



**ARKANSAS**  
**Farm to School**

# School Garden Layout and Structure

School gardens are a fantastic educational tool and provide students with the opportunity to eat healthy foods, connect to nature, and learn about nutrition. School gardens also provide an avenue for students to engage in hands-on learning through gardening and farming. Aside from gathering your [farm to school committee](#) and [acquiring funding](#), planning the layout and structure of the garden is an essential step in starting a garden program at your school.



For additional help and support in school garden development, contact Cecilia Trotter, State School Garden Manager at the Arkansas Department of Agriculture, [cecilia.trotter@agriculture.arkansas.gov](mailto:cecilia.trotter@agriculture.arkansas.gov), (501) 295-8856.

## Determining the Location of your Garden

When choosing the location of your garden, the first decision is whether you want to plant an indoor or outdoor garden. You should consider available space and resources for your project, as well as the amount of time your team is willing to devote to the garden.



### Indoor

If you want to start small, or do not have access to an outdoor growing space, an indoor garden is a great option! A simple way to grow indoors is windowsill gardening.

Windowsill gardens are easy to manage, take up relatively little space, and are a fantastic way to integrate convenient hands-on learning in your classroom. You must be sure to grow your plants in front of windows that receive good amounts of sunlight! Indoor gardens can also supplement natural sunlight with [grow lights](#). You can learn more about [windowsill gardens here](#).

## Outdoor

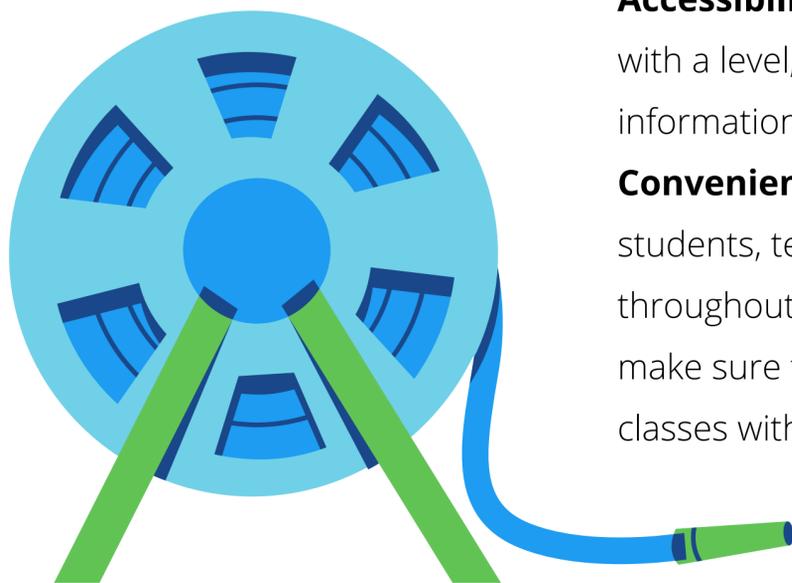
If you decide to start an outdoor garden, consider the following factors when choosing a location:

**Sun:** plants need plenty of sunlight to grow, so be sure the location you decide on is not too shaded. Observe the site throughout the day to be sure it gets at least 6-8 hours of direct sunlight.

**Soil:** nutrient-rich, well-drained soil is essential for growing a bountiful garden. Determine soil texture and consider testing for pH and nutrient content in potential garden sites. Reach out to your [local Cooperative Extension office](#) for information on testing your soil.

**Access to a nearby water source:** your garden should have a nearby spigot or water line in order to irrigate your plants.

**Water drainage:** if possible, avoid sites that are too low, too sloped, or that collect a lot of standing water (particularly if you are planning an in-ground garden).



**Accessibility:** your garden site should be handicapped accessible, with a level, wide pathway so all can enter the space. More information on creating an accessible garden can be found [here](#).

**Convenient for learning:** choose a location that is convenient for students, teachers, and other community members to visit throughout the day, including during recreational time. However, make sure the garden can still be a space to conduct lessons and classes without too many distractions.

## Designing the Garden Layout

Once you have a location for your garden, sketch out the site and start brainstorming a layout for the space. Include students in sketching, measuring, and designing the garden!

First, use a measuring tape to gather the dimensions of the space you are creating. Next, measure the features within the site such as existing structures and vegetation. Then, draw a rough sketch of the garden site and include the site boundaries, existing features, and water source. Be sure to note the cardinal directions on your sketch, and remember it is important to orient your garden so it gets south-facing sunlight.



Once you have the major features of the area sketched out, brainstorm how you would like to arrange your garden. Take into account all of the elements of your garden: different types of beds, pathways, seating areas, and/or outdoor classroom space. Try out different configurations until you develop a general idea of where you want each element.

## Deciding the Growing Space Structure of your Garden

After you brainstorm the layout of your garden, it is time to decide on the structure of your growing space and finalize the garden design. There are three main types of outdoor growing spaces you can choose from (or mix and match):

- container gardens;
- raised beds; or
- in-ground.

