

Planning for a Schoolyard or Community Garden

By Brad Ward

Brad Ward has many years of experience in agricultural finance as a loan officer and underwriter, and has reviewed and advised on hundreds of business and farm plans. Currently he works on the North Coast of Honduras as the farm manager for Cornerstone Farm/Hospital Loma de Luz. He also works with several school garden projects in his area. His background and experience mean that he has a good grasp of what questions are important to ask when considering a schoolyard or community garden.

When considering a schoolyard or community garden, I suggest that you use the following five steps to organize and guide the planning process. These steps can help you use words to paint a comprehensive picture of what currently exists, paint a picture of what is hoped for, and lay out an organized list of tasks to get from the first picture to the second. This garden plan is not meant to be something done at the beginning of the project and then filed away. It should be a living, working guide, reviewed and updated regularly to ensure that the vision and purpose of the garden are being realized. As much as possible, include all of the garden's stakeholders in the planning and review process.

The 5 steps for planning are as follows;

1. Describe the current situation in detail.
2. Describe the purpose and vision.
3. Break the plan down into manageable tasks.
4. Integrate the project components.
5. Budget

Let's take a look at each of these steps in turn.

Step 1: Describe the current situation.

This step will help paint a detailed, current picture of the garden or planned garden setting. We will consider three different categories, one by one.

The environmental conditions

1. The community in which the garden will live.

A. The physical characteristics of the garden's setting. Some things you might want to consider (though this list is not exhaustive):

- Size
- Soil characteristics
- Nearby structures
- Water
- Sunlight / Shade
- Security / Fences
- Terrain
- Existing plants/ trees
- Nearby land uses (ie: next to a soccer field)

B. The environmental conditions. Again, here is a list of items one might consider:

- Rainy / dry seasons
- Amount of rainfall
- Day length
- Temperature ranges / seasons

- Erosion issues
 - Drainage
 - Local planting cycles
 - Extreme weather events (hurricane / hail, floods)
- C. The surrounding community. Here we have a list of community-related items to consider.
- Local leadership / institutions
 - Local custom regarding ownership
 - Male / female / generational roles
 - Local food preferences
 - Underutilized local food plants
 - Security
 - Planting and harvesting cycles

Step 2: Describe the purpose and vision of the schoolyard / community garden project.

This step is intended to help paint a detailed, future picture of the garden, or planned garden setting. To paint a word picture of your vision for a garden, answer the following questions:

A. Why have schoolyard / community garden? Is the reason to address a nutritional issue? Is it to help teach gardening skills, leadership, project planning and execution? Does the community value a garden? Would they do it if you didn't? If not, why? Use questions like these to help articulate your vision for your garden project and to help you clearly define its purpose and benefit to the community.

B. Who will the garden serve, and how? Will the garden be for the whole community or just for the participants? Will it be a teaching tool and/or a food resource, and if so, who will it teach and feed? How will the garden be "owned" by the community? What resources will the community be asked to invest? These types of questions can help you focus your vision and will help paint the community into the picture right from the start.

C. What are the priorities of the garden project? This question can help determine what to do first and how to focus your resources. For example, if the garden's purpose is to promote better food security, you might focus on nutritionally dense, underutilized local plants, or the introduction of a new food source like moringa. If the focus is teaching project planning and leadership, you might focus on high value annual vegetable crops, with lessons geared at helping older kids become master gardeners.

Step 3: Break the plan down into manageable tasks.

It will take work to move from the picture of our current situation to the garden we have envisioned. In Step 3 you break down the process into manageable steps. To keep on track, you should also assign these tasks a timeline and priority. One way to help organize tasks and timelines is to create a separate list for each component of the garden project. For example the components might be as follows:

- Community planning meeting
- Leadership training
- Land allocation
- Fence construction
- Garden bed preparation / soil testing
- Seed / plant procurement
- Composting

- Irrigation
- Shade / clearing for additional sunlight
- Curriculum development
- Market / transportation

As you can see, each component will have its own list of tasks and timelines. Once these lists have been developed, they can be prioritized and delegated.

Step 4: Integrate the Project Components

Step 4 helps us tie the project together. If done well, your garden's impact can be greater than the sum of its parts. As you consider how to fit each piece of your garden project together, look for individual components that feed each other. For example, you might find that instead of building a fence from scrap wood, you can plant a living fence of bamboo or gliricidia. This would give you biomass for composting and / or help fix nitrogen into your soil.

Step 5: Budget

Finally, your plan will most likely require some financial planning. Concentrate on using available plants and materials. Also consider the impact outside resources might have on the community and the (un)sustainability of your garden project. Keep the budget simple and understandable. Carefully research the local costs and availability of the labor and materials that you will need, and don't forget to build in the ongoing cost of fertilizer, seeds and other consumables.

Conclusion

The above five steps can help a schoolyard / community garden start out on the right foot. They can help people involved in planning the project to reach consensus, define their goals and priorities, and create manageable steps to increase the likelihood of the project's success.