

A Primer on School Gardens

Overview

School gardens provide students with enriching learning opportunities outside the traditional classroom while also supplying fresh produce to school cafeterias. Federal policy supports the implementation of school gardens and other farm to school partnerships, and California laws and policies provide guidance for school garden programs within the state. There are also various federal and state grant programs to fund school garden initiatives. By reading this guide, you will gain a high-level understanding of school gardens, the laws and policies to consider before implementation, and the steps to establish a school garden in your community.

About This Guide

A Primer on School Gardens is a resource for those who want to learn about school gardens, with a focus on their operation in California. This resource explores the following core questions:

- [What is a school garden?](#)
- [Who sets school garden and other farm to school policy?](#)
- [How do you start a school garden?](#)
- [What grant opportunities are available in California to start a school garden?](#)

Introduction

Schools in all fifty states, Washington, D.C., tribal sovereign nations, and U.S. territories use farm to school programs, including school garden programs, as a source of fresh produce for their cafeterias.¹ In California, these programs have been widely implemented across the state. School garden programs make healthy food more accessible to students – both by increasing physical access and by shaping attitudes and behaviors toward fruit and vegetable consumption.² School gardens are linked to increased produce consumption, higher intake of dietary fiber and vitamins A and C, improved body mass index (BMI), and improved well-being in children.³ They are also cited as a preventative health measure because of their positive impact on food insecurity and rates of childhood type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.⁴ The benefits of farm to school policies can also extend beyond students themselves. A report published by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) Office of Farm to Fork found that farm to school policies have positive impacts on statewide nutrition security, local economic stability, and climate resilience.⁵

Although this resource focuses on school garden programs, farm to school policies cover a wide range of initiatives, including healthy procurement,⁶ freight farms,⁷ school wellness policies,⁸ and more. Farm to school policies and their implementation vary across states and localities, but they always include at least one of the following core elements: (1) food, nutrition, and agriculture education, (2) local procurement, and (3) school gardens.⁹ These policies complement one another and collectively provide numerous benefits for students, farmers, and the local economy.¹⁰

This resource highlights the legal and policy considerations for starting a school garden program, including educational aspects. For more specific information on farm to school curricula, consider exploring [CalRecycle's school garden curriculum](#) and the [National Farm to School Network and Center for Agriculture and Food Systems' State Farm to School Policy Handbook \(PDFs\)](#). For more information about local procurement initiatives in schools, see ChangeLab Solutions and the California Department of Public Health publications [Homegrown: Implementing State & Local Preferences for Food Procurement \(PDF\)](#) and [Understanding Healthy Procurement: Using Government's Purchasing Power to Increase Access to Healthy Food \(PDF\)](#).

What Is a School Garden?

A school garden is a type of farm to school program that designates a space – typically outdoors – for “interactive, hands-on learning” outside of the classroom.¹¹ Through school gardens, students learn fundamental concepts about food and nutrition, as well as cultural and historical aspects of our food supply¹² and develop a better understanding and appreciation for the following:

- **Land stewardship (e.g., composting, waste management)**
- **Informed, healthy food choices**
- **Origins of food and its journey from farm to table**
- **The important role of agriculture in the state, national, and global economies¹³**

School garden programs can also enhance student learning by integrating school garden curricula with other subjects. For example, schools can bring science lessons to life by providing real examples of plant growth found in the school garden¹⁴ or they can use the garden to inspire writing assignments that incorporate garden crops as prompts.¹⁵ There are several types of school gardens, all which cater to different learning needs and interests:¹⁶

Habitat garden A “natural laboratory” that emphasizes hands-on learning in ecology, biology, and geology. Habitat gardens highlight the area’s natural environment and may include features like native habitat installations, butterfly gardens, and bioswales or other water management systems.

Reading garden An outdoor space designed for reflection and other quiet activities for students, such as reading and writing. Safe, well-maintained, and fully accessible seating is the main feature of this type of garden.

