

WISCONSIN SCHOOL GARDEN INITIATIVE BRIEF:

# CONNECTING THE CHILD CARE GARDEN TO THE TABLE



**Wisconsin  
Partnership Program**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

A garden at your early childhood center will not only grow delicious fruits and vegetables, but it will also grow healthier children! Youth gardens offer early childhood sites access to fresh produce and offer children opportunities to plant, care for, and taste a variety of fruits and vegetables. In this document, you will learn the benefits of youth gardens and the measures to take to keep your students and your garden healthy and growing!

## Benefits of Youth Gardens

The early care and education setting has received increased attention for the important role it plays in shaping healthy students. Research has shown that lifelong nutrition and physical activity habits are shaped during these critical years. Anyone who has ever tried to change a habit knows that creating healthy tendencies from the get-go is an easier road than trying to re-train the brain later in life. One habit that gardening produces in young children is the willingness to try new fruits and vegetables. Studies have shown that if children are given the opportunity to plant and tend gardens, they are more willing to try the produce they grow. Early Childhood Educators who garden with their students set the stage for gardening in the elementary years and beyond, greening the opening act of our society's next generation for the promise of a healthier, happier future.

Youth gardens at early childhood sites also offer a place for hands-on learning and natural discovery. When planting seeds, children notice every change leading to the magical discovery of a green seedling popping its head through the soil. These young gardeners will continue to be invested in care of this plant as grows and fruits into a satisfying, memorable snack.

## Ideas to Incorporate Gardening into your Early Childhood Center

- Plant seeds! Starting seeds indoors give students a close-up view of plant germination and growth.
- Pretend garden play allows children to practice the care needed within the real garden. Supply your garden station with child sized garden equipment, seeds to sort, and "plants" to grow.
- Make the garden – and the produce that comes from it – a part of your daily routine. Sing garden songs at circle time, inspect the inside of a squash during a science lesson, and talk about the source of fruits and vegetables at the lunch table.
- Sample fresh produce from the garden. For children and adults alike, there is little else as satisfying as the snap of a green bean grown with care.
- Share the bounty! Young gardeners love to share. Make edible bouquets for parents or pick extra produce and deliver it to neighbors.



## Considerations for a Healthy Garden to Table Program

Because young children have immune systems that are not yet fully developed, they are at increased risk of food borne illnesses. Special attention to proper practices planting, harvesting, storing, and preparing produce help keep children and early childhood sites healthy. Federal and state agencies allow the use of youth garden produce; however, your community may have local regulations that apply. The following suggestions are general considerations and should not serve as the final rule for food safety regulations.

### Planting and Maintaining the Garden:

- Choose an area for the garden away from garbage and septic systems.
- Know the composition of the soil. Use raised beds, containers, or other planting methods if site has contaminated soil.
- Use compost that has been properly prepared and maintained.
- Use approved water and water systems.
- Control weeds and pests without use of herbicides or pesticides.
- If possible, set-up an outdoor washing station.
- Keep animals, both wild and pets, out of the garden.

### Harvesting the Garden:

- Wash hands before and after harvesting.
- Ensure those harvesting have been healthy for 48 hours after illness.
- Select produce with no visible damage.
- Use clean tool to harvest and food-grade containers to collect and transport produce.



### Storing Garden Produce:

- Store produce requiring refrigeration at 41° F or less and room temperature produce in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area.
- Store produce in clean, sanitized containers with labels.

### Preparing Garden Produce:

- Wash hands before and after handling produce.
- Wash produce under running tap water even if produce will be peeled. Use a scrub brush on firm surfaces.
- Avoid cross-contamination with dirty surfaces, tools, or foods.

## Food Safety Resources

Farm to Preschool

<http://www.farmtopreschool.org/>

UMassAmherst: Food Safety from Farm & Garden to Preschool

<http://www.umass.edu/safefoodfarm2kid/>

Healthy Bites: A Wisconsin Guide for Improving Childhood Nutrition

[http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/fns/pdf/healthy\\_bites.pdf](http://fns.dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/fns/pdf/healthy_bites.pdf)

USDA: Farm to Child Care

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-child-care>



For more information about the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, visit us at [WISchoolGardens.org](http://WISchoolGardens.org)

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