

Tips and Tricks for Working With Young Gardeners

When working with students in a school garden, it is important to remember that what makes good garden management is good classroom management. Some of the same philosophies that are used to prepare and grow a healthy, productive garden can be re-interpreted for young gardeners.

Different plants have different needs – some need more water, some need more sun. This is also true for our young gardeners. It is important to remember the rule of 80-15-5! Most management strategies will work with about 80% of the students most of the time, 15% of the students some of the time, and 5% of the students none of the time. So be flexible and willing to try different strategies!

Preparing the Site and Soil:

- Provide students with activities that allow them to grow skills, knowledge, and ownership about gardening. Including students in the planning, preparation, planting, care, and harvest of a garden allows them to grow their understanding as the garden grows.
- Provide students with Expectations and Boundaries. Before you begin, tell the students what is expected of them and what they will be doing during the lesson, project, and season. This is sometimes called “The Anticipatory Set.” Also tell them where they can and cannot go when in the garden. Use stakes to mark planting areas and keep small feet off.
- Utilize “Engage” or icebreaker activities to get students’ attention. Build excitement for the topic.
- Gardening requires tools and materials; sometimes there is plenty of work for everyone, sometimes there is not. If only one bean plant is ready to be picked, you won’t need 30 gardeners to do the picking! Develop a plan for what everyone will be doing when working in the garden; if tools are needed, make sure there are enough. Consider taking smaller groups to work.
- Use family letters, newsletters, and signs to inform students, families, and communities what is “growing on.”
- Use themes to grow mini-gardens.
 - Books: Use a favorite children’s book to inspire a garden. For example, all purple plants for Harold and the Purple Crayon or Growing Vegetable Soup for a vegetable garden.
 - Recipes: Take a favorite recipe and grow it! You could grow a salsa garden, a cereal garden, a pizza garden, or even a French fry garden (potatoes and tomatoes)!
 - Map: Turn your gardens into a map of the world – group plants by their home countries and signify with small flags. (Make sure that these plants will grow in your region.)

Working the Soil and Planting the Seeds:

- Communicate and Coordinate. If multiple classes are involved in the garden, make sure that everyone knows their responsibilities. It can be very frustrating to prepare a class to go pick beans and find that they were picked by another class!
- Assign jobs in the garden. This can be done on a daily, weekly, or seasonal basis and by student or class. One example, this season the third grade will be in charge of the herb garden; Mrs. Smith’s class is responsible for watering this week (or month); and today Timmy is responsible for watering the basil (or all the herbs).

- Use your inside voice as much as possible – even when outside. Instead of yelling, try using a soft voice to get their attention. Once students realize you’re talking, they will often start quieting themselves.
- Remember that gardening is not supposed clean work. Communicate with families and the janitorial staff about your efforts.
 - Consider having garden smocks for kids.
 - Plastic bags over the shoes or an outside shoe scraper help reduce the mud tracked inside.

Water, Weed, and Wait:

- Two birds, one stone...use gardening activities to meet other educational deliverables. Math, reading, writing, science, art, and more can all be achieved through an interdisciplinary approach in the garden.
- Sometimes several problems can be addressed with one solution. For example, mulch in the garden reduces weeds AND retains water in the soil. For our gardeners, a job weeding can get rid of weeds in the garden AND use some extra energy!
- Assign a student photographer each time the group works in the garden. They can take pictures of classmates, but also track growth and change in the garden.
- Work in multi-age groups or with peer teachers. Let older students share their skills and experiences with their younger counterparts.
- Plan for the wait! Gardens take patience, but there are a few things that can make the time go more quickly.
 - Plant some fast growing seeds like radishes for a quick payoff.
 - Grow a container garden in the classroom – herbs are great for this!
 - Incorporate art while you wait – making garden art and scarecrows (big and mini) can shorten the wait.
- Use monitoring activities to track your garden’s progress.
 - How much have the beans grown? What day did we see the pumpkin plant sprout?
 - The photos from student photographers can also be used to demonstrate a garden’s progress.
- Sit in the garden with “nothing” to do. Well, not really – use the garden as an outdoor classroom for non-gardening tasks. Reading silently or aloud, journaling, and other lessons can be easily moved outside to the garden area.
 - Towels are great “seats” in the garden. Have students bring towels to keep at school.
- Ask students for their ideas when facing a challenge in the garden. Respect their ideas.

More Weeding:

- Move around the garden and spend time working with each student or group of students. Your presence is often enough to keep students on task.
- If you have a student who is causing a disruption, try to work with them in a discrete and quiet manner. Avoid yelling or drawing more attention to their negative behavior. Consider assigning that student a “job” to focus on – holes can always be dug, leaves can be raked, compost can be turned, and buckets of water can be carried.

Harvest:

- Catch students being good and doing what you want them to do – and tell them so! Consider this, plants have been shown to respond positively to encouraging and kind voices...our young gardeners do, too!

- Discuss what was done in the garden. Talk about what happened, who did what, etc. Allow students to keep garden journals to track their garden's growth, their own work in the garden, and their thoughts about the garden.
- Eat right out of the garden! Kids are more willing to try vegetables that they have grown or picked in the garden.