



# Getting a Garden Started

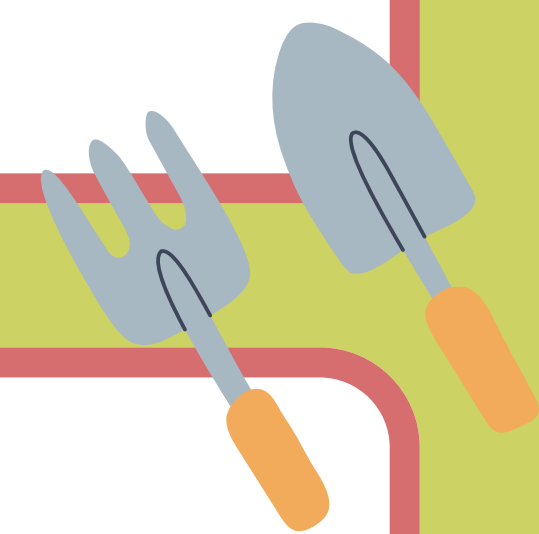


SCHOOL  
FOOD  
MATTERS

## Before You start

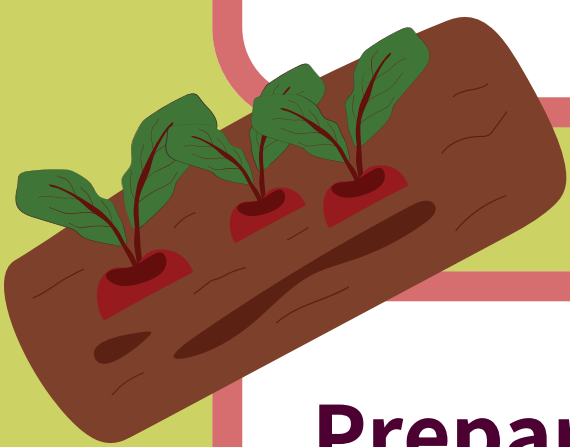
When it comes to gardening, spending time planning before you get started will make your growing journey a lot simpler.

Thinking about where to site your plot and what kind of soil you have can be a learning opportunity for your students and will bring long-term benefits for your crops. It is even more important in a school setting to make your life as easy as possible and create the optimal conditions for growing. That way, you can prevent students from becoming disappointed by failed crops. After all, whilst understanding that not all crops can be successful is part of the learning journey, it's also important to have some successful fruit or veg to celebrate at harvest time.



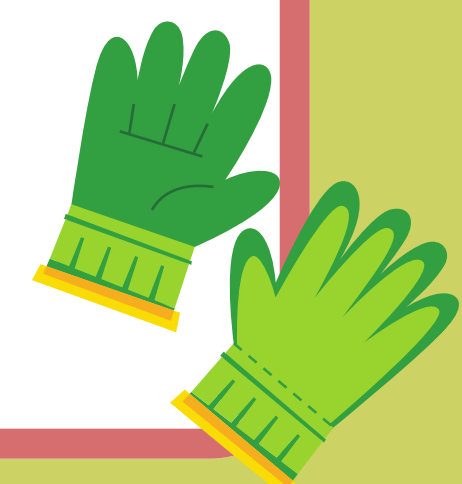
## Choosing Your Site

- Run your beds east to west for maximum light.
- Think about amenities. Don't make work for yourself. Make sure you have easy access to water. Is there an outdoor tap or a good place to put a water butt?
- Try and make sure the site is easily accessible. If you plan to use the space with students in wheelchairs for example, consider the height of the beds and leave enough room for safe passage through the site. You'll need to think about ground materials too so that pathways do not get too waterlogged and muddy.
- Make sure there is a good composting area close by: this needs to be a level, well-drained spot, so that any excess water drains away.
- Be aware of the wind strength and direction. Ideally make your garden site near a hedge or open fence as this will filter the wind.
- Encourage wildlife. Include a small area of land for wildflowers, a bird box, or a bug hotel.
- Build in drainage if required. (Take a look at the [RHS website](#) to find out more.)
- You could consider adding a [weather station](#).



## Preparing and Designing the Site

- Seek inspiration – chat to other schools or growing communities in the area who have successful gardens about what has worked well and less well in their gardens.
- Look at the spaces you have available for the site and spot potential problems. For example, is your proposed site shaded by lots of mature trees which will starve the plants of water and sunlight? Is it on the edge of an area that experiences very high footfall? How will you protect it if so?
- Measure the site.
- Draw a rough plan.
- Place all hard landscaping and features (paths, raised beds, wildlife area).



