Building Successful
Garden Education Programs

Whether you work with allotment-style gardens, group gardens, neighborhood gardens, demonstration gardens, or school gardens; whether you hope to teach through formal garden programs or informal signage; whether you're participants are children or adults…

Here are some ideas to put in your box of tools as you're seeking to build strong, successful garden education programs. You can start by asking yourself the following questions.

1) An eye on purpose

A successful program knows its purpose and goals, understands the need to be flexible as priorities and needs shift over time, and always keeps an eye on the people it serves.

- What are the goals and purpose of your garden program?
- How does the structure and content of your program help you serve that purpose?
- What can you do to further align your program's practices with your program's purpose?

2) Strong program coordination

Having someone or a group in charge of making sure that all the pieces of your program fit together and that everyone's kept in-the-loop makes for a happy and healthy program.

- How is your garden program coordinated?
- How are decisions made?
- In what ways are you making sure all those involved are kept in-the-loop?
- What can you do to strengthen your program's organization and coordination?

3) Multiple entry points (for learning & involvement)

Think about all of the possible ways for your gardeners to learn in your garden and all of the potential opportunities for their involvement in the garden. There is value in gardeners connecting to the garden in multiple ways, in various aspects of their lives.

- In what ways do gardeners learn in your garden?
- In what ways are gardeners involved in the garden?
- In what ways can these things intersect?
- Are there more ways you can involve and connect your gardeners?

4) Foster garden "ownership" and leadership

If your gardeners don't actually have their own garden plot, look for ways for your gardeners to take on "ownership" over aspects of the garden. It might help to encourage them to use the garden as a place they can go to on their own time. Also supporting opportunities for gardeners to act in leadership roles, by taking on projects or mentoring others, goes a long way in fostering a strong connection to the garden and the program.

- How does your program foster garden "ownership?"
- How does your program support gardener leadership?
- What more can you do to foster ownership and leadership?

5) Learn by doing

The beauty of garden education is you have the ultimate learning grounds—the garden itself. Don't be afraid to use it to its fullest potential through hands-on, experience-based education.

o In what ways do you use your garden as grounds for learning?
o What does your program or the garden site itself need to encourage more hands-on learning?

6) Broad, community engagement

Think creatively and strategically about who to involve. From organizational partners to watchful neighbors, the support you receive from these groups and people are what keep your program going.

o How is your community already involved?
o Who in your community could enrich your garden program?
o Who in your community could help you meet your program goals?

7) Seek existing resources

When coming up with educational opportunities in your garden it may be wise to spend less of your time creating new programming and curriculum and more of your time seeking out people and groups who are already doing that work and doing it well.

o Who in your community already does what you're trying to do?
o How can you help each other in your missions?

8) Ongoing evaluation

Infusing your program with evaluative tools—before, throughout, and after gardeners participate in your program—will make your program stronger and ensure that you are meeting the needs of your participants.

o What do you already do to evaluate your program?
o What do you already know about the successes and downfalls of your program?
o What do you still want/need to know?
o What are some creative, engaging, and effective ways to evaluate your program?

Related Web Resources

- Vermont Community Garden Network, *Garden Organizer Toolkit*
  www.vcgn.org
- Cornell University Cooperative Extension, *Cornell Garden-Based Learning*
  http://blogs.cornell.edu/garden/
- The US Botanic Garden and Chicago Botanic Garden, *School Garden Wizard*
  http://www.schoolgardenwizard.org/