

MAINTENANCE

Introduction

Gardens require regular maintenance. Living plants need regular “tender loving care” almost every day when they are young. Do not expect the school ground maintenance personnel to maintain the garden. They may help in the initial process of getting started by digging up the garden plot, erecting a fence, or clearing the area of large weeds and brush.

School Year Maintenance

During the school year, the students can perform most of the general garden maintenance. These tasks include weeding, watering, adding mulch, removing spent blossoms and dead plant material, and, of course, harvesting crops.

Once the students are trained, have some experience, and gain confidence by working in the garden, less supervision by the teacher or garden volunteers will be required. Many students will assume a sense of ownership of their garden and will take considerable pride in its appearance. Students who keep up the appearance of their garden could be recognized with a “Garden of the Week” sign or a “blue ribbon” flag placed in their garden plot. Children and adults learn best when they are having a good time in the garden. Find ways to make these tasks fun. Who can find the most weeds, the biggest, the smallest, or the most different kinds?

Summer Break Maintenance

Some schools are closed during the summer months. Without any maintenance during this time, a garden will quickly become overgrown with weeds. Weeds that are drought resistant will soon take over the entire garden even without irrigation. This is not a major problem as there are several methods to manage the garden during the summer break.

Volunteers

One method of maintaining the garden during the summer months is to enlist several volunteers to spend a few hours a week weeding and watering while school is not in session. [Click here for suggestions on how to recruit and train volunteers.](#)



A big advantage in having a summer volunteer staff is that the garden should be nearly weed free and ready to plant in September when the school year begins. A few students may also volunteer to drop by their garden in the summer months just to look after things. An arrangement should be made with school security for both adult and/or student volunteers to have access to the garden areas during the summer. If the volunteers and students are willing, a scheduled time may be set up for the summer garden crew to work together.

Mulch

Cover the garden beds with black plastic or a two to four inch layer of mulch to exclude light to keep weeds from growing. Materials like compost or wood shavings can be mixed in the soil when you are ready to plant.

Solarization

Solarization is an easy method for controlling weeds for a few months. This requires the removal of all vegetation from the garden plot, tilling the soil and watering thoroughly. Then, completely cover the ground with a clear plastic sheet for at least six weeks. The sun's rays will heat the ground under the plastic and kill germinating weed seeds, insects and some soil diseases. Secure the plastic sheet around the edges with boards or rocks to keep the wind from blowing it off. Inspect the garden every couple of weeks to insure the plastic remains in place.



When school begins remove the plastic and the gardening program starts with a nearly clear soil. One disadvantage of solarization is that beneficial earthworms will migrate to deeper cooler soil. They will return gradually or can be easily reintroduced.

Cover Crops

Planting a cover crop is an alternate way to prepare the garden for the summer months. This technique also requires the removal of all vegetation. The entire garden is then planted with a legume, such as clover. Next fall, use a power tiller to dig the cover crop into the ground. This adds valuable organic matter and nitrogen to the soil. Since the cover crop needs to grow over the summer, some irrigation is required. An automatic irrigation system reduces the need for a person to hand water.

Cover cropping, sometimes referred to as “green manure”, is widely practiced by commercial growers. Solarization is preferred over cover crops among home and school gardeners because less effort is required to prepare soil for planting when school begins.

Waste Disposal

When the students are first introduced to the garden program, include garden waste recycling in their instruction. There will be a small amount of trash such as paper and plastic fertilizer bags and discarded pots that may be handled in the school's trash recycle program. Most vegetation from the garden can be placed in the compost bins that should be present in every garden. Do not add any weeds with seed to the compost pile because most compost bins do not get hot enough to kill the seeds. Dispose of diseased or woody plant materials in trash containers. Locate containers for all the trash and recycled materials in the garden area for easy student use. Make arrangements for periodic pick-up of the disposed materials.

When the garden is cleared at the end of the gardening season or school year, make provisions to dispose of a large amount of vegetative material if the volume of material exceeds the capacity of the compost bins. Keep in mind that good housekeeping of the garden area is important, as its appearance will add greatly to the students' sense of pride and ownership.