soil texture is the combination of sand, silt and clay particles that make up soil. Poor soil texture may cause restrictions to root growth, and poor movement of air and water through the soil. Soil texture is quite easy to test for, just follow the do-it-yourself instructions at <http://soils.usda.gov/education/resources/lessons/texture/>. A nutrient-rich soil with good texture and plenty of organic matter will help your garden thrive. Did you know? A single spade of rich garden soil contains more species of organisms than can be found above ground in the entire Amazon rain forest.

Have your soil tested for pH, nutrients and lead contamination. Call your local Cooperative Extension office, State Department of Agriculture, or Public Health Department to find out where to get soil tested. Soil test laboratories are listed at [http://www.ahs.org/publications/the\\_american\\_gardener/07/03/web\\_special\\_4.htm](http://www.ahs.org/publications/the_american_gardener/07/03/web_special_4.htm) and <http://www.organicgardening.com/soiltest/1%2C7775%2Cs1-2-7-0%2C00.html>. The USDA Service Center in your county can also provide assistance at <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app>.

Nutrients are most available to plants at pH levels between 6 and 7. Having trouble understanding your pH test results? Find answers at <http://soils.usda.gov/sqi/publications/files/indicate.pdf>. If your site is contaminated with lead, the simplest solution may be to find another site. Otherwise, garden in containers or remove the contaminated topsoil and replace it with clean soil. Download a publication about lead contaminated soil at <http://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pid=FS336>.

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## Plant Palette

Choose a palette of plants that are safe (no poisonous fruits, large thorns or weak limbs), healthy (resistant to disease or pests), low maintenance, desirable size and shape, and suitable to your climate.

The basic needs of plants include water, air, light, and space. In addition, you should consider the specific needs of each plant regardless of the garden type. Selecting appropriate plants requires knowledge of what plants will survive and grow year after year in your region of the United States. Most plants are identified in a catalog or plant description by hardiness zone. Do you know your zone? Use the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map to find out at <http://www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone/ushzmap.html> or <http://www.garden.org/zipzone/>