

RUNNING A SCHOOL GARDENING CLUB

There are as many ways of setting up and running a gardening club as there are school situations and, if the club is to be rewarding and enjoyable, a number of questions need to be addressed before you get started.

WHERE?

Will you be using one area only or several different plots? Will you be using containers instead of or as well as a plot. Will you be working on an established area or choosing a new site specifically for your club? Will your garden plot be combined as a quiet area and therefore need seating and/or Shade? Do you want individual plots (such as a chequer board garden) for the club members and, if so, what size should each plot be (as a guide, one metre square minimum) and how many? What will the plots look like if they're not worked on during the winter? If you are in a position to choose your site remember to take into account the aspect and the access. *Aspect* - a sheltered and sunny site will generally give the best results though you may want to find a few small areas with contrasting growing conditions. *Access* – you will need to consider where tools are to be stored, whether there's an outside tap or rain butt nearby, whether you can create a compost heap near the site and whether children will be able to work on the plot/s unaccompanied. Choosing a site could be a useful activity in itself, looking round the school grounds for suitable areas, using a compass or sundial to find north and south, measuring and mapping the grounds and interviewing other pupils to find out what is wanted.

WHO?

First and foremost, *who is going to run the club?* Whoever takes responsibility, be it a parent, teacher or other friend of the school, they will find it quite a commitment and will need as much help as possible with the workload - possibly on a rota basis so that helpers do not get called on too often. The supervisor will need to have plenty of achievable, practical activities planned so that each session is worthwhile and interesting, whatever the weather and time of year, and will also need to guarantee plants are looked after during holidays (see maintenance). *Which children?* The number of children in the gardening club will probably be determined by the space and amount of helpers available rather than the demand. Will you garden with Key Stage 1 pupils – if so you will need a great deal of help particularly where digging is concerned – or will you restrict membership to the older children? Will they garden alone or share a plot, giving opportunities for co-operation and compromise? Will one year group 'own' the plots for a year and then pass them on to their successors? This can work well if the 'gardeners' are of different years and therefore a continuity of a two year cycle occurs. If the club is over-subscribed, will you limit membership to one term only to give others a chance? Who is responsible for maintaining the existing grounds and do you want them to leave your gardening area/s alone? Important people to get on your side are your caretaker or grounds people and probably the school cleaners if children need access to school after hours.

WHEN?

Is the club going to meet every week, every day, every term? Will they meet during lunchtime, after school or during lesson time? Will there be opportunities for weeding and watering outside regular club hours? What happens when the weather is bad? Is there somewhere the club can use if the weather is wet? If the club continues when the plants are dormant what are they going to do?

MAINTENANCE

Think carefully about this before you start your garden. Many disappointments have occurred due to general neglect. Start with a smaller plot than you planned and see how things go. It is so much easier to expand when things are in control. You may have neighbours, a local gardening club or allotment society who would be happy to help with watering or caring during the holidays. You may have to run a rota of helpers to keep things going during the summer holidays as it is tragic to return in September to see the garden dried up. The 'school grounds services' are often too busy and your garden is unlikely to be in their contract. Watering, feeding and mulching are a very important part of garden maintenance. It will save you hours of time if you mulch in the spring before the weeds appear and if you have it, you can use your own compost for this job.

CONTENT

Will you restrict yourself to 'hands-on' gardening or will you attempt other activities such as garden design and studying the heritage or natural history of the site? Will your club have a philosophy? Will you be environmentally friendly and will you include wildlife gardening in your work? Will you only grow plants to eat or will you grow your own bedding plants? Will you produce plants to sell? Is a record going to be kept of your triumphs and disasters? This could include photographs, a written diary, graphs and charts and will this be an individual or group activity? Will your work include curriculum-related activities? If you want a wildlife area or a pond then ask your county wildlife trust. Here, the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust is very happy to give advice and can be contacted on 01380 725670

FUNDING

Gardening isn't expensive but it does need some basic equipment to make it worthwhile. You can ask for donations from many sources but to avoid being given unsuitable products, be very specific in your requests and also consider safety when accepting tools, seeds and plants. There are grants available for garden-related projects. The Wiltshire Gardens Trust gives small grants (other Garden Trusts may run similar schemes). In this area, Wessex Water help if water is included in the project and there may be local businesses, trusts or organisations (including your own PTA!) that could be approached. If you involve the local community then this can sometimes open up further help. Once set up, your club could try to be self-funding with sales of plants and produce. The RHS runs a competition called the Green Finger Challenge every year encouraging schools and clubs to carry out gardening projects. The W.G.T. have a list of National grants from larger companies. Here in Wiltshire, you can contact The Charities Information Bureau on 01380 729279

SAFETY

Your site investigation should include a survey of the previous uses of the ground over the past few years and your school may ask you to carry out a risk assessment. Adults may need to clear the site before children are included. Talk to the person with responsibility for the grounds and find out if any chemicals have been used on the ground recently or are likely to be used in future. Think about tools, how to carry them, how to use them, are they the correct size for the children? What will be the procedure if someone cuts or hurts him or herself during a club session? Check that the plants you handle are not harmful in any way.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Soil – Digging, clearing of weed roots and stones, raking, sieving, collecting soils samples.

