



© Annette McFarlane

## School Gardens – Frequently Asked Questions

Updated 27 July 2023

### **Are there any suggestions when getting a garden started/restarted? Any must do things?**

- Start small. Grow herbs. Garden in containers
- Perfect your compost making techniques. If it is rotting and smelly, it is not compost
- Generously enrich the soil in a small area and expand the garden as materials and time allow
- Convert an existing ornamental bed for food growing
- Engage with other teachers and recruit volunteers. Not everyone loves gardening and other colleagues may not share your enthusiasm. Just start your own class garden anyway.

### **Where do I get soil for gardens?**

- Landscape soils are 'soil-less' potting mix products that contain composted green waste and bark, sand, clinker (coal waste), animal manure and other ingredients allowed under Australian Standards
- Prices vary from around \$80 - \$120 per cubic metre plus delivery. You get what you pay for.
- Also consider no-dig garden preparation, particularly if you are not filling raised garden beds.

### **Can I use local animal manure if available?**

- All manure must be fully composted before use. Take the same precautions as you would handling soil and compost.

### **What natural fertilisers, animal manures and compost can be used for vegetable gardens in schools.**

- Compost can be boosted with blood and bone or any organic fertiliser
- Liquid from worm farms can provide some nutrients, but mostly add beneficial soil microbes
- Supplement growth with organic liquid fertilisers and seaweed for increase root growth, heat and cold tolerance and disease resistance. Apply at least fortnightly.

### **What can I buy to improve the soil in existing beds?**

- Compost, composted animal manures, blood and bone, hoof and horn meal and other animal waste by-products
- Natural crushed rock, dolomite, gypsum, lime, rock and guano phosphate, rock potash and sulfate of potash, sulfur and bentonite
- Seaweed, fish meal and fish waste extracts
- Lucerne, pea straw, coir peat and other plant by-products
- Wood ash and wood products such as sawdust and bark from untreated sources, plus biochar
- Worm castings and liquid from worm farms
- Zeolite, Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) and trace elements.

### **Do you recommend wicking gardens in schools?**

- Wicking gardens save water during dry periods and are ideal for inland regions. They can remain wet and poorly drained during prolonged rainy periods in the coastal subtropics
- Ensure all wicking gardens have an overflow plus a tap that drains the water reservoir completely
- Flush the reservoir at least twice each year to prevent stale, smelly water.

**Do you bother growing food in very hot weather? What happens to the garden during holidays - especially over the hot summer?**

- Garden early in the morning or for shorter periods when it is hot
- Install irrigation systems with a programable timer. Install a 'lock box safe' (available from Bunnings over the timer to prevent tampering or theft)
- Over summer you can put the garden to rest with a layer of compost topped with mulch
- Alternatively, plant sweet potatoes, pumpkins, watermelons, rosella bushes or perennial crops that can be harvested when school returns.

**What crops provide the best value for harvest?**

- Herbs – rosemary, oregano, thyme, onion and garlic chives, parsley, lemon grass, basil, bay, lemon myrtle
- In season leafy greens – spinach (all types), silver beet, lettuce, bok/pak choy, kale
- Cherry tomatoes, spring onions (plant bottoms of supermarket bunches)
- Sweet potatoes, ginger, turmeric, galangal and other hardy root crops.

**What vegetables are easy to grow in bulk to maximise as many students as possible getting to taste fresh from the plant?**

- Always wash any harvest before eating
- Leafy greens and cherry tomatoes provide a good repeat harvest
- Herbs go a long way and can be used to flavour easy mini herb muffins and pancakes
- Lettuce and spinach greens can be added to these and other baked dishes.

**What are natural low-toxic ideas for pest control in the garden?**

- Use pest and disease outbreaks as learning opportunities
- See School Gardens DIY Pest Control
- See School Gardens Off the Self Pest Control

**What is a good plant/ flower/ herb to plant with vegies to keep away pests?**

- Grow a range of vegetables and flowers with different scents and attributes to confuse pests
- Grow regionally/seasonally appropriate varieties known to be pest and disease resistant
- Rotate crops and create habitats for lizards and beneficial insects
- Add a child-safe water feature for beneficial insects and small birds
- Accept minor imperfections in your harvest
- Identify good and annoying insects from those that completely destroy a crop
- Keep records of pests and diseases including when they occur and on what crops
- Take preventative measures, plant at a different time or grow a different crop next term.

**When would be the best time of the year to plant young fruit trees?**

- Plant any time you can dedicate effort to followup watering
- Plant when soil has been well prepared several months in advance. Consider making compost heaps or placing bottomless compost bins where future fruit tree plantings are planned
- Dig a deep hole and check drainage and compaction. Grow pigeon peas to break up the soil
- Consider lemons, limes, mandarins, Dwarf Ducasse bananas and passionfruit
- Fruiting trees/vines may need to be covered with netting to protect crops from birds and possums.

## **How do you embed gardening at school? How do we keep momentum and learning going, after funding has gone, keeping it simple and easy for teachers who have lots going on?**

- Simply going it alone with your own class is an acceptable outcome
- Adopt a whole of school focus with the principal and staff on-board with the concept.
- Staff who hate gardening may be prepared to contribute in less hands-on gardening tasks – stories, artwork, seed saving, supervision, cooking etc.
- Engage with grounds staff. Build ongoing relationships with garden club volunteers, suppliers, parents, grandparents, retirement villages, seed saving groups, permaculture groups, local community gardens etc for support
- Document what you do when, (successes/ failures), so that new teachers/volunteers can easily replicate positive experiences.

## **How do you maintain bananas?**

- Buy Dwarf Ducasse from a nursery. It is illegal to plant donated suckers
- Keep pruned to three stems – one mature fruiting stem, one semi- mature and one new sucker
- Cut excess suckers to the ground. Prevent reshooting by applying hand sanitizer to the cut surface
- Apply plenty of compost and fertiliser.

## **How do you grow paw paw trees?**

- Plant self-fertile trees
- In SE Qld coastal areas, plant close to building where they receive protection and radiated heat
- Fertilise monthly from September until March
- Dwarf varieties are available that can be grown from seed

## **What fertiliser can be used on bush tucker gardens?**

- Most general organic fertiliser and compost are suitable for bush tucker plants.
- Feed phosphorous sensitive native plants like grevillea, banksia and macadamia with native plant fertiliser or use less expensive lawn fertiliser as it is low in phosphorous
- Lemon myrtle, salt bush, Qld Davidson plum, riberry (small leaf lillypilly) and finger limes (although prickly) are productive bush tucker plants.

## **How do you control beetle infestations in gardens?**

- Pick off by hand. Spray with molasses (1tablespoon per litre of water with a few drops of liquid soap).
- Dust foliage lightly with gypsum or wood ash. Apply natural pyrethrum spray.
- Beetles are generally most problematic in tomatoes, potatoes, eggplants and capsicum.

## **Need More Information?**

Register for the Pick of the Crop program and get help from your regional co-ordinator. See

<https://hw.qld.gov.au/blog/pick-of-the-crop-is-back-in-2022-and-were-getting-bigger-and-better>

See Organic Vegetable Gardening - online edition available via [www.scisdata.com](http://www.scisdata.com)

See Organic Fruit Growing by Annette McFarlane

Visit [www.annettemcfarlane.com](http://www.annettemcfarlane.com)

Email: [questions@annettemcfarlane.com](mailto:questions@annettemcfarlane.com)

The Department of Agriculture and Fisheries has good online guides for vegetable and fruit tree growing.