

Effective Outdoor Management in School Gardens

How Can I Possibly Manage 30 Kids Outdoors in a Garden?

Outdoor classroom management is an integral part of a successful school garden program. Many teachers find it challenging to work with their classes outside because of students' high energy and the distractions that exist outdoors. However, when we are able to channel students' energy and enthusiasm toward focused learning activities, and use "distractions" -- such as spider webs or bird calls -- as teaching tools, then the garden becomes an exceptionally effective and exciting space for learning. Ultimately, a well-managed garden provides teachers with new ways to motivate students and demonstrate concepts, and provides students with abundant opportunities to explore the natural world, apply skills learned in multiple academic areas, learn about nutrition, and work together. Educators have identified the following management strategies for making garden-based learning effective and enjoyable.

Cooperative Learning

Dividing students into small groups can bring a welcomed sense of structure to outdoor learning activities. It can be particularly effective to teach students cooperative learning strategies, such as listening to one another and sharing responsibilities, prior to providing them with small-group garden tasks. The first chapter of Life Lab's *Growing Classroom* has loads of activities designed to help students develop cooperative learning skills. Cooperative learning may already be part of your classroom teaching and, with proper planning, it can easily be adapted to the garden classroom.



Small-group cooperative learning is an especially effective technique for leading hand-on science activities. Teachers provide students with clear directions for a structured activity, and then provide support for the groups as they work together. For example, if your students are observing how insects help pollinate plants in the garden, try dividing the class into groups of five, giving each group instructions to find one plant and quietly observe any visitor insects. Give members of the groups specific tasks, such as timing each insect's stay, making a quick sketch of the insect, writing about how the insect moves, and communicating the group's findings to the class. In this way students acquire cooperative learning skills (such as listening, explaining, suggesting, and group decision-making) while learning academic concepts. Once students understand the task at hand, you can provide support and guidance to the six groups while they work together.

Another option is to divide the class into groups for garden classroom work. For example, as one group pursues an independent writing or drawing project in the outdoor classroom area, another can gather around you for a science investigation, and a third can work in the garden with a volunteer. Be sure to rotate the groups so that all students experience the full range of activities.

Created as a supplemental material to the *Effective Outdoor Management in School Gardens* video project. See the videos at www.lifelabvideos.blogspot.com.

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Finally, some teachers set up multiple independent stations that students can explore in groups. For example, completing a garden scavenger hunt, measuring and recording the growth of sunflowers they planted last week, and collecting seeds from dried flower heads.

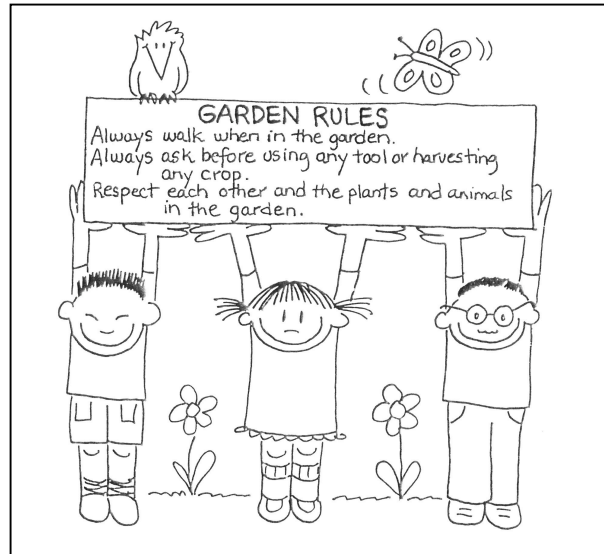
One caution: resist the temptation to have all garden classroom activities led by volunteers or aides. Effective outdoor instruction carefully integrates garden classroom work with classroom activities and it is most effective if the classroom teacher is involved in both. Don't make your garden time a "pullout," and, above all, don't deny yourself the pleasure of working with kids in the garden classroom!

Rules and Discipline

The garden is a special kind of classroom and requires special rules for both effective learning and safety. You will want to set up a standard garden orientation program for your students and another for volunteers. Over the years, many schools have developed these basic rules:

- Always walk when in the garden.
- Stay on the paths.
- Always ask before using any tool or harvesting any crop.
- Respect each other and the plants and animals in the garden.

In addition, create specific rules for using garden tools, and demonstrate to students proper and improper use of tools. Some teachers find it helpful to model correct and incorrect behavior and have students critique them. Your garden classroom may require certain other rules, such as "Always keep the gate shut" or "Always wipe your feet and wash your hands before returning to class." Phrase the rules positively and try to keep them simple—the fewer the better. Letting students help develop these rules will encourage them to obey them.



Post a list of your garden rules prominently, perhaps on the door of your toolshed.

