

Working with Volunteers

Volunteers contribute a wealth of experience and enthusiasm to a gardening program. They also bring abundant skills, fresh ideas, and extra hands to help with garden activities. There are a number of best management practices to adopt when working with volunteers, but communication is the key. If you effectively communicate your needs and expectations, provide volunteers with the information needed to complete their assignments, and follow up with clear words of appreciation, you will have strong volunteer relationships.

Establishing Roles for Volunteers

Before recruiting, define the role you want volunteers to play in your garden program. Create a list of specific jobs you need help with and also when these activities should take place. Do you want volunteers who can be there on a weekly basis or just for special events? Do you want them to help plan and prepare garden programs, or do you just want them to help with the activities?

Keep in mind that people volunteer for different reasons, and any group of people will have a wide range of talents. If you communicate the jobs available for volunteers to complete, then they can determine whether your opportunities match their interests and skills. The time you spend preparing for volunteers and establishing clear responsibilities will help you create an effective and efficient volunteer team.

All volunteers want to feel that they are contributing in a meaningful way. Involve them in as much of the planning and decision making as possible to create a sense of ownership and independence. Although you will certainly need help with some “grunt work,” as long as volunteers know their efforts are helping the program, they will feel like valuable team members.

Recruiting Volunteers

Once you know how you are going to use volunteers, begin the recruiting process. Look for volunteers who will encourage exploration and inquiry-based learning during garden activities and who will approach the garden with a fun and adventurous attitude.



Judy Huffaker

Most schools find their strongest volunteers through parent groups. Reach out to parents in newsletters, on the school Web site, at parent meetings, and at open houses. Additionally, search for volunteers through local horticulture clubs (garden club members, college horticulture departments), “green industry” businesses (garden centers, landscape design firms), senior citizen organizations, and service organizations (Cooperative Extension Service Master Gardeners, Rotary, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, California Service Corps, California Garden Clubs members, California Women for Agriculture representatives, and local corporations’ volunteer service programs). The garden team members who helped plan the garden will often be transformed into a core of strong volunteers. Another possibility is to recruit older students to provide support for garden activities. Elementary school students love to interact with middle school and high school students. A mentoring relationship provides an excellent learning experience for the older students, too.

Some volunteers will be available only for special events. For instance, a Boy Scout might develop an Eagle Scout project at your garden. Other volunteers may be available to help on a regular basis, for example, a stay-at-home parent with a horticulture degree. Garden programs benefit from a diverse set of volunteers.

As you reach out to potential volunteers, schedule a special meeting to share information about the program and the opportunities available. If possible, hold this event during the same hours you typically need volunteer help. If people are available for the informational meeting at that time, they may well be available to volunteer in the future during the same time frame.

In both written and oral requests, be sure to inform potential volunteers of your expectations, including time commitments and tasks. Be as specific as possible; give the dates and times their services will be needed. Also check your school’s policy on volunteer recruitment procedures. Most schools require volunteers to complete a background check with fingerprinting before service can begin. Individuals should be informed of this type of requirement during the recruitment stage. When people sign up or indicate an interest in volunteering, follow up with a phone call or in person to reiterate these expectations and give them a chance to ask questions. Not all individuals are a good fit with a school garden program, and it is best for both parties to figure this out during the recruiting stage rather than in the middle of the program.

Although mass recruiting is less time consuming, keep in mind that people like to be asked in person. It is a first step in making them feel important; it conveys respect and builds confidence. Consider making phone calls or sending



Debbie Delatour

“For many children, a garden experience offers one of the few chances they have to work side by side with an adult and engage in relaxed, unintentional, rambling, and personal conversations. I heard this years ago at a conference and then I began to take note of it when I was in the garden with students, and what a revelation it was! These types of conversations and experiences help build a connection between students and school — so necessary for keeping our students focused and successful in the educational setting.”

