



Gardens are places to grow food, flowers or fiber, but they are also cultural and learning spaces that fulfill other functions. While a large scale farm may have crop production as its main focus, a small garden may also have goals of demonstration, curriculum, cultural connections, beautifying the school grounds, outdoor classroom use and many more. Outlining the goals and themes you want present in your school garden can help integrate goals and intentions into your garden from the start. Themes can also encourage ownership by different classes within your school, make the garden relevant to the cultures of your students and their families, and connect gardening to existing knowledge your students already have. Integrating art and imagination into your garden landscape can have powerful effects! Painting signs, making garden maps, adding artwork and sculpture can all be ways to tie garden beds into curriculum, the communities and cuisines your students know at home, and act as invitations for guests and new visitors to your garden.

“Themes in the School Garden” is a companion to our “Selecting the Crops” guide. “Selecting the Crops” is primarily concerned with physical needs of plants, the natural cycles of the year, and how to balance these with the calendar needs of school gardeners. After choosing which plants are a good idea for you to grow given your maintenance ability, program and school year calendar, look for plants that are compatible to be grown together. Our “Garden Start up Guide” plant table can help with this. (link!) Once you have generated that list, this “Theme Gardening” guide can provide a jumping off point for using cultural and other themes in the school garden.

**Craft a garden mission statement:** As themes are conceptual ideas for the organization of your garden, a good place to start is in your garden mission



statement. Or if you do not yet have one, craft it now! Simply, a garden mission statement can describe the goals of your garden, including who your garden hopes to serve, and what functions you garden hopes to have. From this, pick out specific goals and brainstorm how you will integrate them into you design themes. For example:

1. Beauty (Include flowers? Outdoor sculpture? )
2. All grades involved (One bed per grade?)
3. Outdoor classroom meeting area (outdoor tables and chairs?)

**Who do you want supporting your garden?** Themes can be a powerful way to give different groups ownership of the garden. Shaping themes around who you hope will be involved with your garden can help! For example:

1. A community garden bed! - You want parent volunteers, so perhaps setting aside a parent volunteer bed could encourage an avid gardener to grow extra food in your garden whilst taking care of yours.
2. A pollinator garden! - You want to encourage butterflies, bees and other pollinators to come to your garden to support your food growing efforts!
3. A thank-you flower bed!- You want to encourage local donations to your garden. Grow a thank-you flower bed to recognize your local donors and bring them cut flowers from the garden! (thanks to ... )
4. A Grandma and Grandpa bed! - Honor your grandparents. Older relatives may have extra time to volunteer, and may have garden knowledge to share. A Grandparent themed bed could be full of their favorite plants, culturally relevant plants for cooking, or include a bench and a trellis for shade.
5. A student experimental bed! You want to encourage student involvement and innovation in the garden. Have a student experimental bed for them to conduct experiments, and where you are not attached to the success of the plants!!

**What curriculum connections do you hope to make in the garden?** While curriculum can be generated from any garden, creating gardens around curriculum themes can be a great way to focus this, especially for teachers that are new to the garden. Some ideas include:



Bowe School in Chicopee.



1. Dinosaur Garden: (Plants that were around with the dinosaurs! Like horse tail, ferns, etc: see source! )
2. Five Senses Garden (Smell plants like aromatic herbs. Sound plants like dried flower pods, Touch plants like lambs ear. etc.)
3. 18th Century Garden (plants that came over with the Europeans to the Americas such as cabbage, lettuce etc!)
4. Plants of the Americas (plants that originated in South and Central America and then spread around the world such as tomatoes, potatoes and corn!)
5. A Migrating Bird Garden (bird food, bird bath, sign with birds you might see...)

**Theme your Garden around Specific Events:**

1. Valentines day dried flower garden (grow flowers suitable to drying. Hang them in the classroom and then bring them out on valentines day)

2. Halloween pumpkin and gourd garden (Grow small varieties of pumpkins to carve, or better, small gourds to paint)
3. Eat local day garden (Showcase your garden once a year in an all school snack - carrots...?)
4. A Harvest Moon garden (lots of plant that are round and ripen in the fall! Squash, beets, potatoes etc.)

**Plant food for your favorite recipes!**

1. Perogi garden
2. pizza garden
3. Salsa garden
4. Soup garden
5. A pickle garden
6. Strawberry shortcake garden

**Plan a crop around a visit to a local farm!**

1. A horse, chicken or other visited animal feed garden



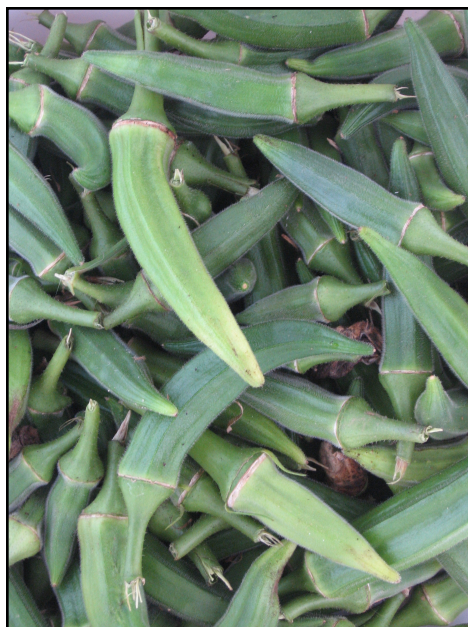
2. A supplemental garden for a Farm to School Cafeteria initiative (e.g. beans from the garden to add to the local farm's offering in the lunch room.)
3. A cranberry bog - to tie in with a visit to a commercial one.

### **Imagination!**

1. Adventure garden ( bean tipi, sunflower house, hidden treasure, scavenger hunt sign...)
2. A story garden: e.g. Peter Rabbit, Jack and the Beanstalk, Secret Garden etc.
3. Brainstorm with your students! Garden themes are a great way to include more student direction into the garden. While crop planting and planning requires a fair amount of oversight in order to have success with a harvest, garden themes and artwork can be a lot more flexible!

### **Finally, gardens around garden themes !**

1. A seed saving garden
2. A plant part garden: with plants grown for the differences in their commonly eaten parts: Roots, stems, seeds, flowers, fruits, seeds....
3. A storage crop garden
4. A winter salad garden



## Sources

Creating and Sustaining Your School Garden Workshop hand out packet. California School Garden Network. <http://www.csgn.org/csysg>

Getting Started : A Guide for Creating School Gardens as Outdoor Classrooms. Life Lab and the Center for Ecoliteracy. <http://www.ecoliteracy.org/>

NY Ag in the Classroom Kids Growing Food Garden Project Guide. [www.cerp.cornell.edu/aic/KGF\\_Resources.html](http://www.cerp.cornell.edu/aic/KGF_Resources.html)

Burlington Community Garden Network Website Resources: [burlingtongardens.org/school\\_community\\_gardens.html](http://burlingtongardens.org/school_community_gardens.html)

National Gardening Association Kids gardening website: <http://www.kidsgardening.org/>.

Specifically about dinosaur gardens: [kidsgardening.org/node/12087](http://www.kidsgardening.org/node/12087)

All photos, author.

Thanks to the many innovative gardens I have visited in Massachusetts, and my work and practice with School Sprouts ([www.schoolsprouts.org](http://www.schoolsprouts.org)) in Holyoke MA



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Please Visit the [Massachusetts Agriculture in the Classroom Website](http://www.aginclassroom.org) to tell us how you used this Theme Beds Resource for the School Garden.

Thanks!

[www.aginclassroom.org](http://www.aginclassroom.org)



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