

A photograph of a school garden featuring several raised beds with various green leafy vegetables. In the background, there are wooden arches and a pergola structure. The sun is shining brightly from behind the trees, creating a lens flare effect.

Summer Management Strategies for School Gardens

Becky Griffin, UGA Extension Community & School Garden Coordinator

James Morgan, Southeast District Agriculture & Natural Resources Program Development Coordinator

Erin Harper, Stephens County Agriculture & Natural Resources Agent



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Most of our Georgia schools are not in session during the summer months, and a summer management plan is essential to keep the school garden in good condition and ready for the next school year. If the school garden is left in May without any summer management, teachers will return to overgrown weeds that look unsightly and garden beds that need considerable work to be ready for use.

Deciding on a summer management strategy as part of the overall school garden plan is imperative. Here are several strategies to help you plan for a stress-free summer in your school garden, ranked from lowest to highest effort:

Low Level of Effort

Strategy 1: Solarization with Plastic

One strategy to manage the plots without growing crops is solarization. Solarization uses high heat to assist in controlling soilborne pests and killing weeds and weed seeds.

To properly use solarization, rake your garden beds smooth, removing any debris and rocks. Irrigate the area so that the top several inches are moist. Tightly cover the beds with clear plastic, securing the edges with rocks or soil. The plastic needs to touch the soil.

A thinner plastic (1 mil or less) provides greater heating but also tears easily. A slightly thicker plastic (1 mil to 2 mil) is more secure but does not provide as much heat. The plastic can remain on your garden beds until you are ready to plant crops in the fall.



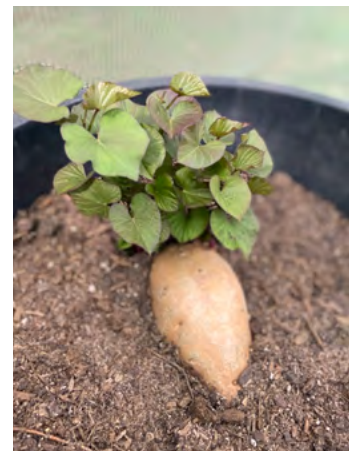
Clear plastic sheets weighed down with bricks for solarization of the soil.

Medium Level of Effort

Strategy 2: Planting Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes can be planted before students leave for the summer. They are a long-season crop, typically maturing in 90–120 days. Sweet potatoes are planted using slips—small pieces of roots—and after establishment, they will need at least 1 in. of water per week. As the plants mature, the leaves and vines cover the soil, helping to control weeds—this way, maintaining the garden is minimal work for summer volunteers.

The sweet potatoes should be ready to harvest after school is back in session, giving teachers a chance to get their new classes started before harvest. Extension publication [C 1014 Home Garden Sweet Potatoes](#) gives details on planting and harvesting. Lesson plans using sweet potatoes can easily be found online.



“Slips”—pieces of roots—are used to grow sweet potatoes.

Strategy 3: Using Cover Crops

Cover crops can build soil, control soil erosion, assist in weed management, and provide resources for pollinators. Cover crops are planted from seed in a prepared garden plot and allowed to grow throughout the season. Just before seed heads form, the crop is chopped down and allowed to dry. The dried material is then tilled back into the soil or removed.

Buckwheat, millet, and cowpeas are appropriate summer cover crops for a school garden. A bonus with this strategy is that it can provide lessons in soil health for your students. A helpful UGA Extension publication, [C 1057 Using Cover Crops in the Home Garden](#), can help you select and plant your cover crop. [Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education](#), a program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, has resources and videos on cover crops that would be useful in a classroom.



L to R: Buckwheat, millet, or cowpeas are summer cover crops suitable for school gardens in Georgia.

Strategy 4: Planting Flower Seeds

Preparation of garden plots for flower seeds can be done during the end of the school year. Zinnias (*Zinnia elegans*), Mexican sunflowers (*Tithonia rotundifolia*), and annual sunflowers all are easily grown by seed. These plants would need limited care during the summer—primarily watering and weeding. These plants should still be blooming when the students return to school and will be useful for school participation in the [Great Southeast Pollinator Census](#).



Zinnias (left) and Mexican sunflowers (right) can be easily grown from seed and can attract pollinators to your school garden.

High Level of Effort

Strategy 5: Community Volunteers

Some schools see the value of making their unused garden space available for community use. Community members who do not have an area to grow summer crops may benefit from the use of the school plots to grow summer vegetables for their families or even for the local food bank. This would require the school garden personnel to recruit and train appropriate community members and establish garden rules. The community volunteers should leave the garden ready for school gardeners to plant crops and ready the garden for the fall season.

Strategy 6: Parent Volunteers

Your school garden committee should have a healthy number of parent volunteers. Volunteering could be a family event where the students work alongside their parents. These volunteers would manage the garden during the summer months, beginning with cleaning out plots from spring crops. Summer duties would include weeding the plots, watering perennials during droughts, and scouting for pest problems. Consider creating a garden duty calendar where parents can sign up for a week of duty during summer break.



There are many online volunteer scheduling tools available that could be helpful. Consider asking workers to leave notes about duties for the next group of volunteers. This strategy would involve volunteer training as well as a volunteer coordinator to assign duties throughout the summer. The goal is for teachers to return to school with the garden ready to use for instruction.

Gardeners can take advantage of the summer to repair or replace rotting or warped boards and repair or replace irrigation equipment. Whichever strategy you choose for your school garden, ensure you have a plan in place to make the transition back to school and the school garden as easy as possible.

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