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Getting Started -- Ingredients for a New Outdoor Classroom

Ingredients:

- Small group of enthusiastic adults
- Sunny spot with access to a water source
- Funding for materials
- Basic organic gardening knowledge

To ensure long-term success, a committed group, or “Green Team,” is necessary to start an outdoor classroom. Committee members should be willing to devote a minimum of two hours every week during the school year. Ideally, your Green Team should include staff, parents, a horticultural advisor and community volunteers. An administrator and grounds/maintenance staff member should be involved in important decisions such as design and location.

The other key elements are a physical site, funding and knowledge. Since 1994, Urban Harvest has helped dozens of school gardens. Our “*How to Start a Community or School Garden*” class is held twice each month. It covers the basic steps to creating a garden, support services and tips for success. Visit the *Classes* section of our website or call us to find out when the next class is being held.

Steps to Creating a Successful Outdoor Classroom That Will Stand the Test of Time

Gary Edmondson, Urban Harvest staff, 2005 (updated 6/13)

Over the past years I have had the opportunity to work with many outdoor classroom gardens. During this same time period, I have taught about the essentials needed to keep a garden going. However, as director of the After School programs during this past year, I have had the opportunity to more directly experience what it takes to build, operate and maintain outdoor classroom gardens. Each of our seven 21st Century Program locations established vegetable beds. Some have habitat areas and fruit trees, and a few have ponds. This experience has made me keenly aware of what makes an outdoor classroom operate smoothly.

Form a Team of Teachers

A team of teachers, parents and members of the community are needed. They need to decide which curriculum objectives they want to reinforce and then decide what resources

are needed within the garden in order to accomplish those goals. An outdoor classroom garden becomes a learning opportunity only when teachers are capable of seeing how curriculum objectives can be taught in the outdoor classroom.

Many times schools come to the *How to Start* class because there is a teacher or several teachers who are interested in nutrition or the environment. While this is good, it does not necessarily guarantee continued use of the garden by staff at the school. A team of many individuals is needed to establish curriculum links to the garden, find funding, set up volunteers, and provide knowledge on gardening and maintenance of the garden.

Link to Curriculum Objectives

There are a wide variety of potential lessons possible in the outdoor classroom. Teachers need lessons that are accomplishing their state objectives (TEKS), and it is therefore necessary to find lessons in the outdoor classroom that are directly correlated to those objectives.

- 1) *Science*: There are many science objectives that can be accomplished in the garden. Learning about soil, plants, insects and other critters all becomes possible even when very small environments are created. With a pond it is possible to study water quality as well as observe life within this environment. Above all, when a garden of any type is created, environmental education becomes something the student can both observe and directly interact with.
- 2) *Math*: There are many real life examples of math in the garden that include adding, subtracting multiplying, dividing, measuring, estimating, fractions, and percentages.
- 3) *Social Studies*: It becomes real when we can talk about and experience the food from other cultures. Also, of course this is also a great way to talk about and experience nutrition.
- 4) *Language Arts*: Language development is the foundation of science. Students need all of the language to compare, describe, question, summarize, restate, or place items in chronological order.

Knowledge and Skill

While we strongly recommend that at least one teacher on staff becoming educated through Urban Harvest's many classes, it is frequently not possible for a teacher to take the time for that education. Therefore finding someone within the community who has that knowledge is frequently best. Finding a parent, a member of the community, or a business partner are several ways to accomplish this goal.

Size of the Project

Always build to accomplish your teaching objectives, and do not include elements that are not part of your objectives. If your goal is to study pond ecology, then a pond is all you need. If you are studying math, then vegetable beds are the only element

needed. If your primary goal is nutrition, then fruit trees and vegetable beds are the needed elements, and if you decide to study insects, then build a native habitat.

Maintenance as it Applies to Size

Maintenance is achieved by having a large team of people sharing the responsibility. The reason you should only build the elements needed for teaching objectives, is that every extra bit requires maintenance, and the amount of time and effort expands quickly. If you do not have a group of teachers or a plan in place for the maintenance of a pond, habitat, fruit trees, vegetable garden or other elements, then it is not appropriate to include these extra elements in your outdoor classroom.

If no one in your team is willing to coordinate the maintenance or figure out a plan for the maintenance of vegetable beds, then do not include vegetable beds. Vegetable beds are for the most part annual plants that die each season and therefore require a lot of maintenance. By all means do not build a large habitat area to support your vegetable garden. While having flowers and attracting insects are a part of vegetable gardening, it is not necessary to have large beds or areas surrounding the garden.

Vegetable beds that are 10 feet and not more than 20 feet in length and 4 feet in width are about the right size for a classroom. Even then a teacher needs assistance on the maintenance of these beds both during the school year and the summer. It may be more sensible for several different classes to share the beds on a seasonal basis. For example a class may start in the fall and plant the garden and continue using the beds through February and then another class can use the beds until the end of the school year; and perhaps a summer school program can continue with the beds in June.

Be aware of the watering demands, as well as the need to take out weeds. This is particularly true during the first few years of establishing a habitat garden. Especially for the first two years in drier and hotter periods of the year, it takes routine watering to establish trees and shrubs. Newly planted vegetable seeds need to be watered every day, preferably even on weekends. Some of the easiest things to have outdoors are a compost bin, fruit trees or a small habitat area. In general it is best to start small.

General Maintenance

While maintenance has been mentioned previously, I cannot over emphasize the importance of designing your garden so that maintenance is kept to a minimum. The more grassy edge you have on gardens and beds the more maintenance is needed. You might be able to achieve some of the maintenance by the school district yard crews, but they often kill fruit trees by hitting them with an edger. Also the size of your project will directly impact maintenance.

No matter what size garden you have there is a need for weeding and watering especially when you are first establishing the outdoor classroom. Letting weeds get out of control causes a great deal of disappointment to gardeners. Therefore, make

sure you maintain control of this aspect of your project by starting with a design and plan for maintaining the garden.

Seeking outside assistance and expertise from Urban Harvest and other organizations such as Fisheries and Wildlife or National Wildlife Federation are especially important during the design phase. Having parents and business partners who are able to assist you with the maintenance of your garden is essential! Teachers by themselves with students, especially in the elementary grades, are not capable of maintaining gardens on their own, unless the project is very small.

Funding

I saved funding for last largely because if you have a good plan in place, which has been established by your team, it becomes very easy to prove to a potential funder that you are going to be capable of impacting your students in a positive way. That really is the key to finding grants. But before you even consider grants, take a look around your community. Find out about the employers of parents as well as spouses of teachers. It is sometimes possible to find a corporate sponsor through these sources. This is by far the easiest way to find funding!

Unless you have some kind of relationship to a business, it is frequently more difficult to find money. There are however some small grants available locally that do not require an enormous amount of time energy. Some of the places to look first are national chain stores (Lowe's, Home Depot, Whole Foods, etc.) & local garden associations.

Some schools have festivals where they raise money and I have no doubt that there are many other strategies that have worked for schools as well. National Wildlife Federation has a Schoolyard Habitats program - check their website for more information. Just letting everyone around you know what you want can also attract unexpected donors or sponsors. This is an extensive topic and deserves a more comprehensive article in the future.

Conclusion

I have covered the essentials to creating a sustainable outdoor classroom, but what really holds all of this together is taking time to build a support system and taking the time to communicate with everyone who is going to be a part of your project. Above all else make it fun and plan celebrations of your accomplishments at all stages of development. Make sure you properly thank your donors and let them see and hear what you have accomplished at each stage of development.

For further exploration of how to start a community garden, attend our class, *"How to Start a Community or School Garden."* Better yet, get a group of people from your school to attend.