American Heart Association®
Teaching Gardens®

Choosing Your Garden Site

Thriving Teaching Gardens® come in all shapes and sizes, from a planter box outside the classroom to an edible jungle overtaking the corner of a field. A dedicated team can transform almost any site, from a dirt parking lot to a school courtyard, into a flourishing garden.

Whichever arrangement you choose, consider these factors when selecting your garden site:

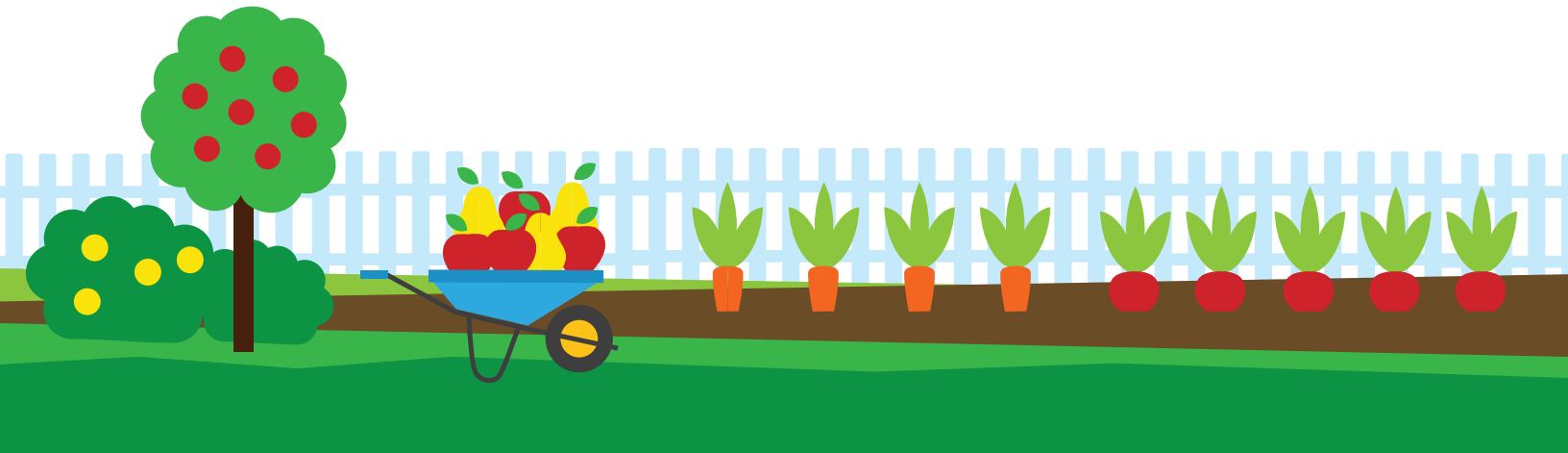
Water. Access to water is the most basic requirement. When water is limited, plants grow less and produce less. Carrying water in watering cans might work for a small container garden but isn't a good option for a larger garden. Also, soil type affects how water moves and how much is available for plants to use. Knowing your soil type will help you decide how to water.

Sunlight. Most vegetables and herbs need at least six hours of full sun every day. Check possible garden sites for sun exposure at different times of the day. Take note of objects (such as buildings or trees) that might block light in different seasons when the sun is lower or higher in the sky. If you decide to include shady spots in your garden, you can use them for shade gardens, wildlife habitat or teaching areas on hot, sunny days.

Drainage. In addition to soil type, slope affects drainage. Avoid steep slopes. Also, do not plan a garden in a low spot where puddles form in wet weather.

Soil. Test any potential in-ground site for lead or other contaminants. Check with local utility companies or school officials for underground pipelines and cables. If your soil is toxic, it will be important to keep the entire garden in the provided containers, where the toxic substances can't leak into the garden.

It's also a good idea to test your soil for nutrient content, pH and texture (sand, silt and clay). You can buy a do-it-yourself soil test kit at a garden center or contact your local Cooperative Extension office for information on where you can send your soil for testing. This information will help later in determining what, if any, amendments you should add to the soil when preparing to plant.



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Proximity. If your garden is a short walk from your classrooms, teachers will be more involved than if the site is a trek across school grounds. A garden close to classrooms makes it more convenient, more visible and easier to incorporate into the curriculum on a regular basis. Student management will be easier, too. For the early grades, garden beds or planter boxes right outside the classroom work especially well.

Accessibility. Teaching Gardens are meant to be used and enjoyed by all students. Consider items and setups that will allow students with disabilities to use the garden space. For example, does your garden have sidewalks and spacing that is wheelchair-friendly? Is there space for planters or garden beds at different levels for students to use standing or sitting? Consider using a space to incorporate a sensory integration station where students can interact with soil, plant material and water.

Security. If possible, locate your garden within sight of classrooms and neighbors. Fences and natural borders of plants, if they don't obstruct visibility and hide intruders, provide security. Make use of existing fences, trees and hedges in selecting your site.

Visibility. Gardens can add beauty to the school and the community. Try to integrate your garden with the existing landscape, but don't hide it. "Out of sight, out of mind" can apply to gardens that aren't in a central, visible location. Keep your garden in a spot where students and community members can see it and take pride in their hard work.