Martha Deichler, Principal
Vista Square Elementary School
Chula Vista, CA

personal invitations to individuals you have met who would be good volunteers or who have been recommended to you by others.

The recruiting process may sound like a substantial undertaking, and it is. However, you will be rewarded by a supportive, dedicated, and informed volunteer group who will help sustain your garden efforts.

Orientation

After recruiting volunteers, you need to continue strong communication skills through orientation followed by appropriate training. You will begin by orienting the volunteers to the program, the students, and the school. Start by once again reminding them of your expectations. Next, brief them on school policies. For example, let them know where to park, where to sign in, and what the procedures are for screening. Introduce volunteers to key school personnel like the principal and office secretaries. After this overview, provide the group with a tour of the garden and school. They need to know things like the locations of bathrooms, how the students will travel to the garden, where tools are stored, etc. In

addition to an in-person orientation, provide this information in writing for later reference.

Training

You will also need to provide training to properly prepare the volunteers for their jobs, whatever they may be. The most important thing is to always provide clear instructions as to what you want them to do and give them a chance to ask questions. To be successful, volunteers must know what is expected of them. Provide background on any specific skills or knowledge needed to complete tasks by sending copies of your lessons a week ahead of time, or links to information on Web sites or recommended books.

In addition to regular training and information related to activities and programs, it is a special treat for volunteers to attend “advanced training.” For instance, you can invite a guest speaker to introduce a new curriculum or teach volun-

teers about inquiry-based learning techniques. Depending on their level of involvement, certain volunteers might be invited to attend trainings conducted for educators by school districts and other organizations. Training is a powerful tool to motivate your volunteers and keep them excited about your program.



Alicia Dickerson/Life Lab

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

AmeriCorps Volunteers Vital to Program Success

Bayside Elementary School, Sausalito, CA

For the past two years, the Marin Food Systems Project (a project of the Environmental Education Council of Marin) has partnered with AmeriCorps volunteers working at the Marin Conservation Corps to run a gardening and nutrition education program at Bayside Elementary School in Sausalito. This collaborative program takes an integrated approach to reconnecting students with the environment and promoting healthy foods in schools.

AmeriCorps is a federally funded program for Americans of all ages and backgrounds providing full- and part-time opportunities for individuals to serve in communities across the country.

One particularly innovative project facilitated by the AmeriCorps volunteers was the design and installation of a turtle habitat, including a solar-powered water fountain connected to a small, bathtub-sized pond. The project was inspired by a teacher's desire to free her three box turtles from the confines of a small terrarium inside her sixth grade classroom. After AmeriCorps volunteers, the teacher, and the class developed a vision for the project, they began planning the turtle habitat.

The students took part in the initial brainstorming and design. The volunteers then searched for donations and support to make the plan a reality. The project



Environmental Education Council of Marin

evolved into a collaboration among a vast array of partners, each serving a particular niche within the community. Marin Food Systems Project Coordinator Leah Smith cites many benefits in working with a large number of partners, including the fact that “each partner was only asked for one specific kind of donation, making it much easier to secure donations from local organizations.” Another benefit was that the collaborations turned into “very good advertising for our project and, more importantly, for the Bayside Elementary School community. By soliciting partnerships throughout the community, we were able to build on the school’s growing reputation and demonstrate the innovative range of projects being implemented.”

In addition to community partnerships, the volunteers’ leadership was “fundamental to the completion of the project,” Leah says, noting that the turtle habitat “most

The garden, with the support of volunteers, fostered teamwork, creative problem solving, and a sense of responsibility for taking care of other living things.

likely would not have been completed without their initiation and commitment to the project. They provided the original motivation to begin the project, garnered support for the project at the school, gathered all of the resources, wrote the grant, created and taught the appropriate curriculum, and supervised the assembly of the fountain and pond habitat with the help of the students.”

