

Choosing What to Grow: Vegetables and Herbs

There are so many delicious vegetable and herbs to choose from that deciding which ones to grow may be one of the hardest parts of gardening! If you're like many gardeners, as you flip through a seed catalog (or scroll through, as most are also online these days), everything your eye lands on looks enticing. How do you decide among the many varieties of tomatoes, for example? Which kinds of veggies will grow best in your part of the country? What veggies are kids most likely to enjoy? Perhaps you'd like to grow plants that relate to other areas of learning, such as history, and culture, literature, plant and soil biology, and nutrition.

Here are some tips and ideas to help you make your edible school garden choices that will grow successfully and enhance your students' classroom experiences. And be sure to keep students involved in the selection process – it will help to cultivate a sense of ownership in the garden and help them get excited to get growing!

Go For Veggie Variety

One of the most rewarding aspects of gardening with kids is seeing them expand their food horizons when they sample – and enjoy – vegetables that they grew themselves. Spinach haters often become spinach lovers when they taste tender leaves fresh from the garden! Kids who've refused to even try Brussels sprouts may be willing to at least take a bite when they've personally plucked these mini-cabbages off the plant. Include vegetables kids are likely to be familiar with, like green beans, peas, and carrots, along with some more unusual choices like leeks, okra, and kohlrabi. Who knows what new favorite veggie may be discovered?

Make Classroom Connections

Connecting the plants grown in the garden to other areas of study can really enhance the learning process. For example, growing a Three Sisters garden of corn, beans, and squash can inspire studies of Native American customs, nutrition, and folklore. As students dig in, investigations into plant and soil biology will also flourish. Many children's books can inspire thematic growing projects. Connecting garden plants with classroom literature helps to capture students' interest, curiosity, and cross-cultural awareness. Students might grow and taste the same foods as the characters in the book they're reading. Plant and garden experiences can also inspire students to weave their own tales, exercising their imaginations and language skills and revealing what they've learned in doing so.

Sun or Shade

If you're selecting seeds for an outdoor garden, keep the growing conditions in mind as you choose what to grow. Full sun (6-8 hours of direct sun a day) is ideal for all vegetable and herb crops and a necessity for fruiting crops like tomatoes, peppers, pumpkins, and squash. But don't be discouraged if your site gets less. Most root crops, such as beets, carrots, turnips, and onions will do well with only 4-6 hours of direct sun a day. If your garden only gets 3-4 hours of direct sun, leafy crops like spinach, lettuce, kale, and chard will still give a respectable harvest.

Check Days to Maturity

You may notice that descriptions in plant catalogs or on seed packets list the days to maturity (DTM) for that particular variety. This tells you approximately the time it will take from seed sowing to harvest or, in the case of crops that are usually planted as transplants like tomatoes or peppers, from transplanting to harvest. This information is helpful in deciding if your growing season is long enough for the crop to mature. For example, if you garden where the growing season is short, choosing tomato varieties that require fewer days to mature will increase your chances of harvesting a good crop before the weather turns cold. Knowing the DTM can also help you figure out if a crop planted in spring is likely to be ready before school lets out for the summer or when you need to start a crop for fall harvest so that it matures before frost.

Sowing Seeds Indoors or Out

Do you plan on planting seeds indoors in containers, outside in the garden, or both? If you plan on indoor seed starting, the next step is to figure out what your goals are. Knowing what your goals are will help you decide not only what seed choices are most suitable, but the timing of when to plant them.

Starting Seeds Indoors:

- **Seed starting experiment** – If your main goal is for students to be able to observe and study seed germination and growth as a classroom project, choose large seeds like bean, cucumber, and corn that germinate quickly and are easy for kids to handle. Since you won't be growing these plants for harvest, you can start them at any time of the year.
- **Harvest a crop indoors** – If you don't have an outdoor growing space but would still like to give students the opportunity to taste some vegetables they've grown themselves, choose quick maturing crops that can be grown under plant lights or in a sunny windowsill. Some good choices include radishes, lettuce, basil, spinach, and kale. You can plant these crops at any time since they will spend their lives indoors. However, sunlight will be stronger as days get longer heading into spring, so windowsill-grown plants from seeds sown in late winter and early spring will grow better than ones started in fall or early winter.
- **Grow transplants for the outdoor garden** – If you have an outdoor school garden (either in-ground or container), you can start seeds of some plants early indoors and then transplant the young plants to the garden when the weather conditions are appropriate. Or perhaps you want to grow plants that students can take home and plant in their own outdoor gardens.

Good crops to start early indoors are ones that need a long time to reach their harvesting stage and that tolerate the transplanting process well. These include tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, broccoli, kale, cabbage, onions, leeks, and parsley. This early start gives you an earlier harvest – or one at all. For example, in most parts of the country if you planted tomato seeds directly in the outdoor garden once the weather was warm enough, there wouldn't be enough growing time for them to produce a crop before frost killed the plants.

Some faster-growing plants such as lettuce, basil, and chard can be started early indoors and transplanted and/or the seeds can also be sown later directly out in the garden.

Starting Seeds Outdoors

Some plants don't tolerate transplanting well and their seeds are usually sown directly in the garden where they will grow. These include root crops like beets and carrots, beans, peas, and corn.

Pumpkins, melons, cucumbers, and squash resent transplanting and usually grow best when direct sown. But they can be started early indoors if they are grown in individual plantable (biodegradable) pots so their roots are not disturbed when they're transplanted.

Fitting Gardening into the School Calendar

Gardening in a school setting, both indoors and outside, presents some special challenges. Keeping these considerations in mind from the start will help to make your gardening projects a success.

When you're growing plants indoors in the classroom, it's important to have a plan in place for caring for plants over school breaks. Young seedlings, especially, need frequent watering, so if there is a break that's longer than a weekend, make arrangements for someone to check on and care for your baby plants.

Depending on where in the country you are gardening, much of the outdoor growing season may fall outside of the regular school session.

Here are some possible approaches to this challenge:

- Students can start transplants indoors and transplant and sow whatever crops they can outdoors before the school year ends. Over the summer volunteers, such as students, parents, teachers, and community members, care for and harvest from the garden, perhaps donating produce to a local food pantry. When students return at the end of the summer, they can participate in caring for and harvesting from the garden until the growing season comes to a close. Again, depending on your climate, there may be time for students returning in late summer to plant cool season crops like spinach and lettuce for harvest later in the fall.
- If your school runs a summer session, those students might take over care and harvesting in the garden. Or your school might consider pairing up with a nearby local organization that runs a summer youth program, such as a library, parks and recreation department, or day camp for summer garden care and learning.
- If your garden program is able to invest in season-extenders like cold frames or low tunnels, you can begin planting some crops earlier in the spring or keep them growing later into the fall and early winter months.
- Another approach is to focus on crops that can be planted and reach harvestable size while school is in session. The warmer your climate and the longer your growing season, the easier this option will be. Cool season crops that mature quickly, like spinach, lettuce, beets, and radishes are all good choices for spring and fall gardens in many parts of the country.