Edible garden A dedicated space where students can grow food for consumption while learning about topics such as agriculture, healthy eating, and culinary arts. Edible gardens may include one or more features for food production, such as fruit tree orchards, raised beds, or in-ground gardens.

Agricultural area A large-scale edible garden that may include fully established farms with orchards, planting areas, and housing for farm animals. This type of garden can also serve as a publicly accessible community garden.

Determining which type of school garden benefit a school community the most depends on a myriad of factors. To learn about the steps to implementing a school garden, refer to the “How Do You Start a School Garden?” section of this resource.

Who Sets Farm to School Policy?

School garden programs are governed by laws at the federal, state, and local levels, either directly or indirectly. The following provides an overview of applicable federal laws, as well as California state and local laws and policies that affect school garden programs.

Federal Laws & Policies

At the federal level, there are no legal restrictions prohibiting the use of school garden produce in school meals. In fact, several federal policies actively encourage such programs.

Relevant U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Policies

Federal law does not directly govern the use of food produced in school gardens, but many federal programs provide relevant guidance. For example, most school cafeterias are subject to regulations under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which was created by the National School Lunch Act. The NSLP and its administrator, USDA, support school garden-to-cafeteria programs “by providing grant funding, guidance and resources, and support for food service personnel who are interested in purchasing products from a school garden.”¹⁷ USDA’s school garden guidance states that Farm to School Grants and NSLP funds can be used to pay for garden supplies, equipment, and staff,¹⁸ with limited exceptions around building permanent structures.¹⁹ It also provides information on year-round gardening, including summer maintenance, using gardens as classrooms, maintaining food safety, establishing gardens in preschool and early childcare settings, and staffing and funding recommendations.²⁰

USDA emphasizes food safety by providing guidelines for safe compost and manure use, as well as protocols for growing and harvesting produce safely – all of which fall under the responsibilities of the school nutrition director and school garden coordinator.²¹ USDA also offers food safety tips for serving school garden produce

as part of reimbursable school lunch programs and requires that school cafeterias comply with state and local health and sanitation requirements. The [FDA Food Code last updated in 2022](#)) does not specifically address the use of school garden produce by school cafeterias.

California Laws & Policies

In California, school cafeteria food sales are governed by the California Retail Food Code (CA Food Code), set forth in the California Health and Safety Code.²² Modeled after the FDA Food Code, the CA Food Code aims to ensure that the food provided to consumers is “safe, unadulterated, and honestly presented.”²³ Under the CA Food Code, public and private school cafeterias are considered “food facilities,” which are subject to several provisions, including those governing food handling and preparation, food safety certifications, and the use of specific food products.²⁴

School gardens, by distinction, fall under the CA Food Code’s definition of “community food producers,” separate from food facilities. The 2015 passage of the Food Production law²⁵ allows community food producers to sell or provide “whole uncut fruits or vegetables, or unrefrigerated shell [egg]s” directly to the public or to a permitted food facility, which includes school cafeterias.²⁶ Community food producers must meet certain labeling and signage requirements and comply with California’s food safety guidelines.²⁷ The California Department of Education has published multiple guidance documents encouraging school food authorities to use cafeteria funds to implement nutrition education efforts, including buying certain supplies and equipment for school gardens.^{28,29}

The Code requires that produce sold or prepared for public consumption be handled properly. Produce must be thoroughly washed in potable water to remove soil and other contaminants, and any chemicals used to wash or peel produce must meet certain requirements.³⁰ Although local health departments should be consulted regarding any additional regulations, using produce from a school garden in the cafeteria is typically allowed as long as proper handling practices are followed.^{31,32}

CDFA Office of Farm to Fork Programs

At the time of publication, the CDFA Office of Farm to Fork has awarded over \$85 million through their Farm to School Incubator (FSI) Grant Program, which funded 375 projects in 2021, 2022, and 2024.³³ Additional information on the successes

of the FSI Grant Program to date can be found in the [2025 Progress Report jointly published by CDFA, the Berkeley Food Institute, and other California food systems leaders](#). The CDFA Office of Farm to Fork also hosts the California Farm to School Network (CFSN), which primarily functions as a communications hub and convener of organizations and partners across the state – including food producers, school nutrition services departments, educators, distributors, and advocates – to support collaboration and peer-to-peer learning.³⁴

