

Working & Learning in the Garden With Students

Below are some specific tips for applying the general principles outlined in the Reframing Classroom Management section of this guide within a garden setting. Please refer to page p. 79 for an overview of the 4 Ps.

Personal Relationships

Depending on the location, some gardens can offer big open spaces for physical team-building or icebreaker activities, such as Extreme Rock Paper Scissors. This and many other icebreakers are described at icebreakers.ws.

Perceptions

Students will be more focused in the garden if they genuinely understand that the garden is a classroom. Consider calling it an *outdoor classroom* or *garden classroom*.

Just like inside the classroom, students respond well to consistent routines. Here are a few examples that many veteran garden educators use every time they head out into the space:

- Before heading out to the garden (or at the garden gate), review the Garden Agreements or behavior expectations.
- Before sending students out to explore in the garden, establish clear physical boundaries and teach a “callback.” This could be a bell or chime that you ring, a coyote howl that you call out, or the like. When students explore, they are expected to stay inside the boundaries, and when they hear the callback, they are expected to come back

together.

- Start every garden lesson with a brief, exploratory activity. This can often serve as the Engage and/or Explore portion of a 5-Es lesson plan. It can be as simple as sending students out to look for three things that have changed since the last time they were there. When students arrive in the garden, their attention is naturally drawn to the surroundings, so it makes sense to capitalize on that rather than trying to resist it.
- When you’re ready to engage in a whole-group discussion, take the time to gather in a circle (ideally in an established gathering area), and wait until it is quiet so that everyone can see and hear one another. You might do this to go over the plan for the rest of the lesson with your students, have them share discoveries they made, ask thought-provoking questions, introduce new concepts or vocabulary, explain the flow of stations, or that kind of thing. This will often be relevant during the Explain portion of a 5-Es lesson.
- At the end of the lesson, during the Elaborate and Evaluate portions of a 5-Es lesson, you will often be asking questions about both the content of the lesson (e.g., Why are flowers important to plants?) and the experience (i.e., How did we work well together today? What can we work on in the future?). For this conversation, gather again in a circle, and, again, wait until it is quiet to begin so that everyone can see and hear one another.

Parameters

On the one hand, working with students outside in a garden setting can be wonderfully engaging, invigorating, and heartwarming. On the other hand, it can also be tremendously challenging. In part this is because students usually go outside during the school day for recess, so their idea of behavior expectations outdoors are quite different from inside the classroom. It is essential to establish clear behavior expectations with students for their garden or outdoor classroom, which is different from the indoor classroom but also different from the playground.

When you first meet your students, we recommend establishing a set of behavior expectations for the garden. When students are part of the process of establishing these expectations, they are more likely to understand and uphold them. See the “Developing Group Agreements” section of this guide for strategies on establishing behavior expectations together.

The following is a set of behavior expectations commonly used in school gardens:

- Respect the plants, the animals, the nonliving things, and the people in the garden.
- Ask before using any tool or picking anything.
- Walk on the pathways in the garden.

In addition, if relevant, you and your students can create specific expectations for using garden tools, such as the following:

- Use tools for their intended purpose only.
- Keep the sharp end below the knee.
- Walk with tools.
- Always put tools away when finished.

If you post a list of your Garden Agreements prominently, then all students, teachers, volunteers, and visitors to the garden can see them and review them regularly.

Participation

As with any activity, your garden lessons will be more engaging and less chaotic if everyone has a meaningful way to contribute and participate. We often engage in “inefficiency by design.” For example, a home gardener would never water her garden by filling a little yogurt container at the kitchen sink, walking outside to pour it onto a plant, and then returning to the sink to refill her cup. That would be incredibly inefficient! If you have thirty little students, however, all eager to help water, this is a great way to give everyone a chance to get involved. These are other similar examples: Preparing the soil in a garden bed with a whole class of students by using trowels instead of large spades and rakes or delivering compost by small buckets instead of using a wheelbarrow.

In addition, service members can use a variety of creative strategies to make their class sizes more manageable in the garden, including bringing in additional adults, using small-group cooperative learning, and rotating activity stations.

Many service members manage class time in the school garden by increasing the adult-to-student ratio. Enlist the support of the classroom teacher during your garden lessons. In addition, if possible, ask a volunteer who is trained and comfortable working with students to help regularly. While the classroom teacher and/or volunteers help manage gardening activities, such as weeding or watering with part of the class, you can present a more complex garden lesson or activity with another, smaller group, and then invite students to rotate through the stations. In addition to supervising garden tasks, classroom teachers and volunteers are often easily able, with minimal prep, to jump into reading a story aloud or supervising scavenger hunts or observation activities, so these all make good station rotations for small groups.

Small-group cooperative learning and station rotations are especially effective in the school garden setting. For example, in the fourth grade Garden Grids FoodCorps lesson, there are three groups working simultaneously: one is planning a square foot garden on a worksheet, one is planting a square foot garden, and one is working on a garden chore such as weeding.

Providing for Students' Physical Comfort

Students will have an easier time focusing on lessons and garden tasks if they are not distracted by physical discomforts. For instance, it will be much easier for them to look at you and listen to you if you stand so that the sun is in *your* eyes, not theirs. This means that, when you circle up, you should be looking into the sun to ensure that the students don't have to (of course, you can wear a sun hat to protect your eyes).

Making sure students are warm enough or have a shady spot to retreat to in hot weather can make a big difference too. Bring out a first-aid kit with Band-Aids and sunscreen and a water cooler where students can fill water bottles, cups, etc. Provide clipboards when students will be writing in the garden. All these measures will help students engage in learning in the garden.

Recommended Resources

- *The Growing Classroom*, <http://www.lifelab.org/>
- The Collective School Garden Network's Creating and Sustaining Your School Garden training resources, <http://www.csgn.org/csystg>

