



CLIPPINGS a weekly column from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach

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The Importance of School Gardens

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School gardens aren't a new concept. In fact, they have been around since World War I. For decades school gardens have provided a place for children to become problem solvers, open their minds to creative possibilities that nature can provide them, and even improve test scores. They are a wonderful addition to schools of any size located in any climate.

School gardens provide hands-on learning activities. Children can get their hands dirty with digging, tilling, planting, and harvesting. Some classrooms even prep and cook their produce from the garden to come full circle with the process. These activities not only provide an opportunity for children to learn about the science behind gardening, but also teach basic life skills. In a school garden setting, children can be exposed to important social skills, such as interpersonal, communication, anger control, and stress management. These skills are extremely important to ensure socially responsible adults. School gardens provide an opportunity for group work to take place. Students can work together to problem solve and work through problems they might face together. They are able to make their own decisions, manage problems, and gain a sense of responsibility while working together in their groups.



Photo by Steven Hardina.

Students can work in a group setting in other situations besides gardens; however, gardens provide an opportunity for children to be creative. Allowing students to have time outside with nature and natural materials gives them the ability to create their own stories or games. In the 2013 book *Adventure: The Value of Risk Children's Play*, Joan Almon said that, "play is the way children discover the world around them. They explore, invent, and transform it to suit their needs." When children have the time to play in a nature-rich environment, they work hard. They put in the time to create a story, collect materials, and play without wasting any time. Working in a garden can allow students to work through the lifecycle of a flower while playing in the dirt. Having adults that support the experimental learning

in the garden is key to children creating their own experiences. The journal article *"Playing with Nature: Supporting Preschoolers' Creativity in Natural Outdoor Classrooms"* stated that, "educational theorist John Dewey's work urges educators to give children something to do not something to learn." This doesn't mean teachers, or parents, need to be hands-off in this situation, but instead should be observers.

Students introduced to a more hands-on approach to science are more likely to have a positive attitude towards science. A 2005 study in Texas supported the idea that hands-on gardening lessons in the classroom have increased test scores in comparison to students that weren't exposed to the same activities. Teachers are given garden-based curriculum to provide research-based garden education to children. In Iowa, we have curriculums such as "Growing in the Garden" and "Teachers Going Green" that are suited for Iowa education's core standards.

Children that are allowed to be creative and hands-on in their learning have improved life skills, social skills, positivity towards science and more. School gardens provide more than just delicious produce, the gardens provide a new way for students to learn. As stated by researchers C.D. Klemmer, T.M. Waliczek, and J.M. Zajicek, "gardens can serve as living laboratories in which students can see what they are learning and in turn, apply that knowledge to real world situations."

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