Although no FSI grants have been issued for the 2025–2026 cycle and the future of the FSI Grant Program remained uncertain as of 2025,³⁵ advocates have suggested efforts to sustain this work beyond the grant program. In 2025, a proposed California bill would have established the California Farm to School Program, tasked with advancing CFSN’s initiatives – including administering the FSI Grant Program – through the creation of a Farm to School Account in CDFA’s Fund.³⁶ Another 2025 bill called for the reestablishment of the Instructional School Gardens Program.³⁷ Policies and initiatives like these, if passed, could become important sources of funding and technical assistance for school garden implementation and maintenance.³⁸

As of 2025, CDFA considers projects that enhance or benefit agricultural education opportunities for students and educators, including school or community garden enrichment programs.³⁹ The [California Agriculture License Plate \(CalAgPlate\) Grant Program](#) is another funding opportunity for school gardens. Additionally, CDFA’s Urban Agriculture Grant Program is under development for another round of awards to support urban farmers and gardeners across the state;⁴⁰ previous awardees included projects that centered students and after-school garden programs.⁴¹

Local Policies & Example Programs

Individual school districts and private schools may have policies that affect the use of school garden produce in their cafeterias. The National Farm to School Network recommends involving district and school administrators, facility and food service staff, students, teachers, and community members throughout the planning process to both develop a program vision and ensure success.⁴² Doing so can also help ensure that the implementation of the school garden does not face barriers later. Engaging diverse, interdisciplinary voices in the conversation can highlight relevant considerations or potential obstacles, such as wellness policies, liability policies, procedures for receiving gifts and donations, and opportunities to work

with parent and community volunteers.⁴³ Given the prevalence of school gardens in California, it is unlikely that a school district would have restrictive policies, but district policies can vary widely and should be consulted on an individual basis.

For example, the [Los Angeles Unified School District \(LAUSD\) has an approved plant list \(PDF\)](#) detailing a wide variety of native, nonnative, and edible plant species, with notes on allergens, planting and harvesting times, and school garden recommendations,⁴⁴ [and an approved tree list \(PDF\)](#), including information on tree size, watering and light needs, allergens, and susceptibility to invasive species.⁴⁵ [LAUSD also published a School Garden Guidebook \(PDF\)](#) to help site administrators create and sustain gardens that best serve their school communities.⁴⁶ In addition to state grant opportunities, LAUSD offers additional funding for K–12 schools through its Sustainable Environment Enhancement Developments for Schools (SEEDS) program.⁴⁷ Furthering Los Angeles’s greening projects – an initiative started in 1997 – [LASUD’s SEEDS program](#) awards “a maximum of \$100,000 in landscape design, infrastructure improvements, and installation of landscaping materials to make [a] school’s space ‘garden ready.’” Grantees are also offered the support of an LAUSD landscape architect.⁴⁸

Schools should also consider collaborating with partner organizations and supporting community-initiated projects.⁴⁹ Pacific School in Davenport, CA has been a community leader since founding their [Life Lab garden program](#) in 1983.⁵⁰ Project Life Lab has received grants from the California Fertilizer Foundation, KidsGardening.org, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Ocean Guardian School program, as well as prize money from a CFSN Golden Seed Award.⁵¹ However, the Pacific School Parents Club and dedicated community members have sustained the garden over the years through donations to fund garden staff and by volunteering their time.⁵² Developing relationships and working with parent and community volunteers is also encouraged by California, as outlined in the [CalFresh Healthy Living Community Impact Framework \(PDF\)](#).

How Do You Start a School Garden?

