

# Success Story: Grow It Forward

## Garden Planning is About More than Plants



“Getting a garden project started can feel daunting,” says Amber Daus, founder of Grow It Forward, a nonprofit organization dedicated to building community and promoting healthy lifestyles in Manitowoc through garden-based education and community gardens. “It’s important to remember that there’s lots of help and support out there.”

Daus applies these words of encouragement to educational garden projects large and small. Grow It Forward is home to a large community garden with 30 raised beds for rent and 20 interactive raised beds reserved for visiting schools and programs in the Manitowoc area. But when working with educators, Daus emphasizes that garden projects don’t have to be big to be successful, and the biggest hurdle is often deciding that it’s time to start.

Between establishing the organization’s garden and helping to design and install gardens across Manitowoc, Daus has a unique understanding of challenges involved in garden planning. Knowing that garden planning is a dynamic process, she finds it helpful to think about gardening planning in phases: assessing the resources available, deciding what to do with those resources, exploring educational opportunities, and thinking about what comes next. But whether starting fresh or working with an established garden, the important thing is to think about your particular program’s needs, not how to compete with the garden down the block.

One of the first decisions facing Grow It Forward was deciding where to establish the vast community garden. The first location Daus tried – though a beautiful spot with lots of sunlight – fell through due, in part, to a lack of community support. This early setback, however, led to greater opportunities. The 2-acre community garden now rests on land adjacent to Monroe Elementary School, making it a central location for youth garden-based education. The ambitious garden was installed in 2015 (in a single day!) thanks to strong partnerships and hundreds of volunteers from across the community.



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Thanks in part to Grow It Forward's educational garden beds, educators and students without their own school gardens are able to engage in garden-based learning, including planting and harvesting. The fruit trees and interactive raised beds have become a staple of school field trips across Manitowoc County. But Daugs has seen firsthand how creative educators have gotten their hands in the dirt using the resources available, even when garden beds are not yet an option.

"Planters in the classroom are a good way to start a garden project," encourages Daugs. Smaller, indoor garden projects with manageable upkeep, smaller start-up costs, and big educational opportunities have been popping up across the Manitowoc area. Students at Lincoln High School use grow lights right in the classroom, and at Jefferson Elementary School, a grow light on a little red wagon serves as a mobile garden that can travel from classroom to classroom. "The garden doesn't have to be outdoors," Daugs reminds us. "You can create an indoor garden in your classroom, right where your students already are!"



The garden's location and purpose, as well as available resources, will help dictate what to plant. "We have such a small growing season during the school year," says Daugs. "Decisions about what to plant go beyond what we are putting in the box. Who is responsible for upkeep? Do we want to maintain the garden during the summer?"

Daugs encourages schools without infrastructure for summer garden maintenance to plant quick-growing crops – like radishes, lettuce, and spinach – that can be harvested in late spring, before the school year ends. Planting garlic in the fall is also a good option, as are perennials like fruit trees and raspberries. Grow It Forward emphasizes that choosing what to plant can be a creative and collaborative process. Daugs observes that elementary school students often cheekily suggest growing pizza. This can lead to fun and educational discussions, she notes. "If students say they want to plant pizza, talk about what pizza is made of and plant pizza ingredients!"

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Growing food is a learning process for students and educators. Recalling her share of unsuccessful moments in the garden, Daus emphasizes that growing something is better than growing nothing, and encourages teachers and students to take chances and experiment. One year might seem like a bust, but the lessons from any gardening attempt inform the next year's process.

She remembers with a laugh her first attempt at gardening. "Oh boy! I planted a whole package of radishes in a one-foot row, not realizing that I'd have 100 radishes coming up in that space...The garden – and support from organizations like Grow It Forward – gives us a chance to learn from hands-on experience."



Daus attended our own Growing Minds course, where she discovered that the garden isn't just a place for growing food or learning how to plant a seed, but a versatile space for enhancing any lesson. Even if there is just one small garden bed or a few planters, Daus sees opportunity to have students think about what vegetables or varieties could thrive in the available space. Seed catalogs provide opportunities for math and financial lessons when students determine what they can afford to buy and how they can make the most of their funds. The key, according to Daus? "Don't overthink it! The kids will just enjoy having a hand in the soil and using real world examples. Anything can be a garden lesson. Think about how much money is required for the lumber you need or how much soil it will take to fill a bed. Have kids do story-telling in the garden."

Grow it Forward's success comes from combining a deep understanding of gardening and garden-based learning with the conviction that everyone has it in them to facilitate meaningful moments with kids in the garden. "It's an organic process," says Daus. "You, me, we all have an abundance of knowledge that we can use to create a meaningful experience for kids in any place at any moment."

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