Support = Success

Experienced gardeners will tell you that, in order to have a successful garden, you need to build the soil, fertilize it well, and tend your plants with loving care. Your school's garden classroom will require that and more. Besides cultivating your plants, you must also cultivate support from teachers, students, parents, community volunteers, community leaders, and school administrators.

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As you succeed, your garden classroom will generate an air of excitement that animates not just your school, but the entire community. As individuals and groups share in building Life Lab, they will also share the satisfaction of seeing it flourish. Here's some more ideas to effectively manage the outdoor learning environment:

Team Teaching

Some teachers temporarily reduce class size by making reciprocal arrangements with other teachers to take half of their class for P.E. or computers during their garden time. (Be sure to repeat the project, this time permitting the other half of the class to participate.)

Buddy Classes

An interesting variation on team teaching that also includes aspects of cooperative learning, is a "buddy class" system that teams a lower grade class with an upper grade, matching students one-on-one for projects. Each teacher works with half of both classes at once. Similarly, another approach, called cross-age tutoring, groups one older student with several younger ones.

Additional Adults

Another way teachers manage class time in the garden classroom is by increasing the adult-to-student ratio. As mentioned earlier, some schools have a paid garden coordinator, and many schools make use of community volunteers such as parents, university students, or local gardening enthusiasts.

Volunteers: Extending the Teacher's Reach

Volunteers are a major part of most successful school garden programs. Volunteers can help you build a toolshed or fence, organize a fundraiser to pay for a garden aide, contribute gardening expertise, or help you in the classroom. For many schools, this volunteer support takes the form of an enthusiastic community support committee, often made up of parents associated with PTA or PTO groups. But don't worry if you don't have that enthusiastic core of support to begin with; it will grow with your garden classroom.

Keep parents informed as you plan your garden classroom. Send home flyers letting them know about the purpose of your garden and how they might get involved. Ask them for specific types of help, such as expert help in gardening, design, or carpentry, and donations of tools, materials, and supplies.

Where else to look for instructional garden volunteers:

- Local garden clubs
- Area educational institutions (universities, community colleges, and high schools). Teacher education and science departments, especially environmental studies and horticulture departments, often offer internships, work study programs, or other community involvement options to their students.
- Local senior citizen organizations.
- Young people's organizations like scouts or fraternal organizations.

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- Your county's Cooperative Extension Office, which is designed to provide various types of assistance to enterprises like yours. Some of the programs they coordinate, including 4-H Clubs, and master gardener programs, may also yield volunteers.

Organizing Your Volunteers

Ideally, organizing your garden volunteers will be a task for – you guessed it – volunteers! An ongoing volunteer support committee can make recruiting, organizing, training, and scheduling volunteers one of its tasks. While the initial establishment of a volunteer corps can be time consuming, this groundwork will result in an ongoing, dedicated, and reliable group that provides a steady flow of energetic help.

Volunteers will come to you with varying degrees of expertise. Some may have experience with children, some with gardening, and others with both. Provide a short workshop for new volunteers (it can be led by a teacher, aide, or experienced volunteer) covering the hands-on approach to science education, basic gardening practices, safety, discipline, etc.

Let your volunteers observe the class until they feel comfortable supervising a small group on their own. Keep the number of students per volunteer as low as possible.

Regular volunteer meetings will not only allow you to discuss activities and address problems and questions, but will also let the volunteers know how valuable they are to your program. Make volunteer appreciation a major theme of your garden's events.

For more on working with volunteers refer to chapter 10, Working with Volunteers in *Gardens for Learning: Creating and Sustaining Your School Garden* <http://www.csgn.org/page.php?id=36>

Barbara Bonsac, a parent and school garden volunteer coordinator at Palmetto Elementary School, offers these tips on how teachers can best work with volunteers:

1. Encourage volunteers to attend Life Lab workshops www.lifelab.org/workshops/html or other garden-based learning professional development offerings. (View garden-based learning opportunities in California at the California School Garden Network website www.csgn.org. Regional Support Organizations <http://www.csgn.org/page.php?id=42> Event Calendar <http://www.cfaitc.org/eventcalendar/index.php>)
 2. Set meeting times with volunteers to discuss the upcoming unit(s). Discuss lessons and volunteers' tasks (teaching, supervising small groups, or assembling supplies) and set up a schedule.
 3. Give volunteers a copy of relevant garden lessons to review ahead of time.
 4. At some point before the lesson, meet with volunteers to finalize plans.
 5. The day of the lesson, have volunteers arrive a few minutes early to help set up materials for the lesson.
 6. Encourage volunteers to have fun!
 7. Be sure to schedule special events such as potlucks and awards ceremonies to honor the volunteer for all their great work!
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