Through each step of the process, the volunteers taught students important educational concepts, including the basics of solar energy, recycling, habitat restoration, and light construction skills through hands-on activities. “Solar education is a science standard for sixth graders, so the project directly addressed state curriculum standards. Without the solar panel, the sixth grade class at Bayside would have learned about passive solar elements and design, but would not have been able to study the direct harvesting of the sun’s rays for the production of electricity.” After the habitat was installed, it became clear that “although the final, completed project will be a monument to the garden, the process was certainly just as important as the final product — if not more so,” Leah says.

This project illustrates how the garden, with the support of volunteers, fostered teamwork, creative problem solving, and a sense of responsibility for taking care of other living things.



Alicia Dickerson/Life Lab

Communicating with Volunteers

As previously mentioned, clear communication with volunteers is essential. When communication is poor, volunteers feel uninformed, unimportant, and underappreciated. Disorganization and lack of communication will frustrate them, and they will quit. Here are a few communication tips for working with volunteers:

Keep a good record of volunteers with up-to-date contact information.

It would be unfortunate to accidentally miss someone.

Establish a standard method of communication that is delivered consistently.

This may be a weekly e-mail, a monthly newsletter, or a regular Web site posting. Choose a method that works well for you and your vol-

unteers. By establishing a routine, you remind yourself to communicate with your volunteers, and in turn they have a place to go for the latest information.

Create a written schedule of events that is accessible to all volunteers. It can be mailed out or posted on a Web site. Make sure you have an effective way to notify volunteers if any changes are made (via either e-mail or a phone tree).

Hold a regular volunteer meeting either monthly or quarterly.

Personal contact allows for more interactive discussions, and it is very important for volunteers to have a chance to provide you with feedback and suggestions for the program. This is also a great time for you to show your appreciation for their work.

Provide members of the group with comments about their job performance. Although a formal evaluation may not be possible, volunteers need constructive feedback so they can learn and grow during this experience.

With your busy schedule, it may seem overwhelming to find time for this level of communication. If you feel that you cannot maintain strong communication, seek out a volunteer willing to assume this role. Communication is not a task that can be neglected even briefly without negative consequences. It is the key to a successful volunteer experience (for the volunteers and for you)!

Retaining Volunteers

All the suggestions mentioned thus far will contribute to the satisfaction of your volunteers and help you retain them. In a school setting, you will naturally lose volunteers as students graduate and families move, but by adopting good techniques, you can decrease the number of people who quit because of a negative volunteer experience.

If you are concerned about volunteer retention, take time to find out why people sign up. Volunteers often pitch in because they care about the project and its

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

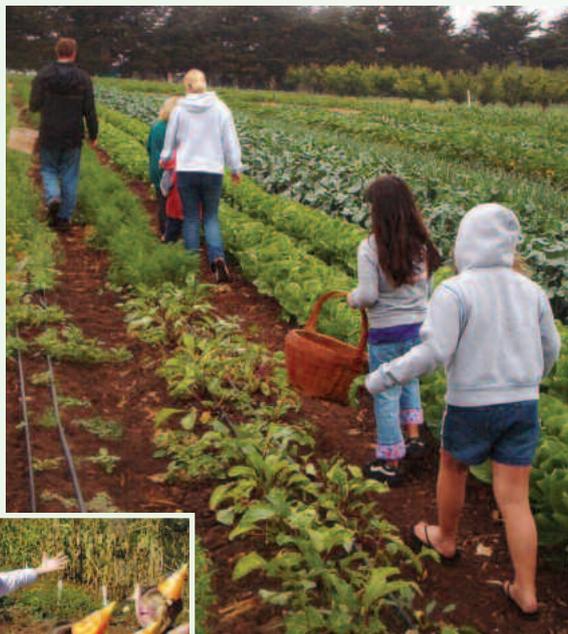
Working with College Students

Life Lab Garden Classroom Program, Santa Cruz, CA

Successful garden programs rely on volunteer support, but finding good volunteers is not always easy. Life Lab Garden Classroom Program Director John Fisher recommends exploring your local college or university for potential garden help.