Starting a school garden program can involve a lot of communication, effort, and logistics planning, but following four main best practices can make the process more manageable: (1) engage stakeholders, (2) explore and secure a variety of

funding opportunities, (3) design your garden and garden curriculum, and (4) set yourself up for success by planning for garden maintenance and long-term sustainability.⁵³

Engage Stakeholders

There are many stakeholders who should be consulted throughout the planning process for a school garden program, including school district staff; school administrators and other staff, such as the school's complex project manager,⁵⁴ facility and food service staff, and teachers; parents; students; and community members.⁵⁵ Developing a successful vision and plan for the garden and its benefit to the school community is best done through equitable community engagement, which involves directly engaging with these stakeholders, as well as partnering with organizations that have established trust and regularly engage with communities.⁵⁶ Identifying partner organizations that can offer planning, curriculum, and ongoing maintenance support can be an important step in addressing questions, securing grant opportunities, and ensuring long-term sustainability of the garden.⁵⁷

In the stakeholder engagement process, consider the following questions and discuss them as a group:

- **What purposes will the garden serve (e.g., education, food production, pollinator habitat)?**
- **How will the garden be integrated into learning objectives and standards-based instruction?**
- **How will teachers be trained or encouraged to use the garden?**
- **How will students engage with the garden?**
- **Who will plan and maintain the garden?**
- **What will happen to the garden when school is not in session, such as in the summer?**⁵⁸

Explore & Secure Funding Opportunities

This guide lists various federal, state, and local grant opportunities, but it is important to apply to any that are relevant to your school and circumstances. Other funding options include hosting a crowdfunding campaign, such as on GoFundMe, organizing a fundraising event, or reaching out to local nurseries, hardware stores, businesses, and partner organizations for donations, discounts, or volunteer

support.^{59,60} Fundraising events can include silent auctions, raffles, craft or art sales, or a “Donate a Tool Day.”⁶¹ As modeled by Pacific School, it’s also important to ask school administrators and parent groups for contributions from their budgets or donations.⁶² Once a garden is established, fundraising through seed or plant sales or hosting events like garden-to-table dinners are great ways to raise money for the year ahead.⁶³

| Government Level | Grant Name | Grant Description |
|------------------|---|--|
| Federal | USDA’s Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program | This grant program is designed to “increase the availability of local foods in Child Nutrition Program (CNP) operations and connect students to the sources of their food through education, taste tests, school gardens, field trips, and local food sourcing for CNP meals.” ⁶⁴ |
| State | California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program | The focus of this grant program changes annually, but past years have supported nutrition education, sustainable food production, equitable access, and climate resilience. ⁶⁵ |
| Local | Los Angeles Unified School District’s SEEDS Program | Some school districts offer funding opportunities directly. |
| Federal | Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production (UAIP) Grants | These grants initiate or expand efforts of various stakeholders in urban and suburban areas to address “food access, education, business and start-up costs for new farmers, and development of policies related to zoning and other needs of urban production.” ⁶⁶ The grants prioritize innovative production and also provide funding for Composting and Food Waste Reduction cooperative agreements . |

| Government Level | Grant Name | Grant Description |
|------------------|---|--|
| State | CalAgPlate Grant Program | This grant program focuses on projects that enhance or benefit agricultural education opportunities for students and educators, including school and community garden enrichment programs. ⁶⁷ |
| Local | Greening Programs | Examples of Greening Programs include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature Explore programs • LAUSD's Greening Our Schools initiative • San Francisco Unified School District's School Facilities Bond Program and Green Schoolyard Program • San Francisco Public Utilities Commission's Green Infrastructure Grant and Community Garden Irrigation Meter Grant |
| Federal | Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) | This program reimburses enrolled early childhood education sites, after-school programs, adult day care centers, and emergency shelters for nutritious meals and snacks for eligible children and adults. Funds can be leveraged to support school gardens at early childhood education sites by defraying costs associated with local food procurement, garden development and maintenance, and educational programming. |

| Government Level | Grant Name | Grant Description |
|------------------|--|--|
| State | Urban Agriculture Grant Program | These grants fund projects aimed at supporting urban farmers and gardeners across the state and prioritize Priority Populations in the first round. ⁶⁸ In November 2024, Californians passed Proposition 4, which made \$20 million available for urban agriculture projects that create or expand city or suburban gardens. The next iteration of the grant program is currently in development. ⁶⁹ |
| Local | Community-Initiated Projects | Examples of community-initiated projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate sponsors • PTA/PTO funding • Climate Action Now! (San Francisco) • California Native Plant Society; several chapters have school garden grant programs • California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom grants and scholarships |
| State | California State Water Resources Control Board Low Impact Development Projects | The Board's Division of Financial Assistance has supported the Drought Response Outreach Program for Schools (DROPS), which has funded various landscaping projects, including native pollinator gardens. ⁷⁰ |

