

# School Gardens: Less Expensive Sources of Plant Material, Amendments, and Tools

## Community and School Gardens

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Budgets for school gardens are often either very tight or non-existent. Supplies and materials that can make gardening easier and the garden more successful are often costly, but it is possible to plant a vegetable garden or fruit orchard with limited funds. Garden centers and large retail stores are usually very generous to schools; some have formal donation programs. Almost every retailer ends up with broken bags, faded labels, overgrown plants and leftover products that they are often willing to donate or sell at a very reduced price at the end of a marketing season.

### Seeds

Vegetable seed is fairly inexpensive and sold locally at hardware stores and garden centers, as well as online. Some heirloom vegetable seeds can be saved from year to year and are often sold through places like the Agriculture Market Bulletin, Craigslist, Master Gardener plant sales and flea markets. However, hybrid seed cannot be saved, so it is important to know the difference. Many garden centers will offer free seed to school groups. Last year's packets are often given away to make room for a new shipment and the seed is still perfectly good.

### Vegetable Plants

Most garden centers and hardware stores do not grow their own vegetable plants. They purchase them from large growers that specialize in vegetable transplants that are delivered weekly during the planting season. Sometimes, garden centers will give away packs of plants that have one or two missing plants and can't be sold, or plants that have started to outgrow the container. These are perfectly good plants, just not marketable to the public.

### Fruit Plants

Fruit plants are more expensive and harder to come by than vegetable transplants. Garden centers will often put fruit plants on sale after the primary planting season is over, but this may be too late for schools to plant. Many fruits can be rooted easily from cuttings, but the cuttings will need to be collected in early summer by a parent or teacher and grown in under close watch. The cheapest source of fruit plants is mail-order nurseries; however, you should know your plant source. There are several mail-order nurseries based in Georgia that provide good quality plants at a reasonable price, including:

**Bottoms Nursery**  
Concord, GA 30206  
<http://www.bottomsnursery.com/>

**Isons Nursery and Vineyards**  
Brooks, GA 30205

**Johnson Nursery**  
Ellijay, GA 30536  
<http://www.johnsonnursery.com/>

### Compost

Compost is the cheapest and easiest way to amend your garden soil if you can make it yourself or have a free source. Composted animal manure is the best, but it can be difficult to find because most manure is given away or sold fresh. Many cities are now making compost from



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yard waste materials as a way to save landfill space; you can check to see what is available in your area. Many large chain stores will give broken bags of animal or mushroom compost away free or for a reduced price to schools. Potting soil is often considered as an alternative, but there is a big difference between potting soil and compost. Potting soil is made from peat and pine bark and should be used for growing plants in containers and hanging baskets, not as a soil amendment in a garden.

## Fertilizer

Compost alone will typically not provide enough nutrients to grow healthy plants for the entire season. At some point, the plants will need fertilizer from another source. Fertilizer, whether organic or conventional, is relatively inexpensive compared to the other materials. Water-soluble fertilizers are the most expensive but easiest to apply. Granular fertilizers are the cheapest but need to be mixed into the soil before planting or very carefully applied to growing plants.

## Mulch

The best mulch to use in the vegetable bed is wheat or rye straw. It will help keep weeds in check and add organic matter to the garden at the same time. Hay is less desirable because it can introduce weeds to your garden; however, it is often possible to find old bales of straw or hay for free from farmers or landscape suppliers. Broken bales are often swept into piles and offered free to those who can bag and carry it away. Newspaper is also good for mulch, but it will need something overtop to keep it from blowing away. Some people lay cardboard (cut into strips) between rows. Pine straw is fine for fruit plants, but not recommended for vegetables. Wood chips from a brush chipper work well for mulching non-growing areas such as walks and row middles. Wood chips are often available free from tree service companies and utility companies. Wood chips should not be tilled into soil as an amendment because the microorganisms in the soil that break it down use nitrogen the plants need. As mulch, wood chips will break down over time and add to the soil organic matter. Commercial growers use plastic for a mulch, but in the school garden, it will be hard to get water to the roots through plastic and removal is difficult. Weed barrier cloth can be used, but it is expensive and also hard to remove after the growing season. Weed barrier cloth is better used around fruit plants and for walkways where it will remain in place for a long time.

## Hand Tools

Using garden tools is part of the fun of gardening, especially for kids. Having enough tools on hand for every child to use a tool is important for making the garden activity enjoyable and educational for everyone. Another circular in this series, “Stocking the Toolshed” (Circular 1027-8), provides guidance in tool selection and use. In school gardens, tools will be broken and left outside in the weather. It makes no sense to spend large amounts of money or use valuable donated dollars on fancy tools. The first place to look for tools is the staff and families associated with the school. People often have unused tools in their garages and basements. Ask around and see what you can round up for free before purchasing tools. Second, visit flea markets, yard sales and Craigslist to find tools at a reasonable price. Local retailers may also be willing to donate or sell tools for a discounted price. There are many online horticulture tool supply companies that may sell for a cheaper price, but one drawback is that they do not have a local connection.

## Mechanical Tools

Fortunately, school gardens usually do not need expensive tillers, lawn mowers or string trimmers. These tools require experienced people to operate and maintain them. A small hand-held tiller is very useful for tilling small areas and raised beds. You may be able to borrow a tiller from a parent who operates a landscape company. See if someone connected to the school would be willing to donate time and equipment to get a garden started or volunteer for a maintenance day. The school's maintenance department may also be willing to help. A local tool rental store is another option. Even a large tiller can be rented for an entire day for approximately \$50; however, you will still need an experienced operator.

## Mail-Order versus Local Supplies

The Internet offers access to a wide range of garden supplies, often at inexpensive prices. However, most local hardware stores and garden centers will gladly donate supplies to schools or community gardens, and sometimes they might at least offer items for a discount. Broken bags and returned merchandise can often be found for half price. While most online garden supply companies are very trustworthy and reliable, some are known for low-quality or poor service. You can investigate garden suppliers at <http://davesgarden.com/products/gwd/> before making a purchase.

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