

GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH SCHOOLS



Shared as part of the Fynbos Corridor Collaboration - fynboscorridors.org
October 2021

INTRODUCTION

The following guidelines were developed by The Greenpop Foundation for the purpose of facilitating successful urban greening projects at schools in Cape Town.

For further information, please contact deon@greenpop.org.

WHY SCHOOLS?

In under-resourced communities in Cape Town, access to natural spaces is low, which means that many children grow up without meaningful access to a multitude of ecosystem services. Ecosystem services are the different services that nature does for us and on which we depend to stay alive. Examples of these are the filtering of air, food production, production of oxygen, and more subjective services, such as providing us with spaces to relax. With low access, there is minimal opportunity for a deep understanding of nature to develop optimally. Through bringing nature to schools, multiple problems are eliminated :

- Lack of resources to travel to nature reserves
- Other educational topics might also take precedence when a decision is made about school trips.
- Limited academic time to spend on nature outings, especially with the emphasis on literacy and numeracy being so strong.

Other solutions a school garden could bring:

- Virtually non-existent travel time for learners means that little academic time is wasted when travelling to the garden to learn about nature.
- Being on school grounds, the garden is enclosed within the school's fence and, therefore, much more secure.
- Most school grounds are ecological deserts, with only one species of grass and multiple other weeds. Having a garden would, therefore, increase the biodiversity of the school grounds.
- A garden means less grass to cut.
- Well-adapted, locally indigenous plants require less frequent watering than grass.

- A fynbos garden is aesthetically pleasing and a feast of the senses, with multiple aromatic plants, the chirping of insects and birds, and edible and medicinal plants.
- A garden could act as a base to bring communities together and upskill them in using and propagating multiple species of plants, especially medicinals. More knowledge of and access to medicinal plants means less reliance on doctors, clinics and hospitals.
- Gardens beautify spaces and can help instil pride in the school and community.

As schools are long-term institutions, well-maintained gardens could stay a commodity for a very long time and impact thousands of learners. In time, this could lead to more adults in the conservation and ecological fields and a more significant portion of the population who have respect and admiration for our precious natural heritage.

ACADEMICS FIRST, GARDENS LATER

A school is a stressful place to be for a teacher, and many of the demands are superhuman:

- Curriculums with excessive amounts of content
- Strict time schedules for when educational topics need to be covered with no room for movement
- Crammed classes, which makes individualised teaching virtually impossible
- Scarce resources
- Staff shortages
- The expectation of teachers to teach and be experts in multiple subjects, including sports
- A full programme of extra-curricular activities, prize givings and school concerts

Most schools are filled to the brim with enthusiastic and passionate teachers, and most would love having a garden on their premises. However, in practice, if the garden and the programme and maintenance around it aren't tailored to the schools' needs, the garden will become neglected and disused. Teachers and ground staff cannot be expected to be full-time gardeners as well, even if they have the skills and passion.

Teaching is the teacher's primary and most pivotal responsibility, and the garden should enhance the current curriculum, as opposed to being a burden. Communication with the principals and teachers beforehand and expectations management is key to a successful long-term partnership with any school. Schools should, therefore, be seen as partners in the gardening endeavour (as opposed to static beneficiaries of a gift).

SELECTING & ONBOARDING A SCHOOL: STEP-BY-STEP

Step 1 - Get to know your school

Before deciding on which school to work with when planning on a school-based urban greening project, the most straightforward option would be to work with a school you already have a relationship with, be it one you've worked with in the past, a school your children go to, etc. Prior

engagement with a school is very beneficial, as this means you already have a well-established connection, and you are already familiar with the school dynamics, strengths, challenges, and a couple of stellar teachers. This will also mean that you have knowledge as to which other greening projects are currently being run at the school.