Design Your Garden & Curriculum

Design specifics may vary depending on several factors, such as a school's funding climate, geographic location, and readiness for policy change. These factors aside, the general first step of the design process is identifying a site for the garden. For an edible garden, this requires a space that receives at least six hours of sunlight per day. If the space will also be used as an outdoor learning environment, it is recommended to choose a site with some existing shade, such as from an established tree.⁷¹ If planting trees is part of the anticipated design, it should be taken into account that their establishment and ability to provide adequate shade may take several years.⁷² Site selection should also consider water sources; choosing a site with nearby access can reduce the amount of funding needed to extend water lines or time spent hand watering.⁷³

Accessibility should also be central to the school garden design. Features such as concrete walkways, adapted garden tools, vertical growing systems, and accommodations for different sensory needs can help ensure all students and visitors can enjoy the garden.^{74,75} The [National Farm to School Network offers starting guidance](#) on how to make school gardens accessible.

Designing the educational aspect of a school garden is just as important as designing a garden's physical space. The [California Foundation for Agriculture in the Classroom offers a variety of resources](#) including webinars, lesson plans, links to books and lesson packets, and other planting recommendations and resources.⁷⁶ [Readers to Eaters books promote food literacy for children in English and Spanish](#) and can complement a school garden lesson plan.

Ongoing Maintenance & Garden Sustainability

Once the design is finalized and approved by your school, planting can begin! Although this guide links to several planting resources, it is also recommended to consult guides specific to your region or to speak with experienced gardeners.⁷⁷ Planting Day can be a great way to raise awareness about your project and support future fundraising opportunities.⁷⁸

To ensure your school garden thrives for years to come, it's important to develop a sustainability plan that includes:

- **planning for regularly scheduled maintenance**
- **identifying resources to support the garden's long-term upkeep**

- **championing the garden’s success stories to build ongoing support**
- **supporting teachers and other school staff who use the garden with tools and training**
- **continuing to find ways to connect the school garden to the school experience and student learning objectives.⁷⁹**

Schools can involve students, teachers, and other volunteers in garden maintenance by creating a garden club to coordinate planting and upkeep throughout the year.⁸⁰ Maintenance schedules can include watering, weeding, thinning, mulching, fertilizing, composting, and other tasks based on the garden’s unique needs.⁸¹ Importantly, many of these tasks can be carried out by students, allowing them to be incorporated into lesson plans and providing valuable opportunities for learning and physical activity.⁸²

[CalFresh Healthy Living has developed a Garden Maintenance Guide \(PDF\)](#) that can be adapted to a specific region and includes monthly recommendations, garden tasks, and educational activities to be used throughout the year.

Other Resources to Explore

- [**Challenges and Solutions to Creating a Strong School Garden Culture \(Google Docs Resource Hub\)**](#)
- [**The Edible Schoolyard Project’s Resource Library for School Garden Curricula**](#)
- [**Model School Board Resolution in Support of Establishing a Farm-to-School Program**](#)
- **National Farm to School Network:**
 - [**Farm to School Coordinator Job Description Template**](#)
 - [**National Farm to School Network School Garden Resources**](#)
- [**Model Policies for Sustaining School Gardens and Funding Garden Coordinators \(See Santa Cruz and San Francisco examples\)**](#)
- **School wellness policies:**
 - [**Incorporating Shared Use into Local School Wellness Policies**](#)
 - [**Local School Wellness Policy Implementation Tools and Resources**](#)

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