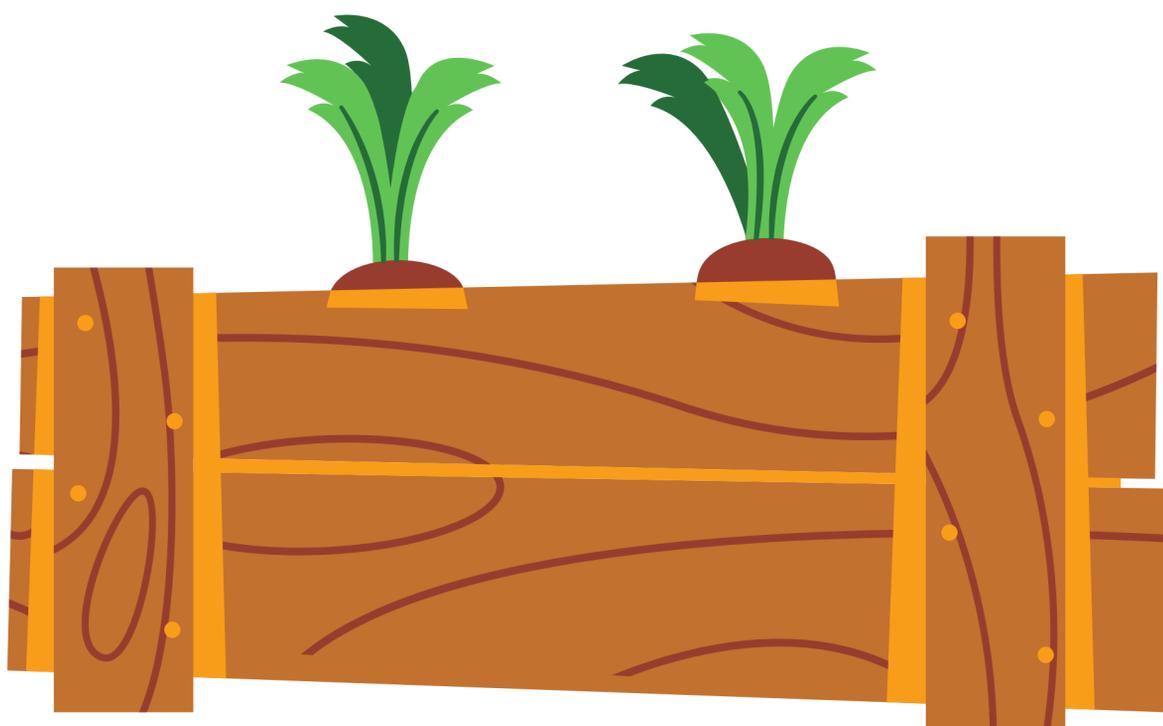
### Container gardens

Container gardens are a good choice for smaller, lower-maintenance planting projects. The first step in preparing a container garden is acquiring your containers, and the possibilities are endless. Regular flower pots, plastic bins or buckets, or reused items such as old wheelbarrows make great containers! Drill holes in your containers for proper drainage and to prevent overwatering. Fill your chosen containers with a good potting soil mix instead of garden soil, which can get too dense and compacted in containers.



### Raised beds

Raised beds are a good option for an area without adequate soil for gardening, and can also be more easily accessible to people of all ages and physical conditions. The initial cost and labor of filling raised beds with soil can be substantial, but once built they are tidy, easily manageable, and a great option for gardening with kids.



Raised beds can be made of wood, bricks, or other materials. When installing a raised bed it is a good idea to line the bottom with landscaping fabric, cardboard, or newspaper to suppress weeds. Raised beds can be filled with soil from surrounding areas or soil brought in from another location, as well as mulch, compost, and other soil amendments. If you need to buy soil, fill the raised beds with a mixture of quality garden soil and compost.

### **In-ground gardens**

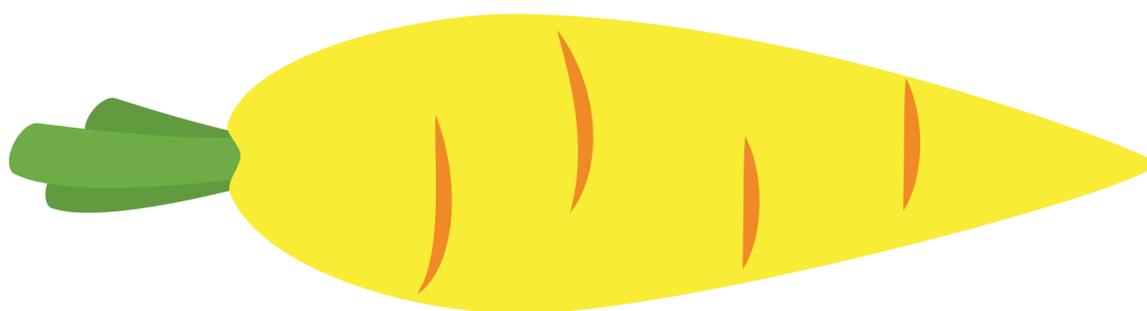
Growing directly in the ground is the third option for your outdoor garden. In-ground gardens provide many benefits, one being that the initial cost of starting the garden is generally lower than raised beds. In-ground gardens can be prepared through tilling the soil mechanically or by hand, which will help remove weeds and loosen the soil. The garden can also be prepared through no-till methods such as solarization or lasagna gardening.

No matter which type of garden you choose, be sure the beds are an appropriate size for your students. Beds that are three feet wide are the ideal size for children to reach into, and it is recommended that school garden beds are no wider than four feet.



### **Dig in!**

Deciding on the location, design, and structure of your garden takes hard work and thoughtful planning, but it is essential in order to help your plants and students thrive. Once you complete this essential stage, you can move on to collecting tools and materials, choosing crops, and planting your garden!



For more information and to sign up for the newsletter, visit [arfarmtoschool.org](http://arfarmtoschool.org).