Step 2 - Getting schools on board and excited

A great way to pique a future garden school's interest is to compose an in-depth application form. This form needs to outline your intended programme, including what you intend to achieve and what you envision the school's responsibility to be. Include photos or colourful plans of previous projects, as this will help the school form a realistic understanding of what it is they're signing up for. In addition, it's also important to note what your organisation is looking for in a school. The following are important questions to include in the application form:

- Descriptions of possible future garden site, including:
 - what it's currently used for
 - size
 - type of soil
 - what is currently growing there
 - sun exposure
 - photos of site
 - access to water
- Existence of eco-club at school
- Who the teacher would be you would primarily deal with
- School and contact teacher's contact numbers and email addresses
- Future building/expansion plans, particularly for the site where the garden is envisioned to be
- Motivations from the school as to why they should be chosen
- Accessibility of location, e.g. distance from school, access for large vehicles for delivery of materials

Set a deadline for completing the application forms and for when the shortlist of sites will be notified. Make an effort to contact the unsuccessful applicants with some reasons as to why they were not chosen; these sites could very well be a future gardening site, so it's essential to maintain positive relationships.

The shortlist should exclude all sites with significant impediments to the long-term success of the garden, including the school moving in the near term, insufficient space, areas with large numbers of trees that need to be removed, or sites that are in perpetual shade.

Step 3 - Site visits

Once the shortlist has been drawn up, it is time to schedule visits to all the sites. These visits are essential to ascertain whether the site meets the criteria and as a way to meet the principals and contact teachers; building a positive rapport with the school right from the start is crucial to the project's success. Before visiting the site, be sure to compose a checklist to complete during the visit, which will help you not to overlook anything important. Ensure the checklist is completed on-site and that many photos are taken of the planned site from multiple angles.

Other critical elements to look out for on a site visit:

- Activity on and around the future garden site during school break time
- Distance from school
- Whether the school is fenced
- How the site is currently utilised
- Distance to water points
- Sun exposure and direction the garden faces
- Any other environmental projects currently running at the school
- Additional features, such as whether there is rubble on the sites
- Presence and willingness of a groundskeeper

These site visits need to be carried out with scrupulous attention to detail; many problems can be anticipated and avoided when careful attention is paid during these visits. For instance, if the site is very far from a watering point, it is much less likely to get watered. If the site is located far from the school, it is less likely to be used. If the site is located in very high foot traffic areas, it runs the risk of being abused or trampled upon. Sites that are not fenced are more likely to be abused or vandalised after-hours. The school's overall state will also tell a lot about the school's commitment to maintaining a clean, welcoming place conducive to learning. It is better to be pedantic here than to have to take continual remedial action in the future.

Step 4 - Pre-sign up

After the site has been positively assessed, schedule a meeting with both the principal and point of contact. During this meeting (45 minutes should be more than sufficient), go into depth about the programme, the criteria for having been chosen. In addition, it's important to discuss possible sites for the garden, the principal's ideas and dreams, and the availability of blueprints.

It is crucial that the school feels like a partner in this venture, so it is pivotal that the school's wishes and needs are heard. Therefore, it would be beneficial to set up a questionnaire, which can be completed during the meetings. Some of these findings will inform how the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) will be set up. Important questions to include:

- Are there any specific physical features, including plants, you would like to see included in your garden?
- Would you prefer if any of the planned features are excluded from your garden?

- Are there any lessons or topics that you would like to see included in the workshop curriculum? These can be modified to suit your individual needs.
- Which grade or group (for example, an eco-club) would you like to include in this programme?
- Who will be the person in charge of seeing to the garden's basic needs, such as weeding and clearing of rubbish, especially during school holidays?

This list could also include some questions about the school; values, learners, demographics, human and natural history, grounds, challenges, wins.

Step 5 - Signing the MoU

Now that the site selection has been made, it is time to set up and sign the agreement. This agreement will help produce a solid partnership between your organisation and the school, one that is based on collaboration and trust. The fact that the document was, in essence, co-created by you and the school will go a long way in ensuring the school has active buy-in in the project. It will also help the school feel included and hopefully foster a sense of ownership.

