

How Can I Possibly Manage 30 Kids Outdoors in a Garden?

Outdoor classroom management is an integral part of a successful school garden program. Many teachers find it challenging to work with their classes outside because of students' high energy and the distractions that exist outdoors. When we are able to channel students' energy and enthusiasm toward focused learning activities, however, and use "distractions" -- such as spider webs, birdcalls, or ripe strawberries -- as teaching tools, then the garden becomes an exceptionally effective and exciting space for learning. Ultimately, a well-managed garden provides teachers with new ways to motivate students and demonstrate concepts, and provides students with abundant opportunities to explore the natural world, apply skills learned in multiple academic areas, discover the joys of healthy eating, and work together. Educators have identified the following management strategies for making garden-based learning effective and enjoyable.

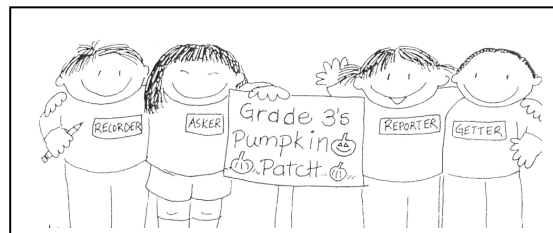
Perceptions

The school garden is a unique learning environment, with activities that are usually more structured than recess, but also often more physical and open-ended than those done in the classroom. In order to set the tone of this new learning environment:

- Design the garden so that it is easy for students to follow the rules. For example, make pathways wide, mark beds clearly, and create a labeled and organized space to store all tools.
- When introducing the garden, use language that reflects the goals of the space, such as "garden classroom" or "living laboratory."
- Create and follow predictable routines, such as starting each class by gathering in a circle to talk about the main idea and activities for the day, and review behavior expectations.
- To foster the perception of the garden as something to look forward to ...
 - Start your year out with something highly engaging, like harvesting and eating Six Plant Part Burritos or feeding the worms in the worm bin.
 - Provide plentiful opportunities for students to harvest and eat from the garden, and also to use tools they can manage.
 - Look for opportunities to provide students with choices. They may be able to choose, for example, which chore to work on or which seeds to plant.

Personal Relationships

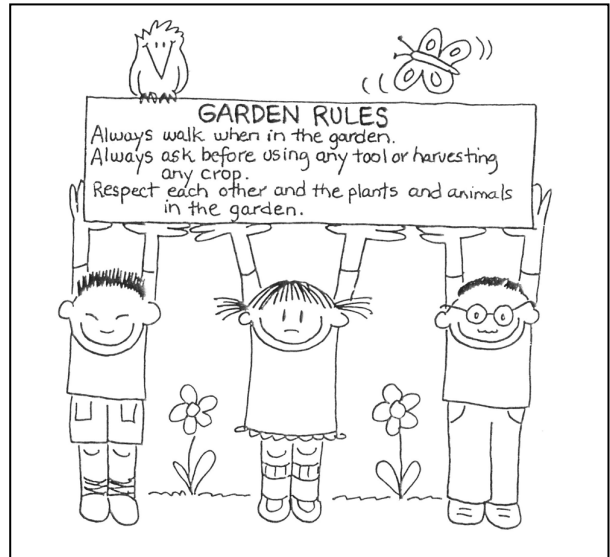
- Give students opportunities to practice cooperative learning skills, such as listening and sharing responsibilities. The first chapter of The Growing Classroom is full of activities designed to encourage these behaviors.
- Divide students into small groups for hands-on activities. In some instances, all the groups might be doing the same thing in different parts of the garden. In other instances, you might have multiple stations for groups to rotate through.



Parameters

Clarify for yourself and then for your students what types of behaviors are appropriate in the school garden, and how expectations and consequences will be similar and/or different from in the classroom. For example, informal conversation is often more welcome in a school garden than in a classroom, but put downs are not allowed in either location.

- Discuss the importance of staying safe and respecting all living things, including plants, animals, one another, and the adults in the garden. Enlist students' ideas to establish a simple list of garden rules toward this end, as in the illustrated sample.
- When using tools, establish and model safe use of those specific tools. Some sample tool rules include:
 - Keep the pointed end below your knee at all times.
 - Always walk when moving with a tool.
 - Clean and put tools away when finished working.
- Establish a call back signal, such as a coyote howl or a ringing gong, to let students know when it is time to rotate groups or return to the circle.
- Help students stay comfortable: When you're addressing the group, wear a sunhat and look into the sun so that they won't have to. A shaded gathering area can be very helpful. Also consider other equipment, such as work gloves for hands and carpet squares for kneeling or sitting on the ground.



Participation

- Make sure that everyone in a group has a clear task. For example, a group building a compost pile might have a browns team, a greens team, a soil team, etc.
- Balance quiet, reflective activities with active, hands-on activities.
- When possible, use support from other school staff, parent or community volunteers, university students, or other invested adults to reduce the adult-to-student ratio in the garden.
- Consider buddying a younger class with an older class for cross-age-tutoring out in the garden.

Be Prepared

- In addition to your planned activities, have a set of "back pocket activities" ready to go, in case a student or group finishes their task early or requires some redirection. See the Back Pocket handout for ideas.
- Keep a first aid kit, sunscreen, and drinking water in your garden.