

School Gardens: Fences & Borders

Ideas for creating a sense of space

A school garden is a classroom without walls but it is helpful to have borders for your school garden to delineate the outdoor classroom for students. While there may need to be a solid fence to keep students safe and on school grounds, in the majority of situations, a semblance of a fence or some feature that serves as a border will work and provide additional intrigue or appeal to the school garden.

The key role of a garden border is to help students identify the area as an outdoor classroom. This is particularly so for a garden bordering a field or other open space, or if the garden is close to foot traffic. And yet, an important ingredient to school garden success and sustainability is to have a space that is welcoming and open to the community. Below we highlight key considerations and provide options that can be adapted to your garden classroom.

When deciding what to use as a garden border, start with the least restrictive type and evolve as needed into options that limit movement. Remember, at an early age, we all learn to not walk into the street without looking. The majority of students will only ever need markers that help them (and their bodies) remember to stay within the garden during visits to the garden classroom. Walls have a way of fostering the types of unwanted activities we want to avoid.

With your garden team and other educators, discuss the relative importance of each of the following principles to your school and the students who will be using the garden.

Safety

- Being able to see students at all times
- Avoid creating a space for unwanted visitors
- Avoid plants/materials that might inadvertently hurt students or staff

Aesthetics

- Assess how much space can be afforded without detracting from the garden area
- Use plants that have educational connections (i.e. food or forage)
- other uses for borders (i.e. seating)

Maintenance

- Level of maintenance the border type will require
- Avoid a border that requires significant changes to maintaining space/grass around it

“Define the garden boundaries with visual cues or physical barriers such as containers, planters, boxes, grow bags, straw bales, and more. Markings on the ground with paint, rubber cones, or removable, reusable fences can be used to indicate physical distancing and perimeter markings for teachers and students.”

- Green Schoolyard
America

5 Creative Borders

Range between 6" and 3' wide and at least two feet tall

1) "Soft" Fences

Though this document focuses on options other than fences, there are alternatives to a chain-link fence that are low cost, easy to set-up and can enable ingenuity and innovation or highlight local traditions.

- A rope fence that doesn't necessarily prevent runners, but indicates to students that they should go no further. (See Case Study below)
- A Split Rail Fence is the very solid cousin to the rope fence
- A wattle fence can "grow" with contributions from the school community. Or take spin on this idea and combine it with vining plants that contribute to the structure when they die back each year.



From " How to Build at Wattle Fence"
<https://gardenandhappy.com/wattle-fence/>



Apples trained along split rail fence. Photo from
JuniperHillFarmNH.com

Long grasses or green branches or even growing vines are woven between sticks and stay there through the seasons. It is typical to add to it or replace wattle over the years and unusual to have a complete wattle fence in one season. These types of fences can be as low or as high as you like. For a burst of color use a bit of yarn or twine.

2) Perennials and annuals, such as grasses or other tall native plants

Perennials and self-seeding annuals are effective in the fall, but not so much in the spring when they are growing. However, this may be a great option if they are native pollinator-friendly or showy flowers so that students build muscle memory of the space as a border of their garden classroom that will carry into the spring. Karl Forester Grass is a "well-behaved" grass that grows in clumps and doesn't spread too much. It is reasonably straight and tall.

3) Living fence or panels for vining plants

Cucamelons, gourds, small winter squashes, runner beans, and malabar spinach are some of the plants that can grow well in small spaces, and as they climb a panel or trellis structure create a beautiful and soft area. This can be an attractive option for areas where visibility remains good as it can take substantially less area and be a “living fence”.



Tweak this design to be smaller or shorter. If created as units, might be able to move as needed. Photo from Green Schoolyards America

4) Wooden structures

Wood ages well in garden settings, and can both soften and welcome visitors while maintaining the sense of a border.

Adding color or movement can attract students and in this way prevent students from leaving the space. Below are some ideas to grow on.

- A brightly colored balance beam or large trunk—that is either on the ground or lifted a short distance off the ground.
- Short “stumps” in various heights can create visual appeal, provide for large muscle movement, and can serve as both table tops or additional seating (or standing seat) for small ones.



Using stumps can create a gathering space (pictured) or placed in a row to create an interesting border that can also serve as seating. A variation on this design is the use of 3-6' lengths of tree trunks

5) Tall shrubs, hedge or thick trees

Major plantings can soften an area and can provide early spring flowers, but require maintenance and easy to hide in.

- A densely planted fence (such as a wall of tall shrubs or hedge, can create hiding areas where it is hard to see youth or others you may not be expecting in the garden.
- Edible shrubs that flower early and provide food for animals, such as serviceberry, bush cherry, honeyberry can provide food and flowers to attract animals
- Shrubs or trees like arborvitae require regular pruning and can grow more than 3 feet wide. They will need a minimum of 2 feet in width.
- Creates hiding spots for youngest students and interfere keeping an eye on older students.



<https://backyardscape.com/how-close-to-a-fence-can-i-plant-a-hedge/>

Our Rope Fence

At our school, people were walking through our newly installed pollinator garden. They just didn't "see" it. So we put up a simple rope fence to delineate the space and encourage people to go around the pollinator garden and it did the trick!

It continues to stand after 4 years and find it helpful to continue to mark that this is a garden, particularly each spring during that period between snowmelt and perennial popping!

Initially, we drilled holes to thread a rope through. But the rope was too big so we just tied one string of rope around each of the 4' high 2x2 lumber posts. At times we have to straighten or adjust the rope, but we have lots of student volunteers to help!

In addition, the rope fence allows students to get close to the plants from outside of the garden as well and investigate the flowers or insects they see.



A simple rope fence in need of some adjustment, but doing the job of keeping people from running through the pollinator garden at Bruce Vento Elementary.

Borders can add learning opportunities, excitement and joy to the garden space. Keep in mind potential security issues for school spaces and other community spaces that are open to the public. Start with the least restrictive type of fencing or border possible and evolve the garden's borders only as needed.

May your garden grow with ideas and innovation!

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References

Non-cited photos from Green Schoolyards America:

<https://www.greenschoolyards.org/school-gardens-2>

See more Ideas at <https://www.joyfultoddlers.com/play-garden/>
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<https://granthamsunriserotary.org/projects/ambergate-school-sensory-garden/>