A memorandum of understanding is a document that describes the broad outlines of an agreement that two or more parties have reached. MoUs communicate the mutually accepted expectations of all of the parties involved in a negotiation. An MoU should include the following:

- Stating the name of the two parties as well as the individuals who will be representing the organisations, as well as a description of each of the organisations
- Purpose, objectives and intention of the MoU
 - The purpose of the MoU is to specify what the programme entails and the responsibilities each party agrees to commit to throughout the duration of this project.
 - This section should include a short description of the programme and its goals.
- General components of the programme
 - Detailing different parts and sequence of the programme
- Identified Areas of Cooperation
 - This section should comprise an outline of the agreement between the two parties and describe the relationship between them, including exactly what they are respectively responsible for.
- Character of the Agreement, Financial and Liability Aspects
- Duration and Termination of Agreement

The documents should then be dated and signed by both parties, with hard copies given to each party.

Step 6 - Tips and tricks for a successful partnership and programme

The following are some steps you could take to maximise the impact and efficacy of the programme:

- Social media:
 - Announce your partnership on all available social media channels. This will bring some attention (and possible sponsorship) to your programme and make it more accessible to the parents and surrounding communities.
- Interviews with staff and students:
 - After getting permission from parents and teachers (in the case of children, this will need to be written permission), you could interview staff and students about their experiences with nature and what their expectations are for the garden.
- Photos and videos of the school and site:
 - Having pictures of the school before the programme starts is an excellent way of showcasing progress. Identify and record several spots around the garden where pictures will be taken and repeated after every step. This ensures maximum impact of your before and after photos.
- Workshop with the teachers:
 - Schedule a meeting with teachers to introduce yourself and the programme. At the meeting, ask them to identify areas in the curriculum that need intervention and brainstorm how the programme can enhance learning. The most important thing is to include them in the planning of the programme/workshops. Be sure to emphasise your intention of reducing the workload of the teachers. For example, if your garden is intended to be an outdoor classroom, you need to give the teachers the know-how on different ways the garden can be used. Many teachers are also reluctant to move their learners out of the classroom for fear of disruption that takes a long period of time to resolve. What could address this is a couple of tailor-made lessons that fit into the school's curriculum time frame and topic. Having the garden as the backdrop for the lessons would eliminate the need for teachers to do the planning for that particular lesson and ensure that the garden will be utilised.
- Assembly with the students:
 - Ask the principal whether you can have a slot during the school's assembly period. This use opportunity to introduce yourself and the programme to the students in a high-energy and fun manner. This will hopefully help them appreciate and gain an understanding of your motivations as well as develop pride in their school garden.
- Open communication:
 - Have regular check-ins with the principal, contact teacher and groundsman to keep them up to date with the progress of your programme, and answer any questions and address any possible concerns. A continued presence helps to keep the programme actual and relevant. Also, do not wait to address any concerns.
- Be mindful of school schedules:
 - Ask the principal to inform you of the dates for test and exam periods to ensure not to schedule workshops during that time. You should also give the school ample notice of an upcoming workshop, which will give them time to prepare, shift around some lessons, and get the necessary permissions.

ORGANISE YOUR PLANTING EVENT(S)

Now that your site has been selected and your agreements are in place, it's time to organise your event. Remember, the more thorough you are with your preparations, the fewer problems you will encounter on the plant day.

2 to 6 weeks before plant day:

- It is essential that you notify the school or site at least two weeks in advance (if necessary) to give them ample time to make the necessary arrangements.
- If you are taking any learners off-site during school time, you have to give the school at least **six weeks' notice** to give them enough time to liaise with the department of education, the teachers, and parents.
- If major landscaping needs to be done, have it commence at least two weeks before the plant day to give ample time to absorb any possible delays.

1 week before plant day:

- Before the plant day happens, it is best to visit the site to do any preparatory work for the plant day to commence. Examples of these are digging holes for trees, removing grass and rubble, indicating outlines of beds (if the plant day involves the building of a basic garden)
- For larger projects, have all the materials (like compost, mulch, rocks) delivered at least a week before the date of the plant day. Remember to be very specific about where precisely the materials should be delivered: the closer to the planting site, the better, hence the importance of choosing a location with easy access to large vehicles.
- Confirm plant day with sponsors and volunteers and send out best-practise guidelines, which is especially important when working with children

Days before the plant day:

- Make sure you have enough of the right tools for the plant day
- A day or two before the plant day, deliver all the plants to the site, granted they would be safe until the plant day happens
- Make sure you do a final thorough site visit before the plant day to ensure everything is ready
- Check the weather and make any adjustments should it not allow for a plant day to happen
- Compose a consent form for volunteers and sponsors to sign prior to activities starting

