Other considerations and recommendations

Those planning and planting the school garden should review your school's rules and regulations. Some plants that can cause serious allergic reactions may be prohibited.

If the garden is near parking areas or other high-traffic zones, consider testing for contaminants before growing fruits and vegetables. Many states have agriculture extension services that can help with this. If building a raised-bed garden, consider purchasing soil meant for food production from an established retail entity to ensure soil safety and traceability.

If your school has a composting program for cafeteria waste, use the resulting compost for flowers, ornamental plants and trees rather than for garden beds where food is grown. Compost that comes from garden waste can be applied to food-growing beds if deemed appropriate by the school garden supervisor and/or compost coordinator.

Be sure to coordinate with school grounds-keeping or custodial staff about your garden's goals, protocols and maintenance plan. If you are concerned about the presence of pesticides on or near your garden, be sure to communicate that, too. Consider using your school garden as an educational tool that can teach students about food safety procedures and incorporate curricula that teach to these issues in your garden educational plan.

Be sure that your school garden program is aligned with any relevant school district policies including, but not limited to, wellness policies, school procedures for receiving gifts and donations, working with parent and community volunteers, and liability policies.

"Last week we had a salad with lettuce from the greenhouse. It was amazing to know that we had grown some of that food...If I hadn't done this in school I never would have done this. I'm glad that I did." 8th Grader

These best practices were created as a collaborative effort among school garden practitioners from across the country. Thanks to Kelly Erwin, Deb Habib, Tegan Hagy, Noli Hoye, Dana Hudson, Marion Kalb, Emily Jackson, Catherine Sands, and Amy Winston. This was created with the support of the National Farm to School Network www.farmtoschool.org

Fresh, Healthy, and Safe Food:

Best Practices for Using Produce from School Gardens

School Gardens serve as exciting living laboratories and are an important component of Farm to School efforts. The bounty from school gardens can contribute to the school cafeteria, students' families, or be used in classroom and afterschool taste-testing activities.

The following practices are intended to provide basic food safety guidelines for those involved with school gardens. They include principles from Good Agricultural Practices and safe food handling procedures and are intended to serve as a framework that may easily be adapted to meet individual school settings and regional requirements. The safety benefits of fresh food grown on site include the avoidance of potential contamination that accompanies long-distance travel (where products frequently change hands) and control over the supply chain direct from garden to table.

Safe handling information should be provided to students, teachers, and others involved in growing, harvesting, and preparing. In addition to the many benefits of fresh food, healthy activity, and learning, your school garden can be an educational tool that helps teach students about food safety procedures.

"We were able to plant the spinach and then we ate the spinach and that was really great." 1st Grader

"Between the excitement introduced into the curriculum, the nutritional benefits, the hands on sense of accomplishment and the sense of pride, the school has never had such a wonderful opportunity to integrate learning and connect it to real life." Teacher

Growing Practices

All organic matter should be fully composted in aerobic conditions and at high temperatures prior to application. Avoid raw manure and limit composted manure to what can be purchased from a commercial outlet to ensure traceability.

When using water for irrigation make sure it is potable and from a tested source. Check with your state cooperative extension or state health offices for simple testing kits.

If soil used for growing is coming from school property, test for contaminants before planting. Testing kits are usually available through your state same as water testing above.

There are many places to purchase seeds for your school garden, so be conscious of where your seeds come from and consider source and quality. Look for those that are preferably non-genetically modified, and come from companies that have taken a “safe seed pledge.”

No synthetic pesticides or herbicides should be used, preventing toxic residue on food and avoiding human and environmental exposure to pesticides.

Materials used for garden beds, containers, stakes or trellises should be constructed of non-toxic, non-leaching material (no pressure treated wood or used tires).

Harvesting and Handling

Students, staff, parents or volunteers involved in harvesting should wash hands thoroughly in warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds prior to harvesting. Anyone with open cuts or wounds on their extremities should not participate in harvest until they have healed.

All harvesting tools--scissors, bowls, tubs--should be food-grade and/or food service approved and designated solely for harvest and food handling. The tools should be cleaned regularly with hot water and soap, then dried.

School Garden produce delivered for use in a school cafeteria should be received and inspected by food service personnel upon delivery with the same system used to receive and inspect all other incoming products.

If storage is necessary, produce should be cooled and refrigerated promptly after harvest. Temperatures vary on type of produce being harvested; specific post-harvest storage and transportation temperatures can be found at http://postharvest.ucdavis.edu/produce/storage/index.shtm

School Garden produce should be washed according to the same standards that the cafeteria has in place for conventionally received produce. A person with ServSafe or comparable food-safety certification should supervise students, parents, or staff who participate in any food preparation--i.e., taste-testings or special cafeteria events.