College students, in order to diversify their resumes and gain real-life experience, often balance their academic studies with participation in meaningful projects accessed through volunteer experiences, internships, and work-study positions. If you find students with an interest in gardening and youth, you can offer them wonderful learning opportunities and at the same time benefit from their support for your program.

Some classes and organizations (for example, service-learning courses, clubs, sororities, and fraternities) include a service-learning element in which students must participate in a certain amount of volunteer work to meet requirements. These students may not be able to dedicate a lot of time to the garden, but are a good target for helping with specific activity days when teachers need more hands and eyes to help manage students. They may also be available to help with fundraising and installation of large projects.



Left: John Fisher/Life Lab; inset: Alicia Dickerson/Life Lab

of internship program associated with their career center or academic departments; student interns participate in directed work experiences in their field in exchange for course credit. Interns arrive with a bit more background knowledge and usually are willing to take on independent projects with guidance from you. Examples of intern projects completed in the Life Lab gardens include construction of a wheelchair bed, creation of worm bins with interpretive signs, and creation and teaching of specific lessons in the garden.

College students often participate in volunteer and internship positions without

“Life Lab was a great opportunity for me to close my books for a while, leave the library, and spend interactive time with kids outside! Life Lab helped balance my time at UCSC.”

Vanessa Shaw

UCSC Community Studies, 2006

financial compensation; however, if you have a little bit of money available to you, consider work-study programs. Work-study is a federally subsidized work program for college students eligible for financial aid. The employing agency pays half the salary and the college's financial aid office pays the other half. John Fisher recommends using work-study positions to help with tasks that may or may not enhance the student's career aspirations but are still needed for your garden, such as regular maintenance.

John explains that “recruiting interns and work-study students is usually as simple as creating an internship/job description and sending it to the appropriate office,” but cautions that “both interns and work-study positions require a substantial amount of supervision and guidance.” He suggests using these resources only if your garden has the staffing to do so. Even though collaborating with higher education institutions comes with additional administrative duties, this arrangement can be a win-win situation for the college students and the garden program.



Alicia Dickerson/Life Lab

participants. Some may have children in the program with whom they want to spend more quality time; others may want to be more involved in their communities, meet new people, or make a difference. To keep volunteers interested and motivated, it is important for you to understand and meet their needs as much as possible while still meeting yours. For instance, if someone volunteers because she wants to spend time with her child, but you never assign her to work with her child's class, she will not stick with it for long. Or, if someone volunteers in order to meet new people, and you always ask him to assist with individual preparation, he will get discouraged and quit.

Also remember that volunteers should support, not replace, educators. Although you may find volunteers who are willing to take on significant planning and educational delivery responsibilities, most volunteers will feel overwhelmed if left on their own to teach a full lesson, or will feel they lack proper guidance. Classroom teachers should be present during all garden activities.

As discussed earlier, not all individuals have the personalities and skills to be strong garden volunteers, so if you find your needs and their needs do not match, you may suggest other volunteer opportunities that would be better suited for them.

Volunteer Appreciation

Volunteers need to feel appreciated. To be sure, contributing to the community is personally satisfying. Also, working with students and watching their curiosity and excitement bloom is motivational and inspiring. But in addition to these rewards, you should implement both informal and formal methods of thanking your volunteers.

Informal ways to thank your volunteers include simple thank yous and smiles when they come to help or a quick e-mail after activities. More formal thanks include handwritten notes (from you and the students), small gifts from the garden (like pressed-flower bookmarks or herbal sachets), and recognition of volunteers in newsletter and newspaper articles. If possible, hold a special event each year focusing on volunteer appreciation, such as a ceremony in the garden or a luncheon. This event can be specifically hosted for garden volunteers, or you can work with other teachers to recognize volunteers in several programs.

Involve your students as much as possible in appreciation efforts. This helps them learn the importance of being grateful and showing respect for those who help them. It is an important life lesson that is often overlooked in our fast-paced society.