

Summer Maintenance Tips for School Gardens

Summer is right around the corner – the kids are ready, the parents are ready and the teachers are *really* ready. But is your school garden ready?

Maintaining a school garden during the summer amidst vacation plans is a common challenge. You want to enjoy the break and renew your spirits, but you don't want to see all the hard work from the school year transform from a beautiful garden into a jungle of weeds. To help you, we offer a few tips for summer maintenance. If you have any of your own tips to share, we'd love to hear about them. Please [e-mail our editor](#) with your questions or suggestions.

- **Choose low-maintenance plants.** Focus on growing plants that will thrive on their own without much attention.

Two characteristics to look for are drought-tolerance and vigorous foliage that will smother or out-compete weeds. Choices vary by region and the amount of rain or irrigation available to the garden. Check with your local Cooperative Extension Office for a list of plants recommended for your area.

- **Use mulch!** A thick layer of mulch reduces weed growth and maintains soil moisture, and it enriches the soil as it decays. In vegetable and annual beds use inexpensive organic mulch such as newspaper topped with straw. In perennial beds add a 2- to 3-inch layer of a more durable organic mulch, such as shredded bark or cocoa bean hulls.
- **Install irrigation.** Drip irrigation equipment is available at most home improvement stores for a reasonable price and you can set it up to run on inexpensive timers. It might be worth your while to search for someone to donate an automatic irrigation system.
- **Many hands....** Enlist the help of parent volunteers or service organizations such as Future Farmers of America, 4-H, scouts, and church youth groups. Create a schedule so that someone checks on the grounds on a regular basis. You can even hold a work day one Saturday per month to knock down weeds and or other large tasks.
- **Host a summer camp.** Many schools offer summer school classes or kids' summer camps. Get in touch with a teachers or summer camp counselors to see if they are interested in taking advantage of your outdoor classroom facilities during the summer months in exchange for upkeep.
- **Harvest in the spring.** Pick and use or distribute as much of your vegetable harvest as is ready. Pick flowers and press or dry them for art activities in the fall. Before you leave for the summer, remove all the plants and then do one of the following:
 - **Cover it up.** Cover your garden with a thick layer of mulch to discourage weeds and decrease water loss. The mulch will break down over the summer and provide organic matter and enrich the soil for next year's crops.
 - **Solarize!** Solarization is the process of using the sun's energy to kill weeds and soil-dwelling pests, and it requires just a couple simple materials that you probably already have on hand: clear plastic and a garden hose. [Visit here](#) for a step-by-step guide from the University of Illinois Extension Service.
 - **Plant a summer cover crop.** A cover crop, sometimes called green manure, is a short-lived legume (e.g., beans) or grain (e.g., buckwheat) that you plant to prevent weeds,



Consider installing irrigation on timers to cut down on summer maintenance.

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May 2005 Kids Garden News

[Contents](#)

[Newsletter Home](#)

[Spotlight Article: Growing a Musical Instrument](#)
by Barb Cesal

[Summer Maintenance Tips for School Gardens](#)

[News Items](#)

Lesson Feature:
Plants with a Purpose

[Introduction](#)

[Background](#)

[Lesson 1:](#)
[Invention Investigation](#)

[Lesson 2:](#)
[Where's the Soy?](#)

[Plant of the Month: Gourds](#)

[Resources](#)

reduce soil erosion, and boost organic matter. They also help maintain and/or increase the nitrogen content of the soil. [Learn more about cover crops here](#). You can also check your state's Cooperative Extension Web site for additional cover crop ideas for your area.

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