Morning of the plant day:

- Pack all the tools and materials you'll be needing for the plant day
- Notify the volunteers/sponsors/beneficiaries of the estimated time of your arrival and remind them of the address, the attire, as well as the planting day guidelines
- Arrive at least an hour prior to the commencement of the plant day to give you time to prepare for the festivities to start
- As soon as you arrive, greet your host and provide a short outline of the day

- Make sure participants sign the consent form before the festivities start

RUN YOUR PLANTING EVENT(S)

The plant day has finally arrived, and all your hard work is coming to fruition. Plant days are the public interface of your project, so these events should be fun, joyous, light-hearted and inviting. Here are a few tips on how to host a successful event:

Great Storytelling

Start the day with introductions and sharing your organisation's story, how the project came into being, and its purposes. Next, give them an outline of how the event will progress and what they're expected to do. For a participant, there's nothing worse than having to idly stand around and not knowing what to do or where to go. Try to preempt this by giving detailed instructions and descriptions of what you want them to do. If you are working with mostly children, ask the adults to help facilitate the children and to assist in making it fun.

Facilitating Interaction

Icebreakers are a great way to get people motivated and engaged. Maintain a high level of energy and fun during this activity, and you'd have won even the most introverted person over. Be genuine in your enthusiasm and guard against making people feel corralled. Have several icebreakers prepared and move on if something isn't working. Keep it to 2 to 3 activities (around 20 to 30 minutes). Also, remember to make the activities age-appropriate. However, when the group comprises mostly children, most adults will understand if the activity is not catered to them and would enjoy being silly for a bit.

Safety

Before moving on to the gardening activities, be sure to do a thorough safety demonstration. Go through the names of each tool and show them the correct way of handling, using, and storing them. This is especially important for children. For too heavy, complicated, or dangerous tools, allocate their use exclusively to the adults. Examples of these are picks, mattocks, mallets, and drills.

Gardening Activities

This is the part everyone is looking forward to, so harness this energy so that at the end of the day, you have a great garden and a whole lot of people feeling they've accomplished something. Ensure that activities are varied and don't require people, especially children, to listen for extended periods. Divide the participants into smaller groups and allocate tasks to each of them, e.g. one group works compost into the soil, another puts wood chips on the pathway, and the other constructs the rock edges. Have facilitators in each group to help guide them. After a set time, rotate so that in the end, each group gets a turn to partake in each activity.

Planting

Once all the preparatory activities have been completed, ask the groups to get together. Do a thorough planting demonstration, which goes a long way to ensuring plants get adequately planted. I've seen people try and plant plants in holes that are way too small or even plant the plant still in its bag. Therefore I can't stress enough how important this part is. Once the demo is over, instruct the groups to start planting. Have a group of facilitators or adults walk around and continually do quality control to ensure that the plants are being planted correctly. Doing this now will save a lot of time afterwards. Be sure to make this part fun, high-energy, and encourage people to celebrate each plant that has been successfully planted with high-fives, fist-bumps, or even (where appropriate) hugs.

A Great, Joyous Sendoff

Once all the plants have been planted, call the group together and thank them sincerely for their help and participation. Pose for a couple of group photos and send the pictures to the participants after. If possible, ask participants to bring snacks and drink, and then have a much-deserved bite in your newly planted garden. Most people are keen to connect, but that might not have been possible during the activities, so this is a perfect opportunity to enjoy the company of like-minded people. Be sure to collect numbers and email addresses so participants can be notified of future greening events.

Tying a Ribbon:

Once the participants have left, do a thorough sweep of the site: check that the plants are correctly planted, correct any errors, pick up any litter, and collect the tools. If there are still materials on-site that haven't been used, like soil, compost, mulch, be sure to clear it and not leave it on site. Be sure to take photos from all angles to document the garden's progress through time. If the site has a grounds manager, inform them of what needs to happen in the garden in the months following the plant day. Schedule a visit within a couple of weeks to document progress and identify any possible problems; the earlier you address issues, such as weeds etc., the better. Be proactive.