



Edible Schoolyards: *An Overview for Getting Started!* **By Bettylou Sandy of Bettylou's Gardening**

An “Edible School Yard” is a healthy environment within the school grounds to immerse students, faculty and their families in the process of growing food in a variety of ways while learning about the origins of their food and benefits of healthy living.

“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. Skills of team work are used to plan, establish and maintain the growing of food. Geography and social sciences are used to track produce and other foods acquired from the grocery store, or the origins of the food being grown. Math skills are used to plan the projects as well as track the progress of the gardens and landscape. These are only a few of the curriculum applications for “Edible School Yards”.

“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 and healthier communities. Their website is included in the resources.

People have, historically, learned about growing food from their parents and grandparents. It has been only since the 1950's that this education has diminished to the need for this type of program.

Students who watch their food grow will be eager to eat it when it is ready to pick, even though they would not have touched the food if it had been offered to them in the average setting. Students and faculty are usually astonished at the wonderful flavor and texture of freshly picked food. From there students start to choose fresh fruits and vegetables to eat, rather than the usual “junk food”, when it is available

Most schools run from late August to June. For this reason, I recommend growing only those foods that like cool weather, or grow through the winter. There are an abundance of fruits and vegetables that students can grow outside all through the school year with the last harvest in early June. With this plan, the food is planted, tended and harvested within one school year, so the students have the continuity within the classroom and in the garden.

Quick growers that work well for school gardens include Peas, String Beans, Radishes, Leaf Lettuce.

- **Peas** – plant by seed outdoors, usually around mid March, if the soil is workable and not frozen, or muddy. Harvest begins in early May through June
- **Broccoli** – start indoors in February and plant outside early April for harvest in late May into June. The process can start again in August. For a harvest in October and November.
- **String Beans** are planted by seed in late April for harvest in June and through the summer
- **Radishes** are planted by seed in late April for harvest in May and June, but may be grown indoors in the winter months, as well.

More Cold Weather crops for *year round* food production

- **Lettuce family** - Plant in April in the sun, summer in the shade. Plant again in August in the sun and December through March may be planted near a window inside the classroom with no special lighting.
- **Kale** - Plant in April in the sun, summer in the shade, August in the sun and December through March may be planted near a window inside the classroom with no special lighting.
- **Spinach** - Plant in April in the sun, summer in the shade, August in the sun and December through March may be planted near a window inside the classroom with no special lighting.
- **Garlic** – Plant cloves outside in October, mulch for the winter, harvest greens (scapes) in June, harvest garlic in July
- **Parsnips** – Plant by seed in April, harvest the following February or March for a sweet fresh vegetable in the cold months.
- **Carrots** – plant by seed at weekly intervals beginning late April to Mid June, then again they may be planted Mid August through September. Harvest through November, but save some to harvest for February and March.

Perennial Vegetables – Those you plant **once** and they return year after year, and multiply year after year.

- **Asparagus** – Plant in the first spring, and then wait three years to harvest. This is a spring treat that keeps going!
- **Rhubarb** – Plant the first year, and then start to harvest the second year through the summer and many summers to come!
- **Egyptian Onions** – Plant the first year small harvest of bulblets first year, larger harvest the second year, third year plants start to propagate rapidly.
- **Scallions** – Plant first year, snip greens for salads, will propagate every year.
- **Jerusalem Artichokes** – Plant tubers first year, enjoy the sunflower tops. Harvest some tubers in the spring, allowing others to multiply for the following year.

There are so many more vegetables to choose from, but these are the most frequently requested. Each vegetable has its own needs for soil type,

.With these “cold weather crops”, some foods may be ***grown and harvested even in the classroom*** in January through March, *without extra lighting*, while waiting for their winter harvest outdoors in late February and March.

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. As you can see there are many options for growing food in an educational environment. Containers gardens, inside or outside are a good way to begin the process. They are small and manageable to build success while planning something larger.

The **ultimate goal** of an “Edible School Yard” is to eventually incorporate shrubs for berries, fruit trees, berry hedges and groundcovers of creeping fruits, as strawberries. Growing food is both beautiful and delicious, when planned and maintained by an organized group of volunteers, students and staff.

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 “Edible School Yard” or community garden. The experience of other people who have participated in the adventure of community gardening is a very valuable resource.

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? Is it a privately owned, town or state owned?*

This will determine the use and insurance needs, among other things.

4. *Who needs to be involved in the process to acquire or plan the use of that land?*

Include the principal, facilities director, grounds director, superintendant of schools and any other officials that need to be contacted. Sometimes the department of Parks and Recreation need to be consulted, as well. It is also beneficial to have students, parents and other adult volunteers involved from the beginning to build a core of invested supporters.

5. *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.

6. *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 to publicize it through their own reporters.

7. *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.

8. *Who is the final authority?*

Will it be an individual, a town committee, an association of the gardeners of the season, or school group?

9. *Who will be the contact person for questions about the garden?*

10. *Who will be the contact person for 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 or packed stone dust.

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 to prepare the soil?

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. In this way they learn to use their hands as well as learn to use their bodies in healthy ways. 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 August to November, March to November, May to September, March to June, or all year long?

With summer school or summer day camps, the growing could go throughout the summer, using all of the “warm weather crops” such as Tomatoes, Peppers, Squash varieties, as well.

20. What responsibilities will the gardeners have for each season?

For planting, tending, watering, harvesting, maintaining a neat area and caring for the tools and supplies, charting progress, reporting on the amount of food consumed, distributed, etc.

21. What is the responsibility of the coordinator or group?

Things such as scheduling of students and other volunteers, monitoring the plants and gardens, leading work crews, planning for the growing process of planting, watering, tending, harvesting, distribution, etc., Communication with the Administration.

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 seasons?

Fall and spring are for high energy and hope. Mid summer is hot, often dry and sometimes discouraging. This in itself is an educational opportunity for the adults, as well as the students.

25. *What kind of resources will be needed at the garden?*

Water, tools, soil improvements, plant supports, among other things, need to be considered. Maybe a wheelbarrow, or two, gloves for the volunteer and student gardeners, buckets, etc. are all part of the planning. Again, donations appear when the word gets out about the project.

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

If so, who will have access and what kinds of things will be allowed to be stored there? Who will be responsible to monitor the condition of the shed?

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

This could be a space to have outside teaching times, or breaks with the students. This could also be a space for other people who are maintaining the garden apart from the teaching times with students. Having a space in the shade, or shelter from the elements is a great resource.

28. *How much funding will be required per season?*

Administration of the garden, materials, supplies, plants, tools, staff, etc.

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 materials for the garden. A staff person might also recruit new gardeners, volunteers, or other resources. There are other purposes for staff at an edible school yard or community garden. This could be a member of the faculty, or another staff person.

30. *Consider a grant writer to acquire funding.*

A list to get you started on the process follows.

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

Plants need food and water to grow and produce well, just as people do. Young plants need much more water to establish their root system. Established plants that are well mulched with straw will not need as much care.

These are just some of the questions we should ask when thinking about a community garden or edible school yard. 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 are “cropping up” in most states in the past five years. Food issues are a great concern for many people these days.

Here in Connecticut, the city of New Haven has the K-8 Barnard School with an edible school Yard and Environmental curriculum. Also in New Haven is the Common Ground High School for farm based education. Follow that in the same city with the Yale Forestry School with their

farm and community gardens and you have the full range of Edible School Yard education from Kindergarten through graduate school in one city.

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. Have a long term plan to build in the pieces as energy and finances are available.

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

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