Seeds* – Sowing into prepared soil in flowering position – Some annuals, especially vegetables, grow very quickly and remember that anything sown before the Easter break will need attention during the two-week holiday. Some seeds can be sown in late summer/early autumn for flowering the following year but many can wait until early Spring. Please read seed packets carefully to determine timing and soil type. If you have no garden plots then many plants will tolerate being grown in pots. These can then be cared for at home during the summer. In summer and early autumn look at seed heads, fruits and the many different ways seeds are dispersed. Collect seed heads so you have a supply of seeds the following spring.

Bulbs and corms* – These can give you all year round enjoyment but have many seasons for both planting and flowering. Most spring flowering bulbs are best planted in the autumn but there are exceptions and therefore like seeds, you have to consult reliable sources for the correct timing. The planting depth is important – you need to measure the length of the bulb and multiply it by 3 – i.e. a 4 cm long bulb will need a hole 12 cm deep. You could try ‘writing’ your school’s name or something similar with bulbs though it won’t be legible for long!

Propagation* – Apart from seeds - try making new plants from established shrubs. Take softwood or hardwood cuttings. The timing is important to the success and these need care and attention until established but, if in pots, they can easily be taken home during the holidays. It is often possible to succeed with layering if you have the space. The division of herbaceous plants can be a good autumn task.

Compost * – Make compost and leaf mould containers from old tyres, timber or wire meshing. Most green waste, except the roots of invasive weeds like bindweed and ground elder, (beware white roots!) can be put on the compost heap, including a small amount of grass clippings. ‘Mix’ the contents of the bin occasionally and examine for mini-beasts. Grow nettles or comfrey near the compost site, but well away from your cultivated plot, as they are very invasive. Their leaves (but not their roots) can be added to the heap to activate the rotting down process or you can make your own liquid feed by composting the leaves or steeping them in water. Dilute the ‘juice’ with 10 -20 times the amount of water before use. *Caution - Nettles and comfrey can irritate the skin, please use gloves when handling.* Rake up leaves in autumn before they are thrown away or burned. If you haven’t made a container then put the leaves into black plastic bags, water them then puncture the bags and leave for a year.

Planting containers * – Make sure you have good drainage holes and place large stones or crocks in the base before using a good compost. Plant in spring for a summer term display and in the autumn for winter-flowering varieties. Vegetables, herbs and small shrubs all do well in containers. Do not forget to feed and water them.

Tidying – Keep plots weed-free, remove and cut out any dead material, cut back shrubs that get too big, split perennials that have outgrown their site. Tie in climbers when needed, deadhead plants to give a second flowering, and remember to have time to study and enjoy all your efforts.

INDOOR ACTIVITIES

Soil – Ask children to bring in samples of soil from their own gardens and compare these to the school's soil. Examine soil under a magnifying glass, add it to a jar of water, shake it and watch it settle into layers, put samples in filter paper and see how quickly water filters through.

Seeds – Sow seeds into seed trays to transplant into school's own containers or for sale. Try something different/difficult like orange and apple pips. Compare different types/sizes of seeds, match seeds to their 'mother plant'. Place seed heads upside down in paper bags and wait for seeds to collect in bag, then label and store for use the following year.

Design/Artwork – Make labels and signs (they are good in clay), paint pots and containers, use different containers like wax juice or yoghurt pots. Make a scarecrow and make Christmas decorations from materials found in the grounds. Design, weave and construct willow or hazel plant supports. Write poems or stories about your garden. If you have expert help try making some mosaic paving slabs or stepping stones to use in your garden.

Record keeping – Keep a good scrap-book of all your plans and work. Maybe a diary or photo journal of the club's activities – use a computer if you can and add your news to the school's web site if allowed.

Quizzes – On conditions for growth, parts of the plant (roots, bulbs, leaves etc.) which part of the plant certain foods come from, how far these foods have travelled etc. Recognition of different trees by their leaves or fruits.

Books* - There are many good publications on children gardening that can probably be sourced in your local library. The RHS sends their member schools a free newsletter every term, see below for web site.

And, if funds and help permit, why not take your club on an outing – to a nearby renowned garden or park, a garden centre or a nursery? They'll deserve it after all that hard work....!

- *WGT has a separate information sheet on this subject free to schools in Wiltshire.*

*This Gardening Club leaflet is available to schools outside Wiltshire – please send 4 x First class stamps to:
Mrs Juliet Wilmot, WGT Education Committee, The Garden Lodge, Chittoe, Chippenham, Wilts. SN15 2EW*

Web sites – *A list of some useful and informative sites :-*

www.rhs.org.uk

www.gardenstrusts.org.uk

www.plantscafe.net

www.teachernet.gov.uk/growingschools

www.gardenorganic.org.uk

www.wildlifetrusts.org

www.bbc.co.uk/gardeningwithchildren

www.ltl.org.uk

There is no one way of running a gardening club, but hopefully however you organise it, you will have an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Good Gardening