FLORIDA Wildflower FOUNDATION

Seedlings for Schools Grant Program

Introduction to Wildflower Gardening

Starting your school garden

School gardens can become outdoor classrooms that help teachers engage students to tap their inner young naturalist intelligence. In fact, real-life garden experiences have been shown to contribute to student comprehension and increase achievement scores.

Through the garden, students can become active participants and gain an understanding of plant and animal life cycles, ecosystems and appreciation of nature. Plan to use your garden to provide hands-on learning for plant-related science, soil and water conservation, weather, ecosystems, natural history, insects and wildlife. Use it to teach connection with nature, positive reinforcement, and how to learn from negative experience (such as forgetting to water plants on a hot day). As a bonus your garden also can teach patience and responsibility, instill a positive work ethic, build classroom relationships, improve teamwork and strengthen school spirit.

And, of course, your garden will help beautify the school's environment and build pride!

Planning your garden

Take time to develop an outline of your vision. How will the garden benefit your students? What steps will you take to develop the garden? How will you use it as a teaching tool? Will you need storage space? How about a place to sit? How will you provide water to the garden? Who can take care of the garden during breaks and vacations?

Create your "Garden Team"

Develop your support network by creating a "Garden Team" that includes other teachers, school maintenance staff, parents and community volunteers. It is important to gain the support of your school administrator. Recruit your principal to help promote the garden to your school and community and, perhaps, to help find other resources.

Envision how your volunteers will participate and what their responsibilities will be — planning, implementing, maintaining or helping in all stages. Plan how often and when your team will meet. Designate yourself or another volunteer as the garden coordinator. Follow up with volunteers so they feel they are an important part of the team.

Your team can help you set goals and provide ideas for integrating the garden into the curriculum. Create situations to work cooperatively and use cross-generational connections to provide social interactions that allow asking questions and the sharing of thoughts. Gardening work can turn into fun while helping to develop a lifelong love of gardening.

What does a wildflower garden look like?

Wildflower gardens come in all shapes and sizes. A 10-by-10-foot garden is a good size with which to start. Make your garden practical and functional. Use pathways to lead visitors through it, and plan where students will sit during discussions. Then list the steps and tools needed for preparation. Mark out your garden with flags, survey tape, orange spray paint or even an old hose.

Tips on garden management

Wildflower seedlings and plants can be planted almost any time of year but usually thrive if planted in fall or spring. Some species will flower in fall and others in spring to create yearlong habitat

for wildlife. Wildflowers planted in fall will develop strong root systems and be ready to continue their growth in spring. Wildflowers planted in spring (after the last frost is expected) will require extra water as weather gets warmer and dries out the soil.

At planting time, consider the mature size of the plants and allow space between them for growth. Dig planting holes twice as wide as the rootbaall, and plant at the same depth as they were growing in their pots. Always water thoroughly after planting and one or two times a week, (depending on rainfall), applying 1/2-inch of water at a time. Several empty cans placed in the garden while watering can help determine this amount. Use a ruler to check water level. Do NOT overwater your wildflowers.

You will probably see weeds started by wind-blown seeds or deposited by birds. Identify weeds and remove by hand — be sure to pull out the roots. Some gardeners mulch to reduce unwanted weeds. We suggest only a light layer of pine straw or leaves that will gradually compost. Fertilizer should not be needed.

Some wildflowers are annuals living only one season. These plants will reappear in your garden if you let their seeds naturally ripen and fall to open ground. (Seeds can also be collected and stored in paper bags for other planting projects.) Most wildflowers, however, are perennials and will live three to five years or longer. After wildflower seeds have been dispersed, the old stem can be removed by cutting at the base. The stem will eventually decompose, but cutting it will improve the look of the plant and may promote a second round of blooming on some plant species.

Remember, although your garden may look dead, there may be eggs and larva of beneficial insects overwintering in its debris. Many roots will survive through the winter and produce sprouts next season, so don't pull out plants that only need trimming. Be patient and learn to love the garden in all its natural seasons.

Tips on classroom management

- Establish garden rules. Students need simple rules that may include walking on pathways and asking before picking a flower.
- Demonstrate proper use of tools, and rotate garden responsibilities among students.
- Work in groups and allow time for the free exploration that can develop individual interest.
- Consider having a first-aid kit on hand to treat scrapes or insect bites.