# Getting a Garden Started: Soil

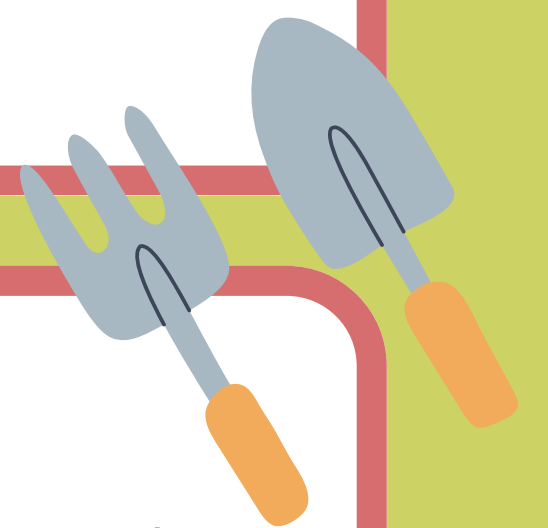


## Soil Type

Testing – Test soil with the squeeze test (below) or a PH test. The squeeze test is for determining the soil type:

- Clay (or heavy soil) will mould into a sticky ball. This soil type is harder to work with but rich in nutrients. It does, however, have the potential to become waterlogged.
- Sand (light soil) is fine to the touch and will slide through the fingers (fail to form a ball). It has good drainage but is poor in nutrients. It is susceptible to leeching (the washing through of nutrients).
- Silt is finer than sand and will form a ball but looks like a crumbling piece of cake when any pressure is applied. It is darker in colour due to a high amount of organic matter.

The best soil is loam soil which is a mixture of sand, silt and clay. It is easy to work with and is rich in humus and organic matter.



## Improving Your Soil

Think of your soil as you think of a plant or a pet, as a living organism. If your soil is too light or heavy, it needs to be improved – incorporate plenty of organic matter as follows:

- Clay: dig over and add organic matter in the autumn, leave to the frost to break up.
- Sandy soils: should be dug over in spring. Add organic matter (well-rotted horse manure).
- If the soil is very compacted, then you can either dig to aerate or adopt no dig principles.

The no-dig method is a term used to describe a form of cultivation that doesn't require digging, forking or rotavating. No dig offers a low-maintenance way of crop production and leaves the soil undisturbed to promote soil health. The basic steps to creating a no-dig bed include:

- Find an area of land suitable for planting e.g. a raised bed/patch of grass.
- To suppress current, and prevent future weeds, cover the ground with a double layer of cardboard. Avoid using plastic, printed cardboard and remove staples/tape before positioning.
- Weigh the cardboard down by applying a thick layer (10-15 cm) of mulch/manure/compost. If you want to start planting the area straight away, then wet the cardboard first.
- For more information about no-dig click [here](#).
- Remember to keep the soil healthy by adding organic matter to the soil as raised beds can become nutrient-depleted quickly.



## Keeping it Healthy

- It's important to compost all garden waste - what you take out you must return. If you are throwing stuff away, then something is wrong.
- Add compost on a regular basis to keep supplying the soil with organic matter.
- If you have access, dig over and add rotted manure in the dormant season.
- Dig in green manures and legumes (beans and peas) to the soil when they have finished fruiting to introduce nitrogen back into the soil.
- Sow green manure (plant-based alternatives to animal manure) in winter to keep soil healthy, prevent soil erosion and nutrient depletion.

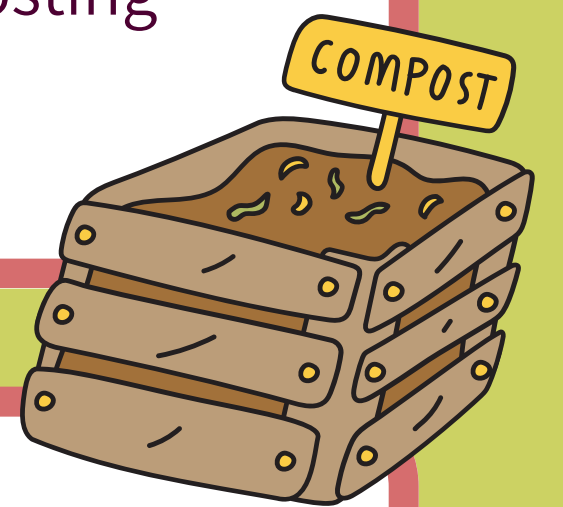




# Getting a Garden Started: Composting

## Composting

- A wooden, open compost bin, with a removable front is best. To build one out of wooden pallets, find out more [here](#).
- Small compost bins made of plastic can be used but need to be turned several times a year to ensure that enough oxygen is getting to the compost (e.g. insert a fork/shovel into the compost and literally turn it over, making sure that you bring organic matter from the bottom to the surface). If not, they can become anaerobic (i.e. oxygen depleted - they will smell like rotten eggs or rotten vegetables) and can become invaded by the wrong type of micro-organisms.
- When composting you want to create a balance of carbon and nitrogen in your compost heap, otherwise known as the ratio between your browns and greens.
  - Carbon-rich (browns): wood chip, sawdust, shredded paper/cardboard, spent coffee grounds, wood ash or dead leaves.
  - Nitrogen-rich (greens): lawn clippings, vegetable peelings, teabags or dead organic matter.
  - Follow the general rule of three parts carbon/brown to one part nitrogen/green.
- Things to avoid composting: dairy products, meat, fish, perennial weed roots and seeding weeds.
- Branches and twigs should be shredded or cut into small pieces and have their own composting area.



## Composting Hints and Tricks

- Turn your compost regularly (see above) to let in the air and encourage the right sort of micro-organisms.
- Use a wormery or add composting worms to help the compost break down.
- Add composting accelerants, some purists may see this as non-organic.
- Items that cannot be put directly on the compost heap can be burnt to ashes (in an incinerator) then added to the compost.



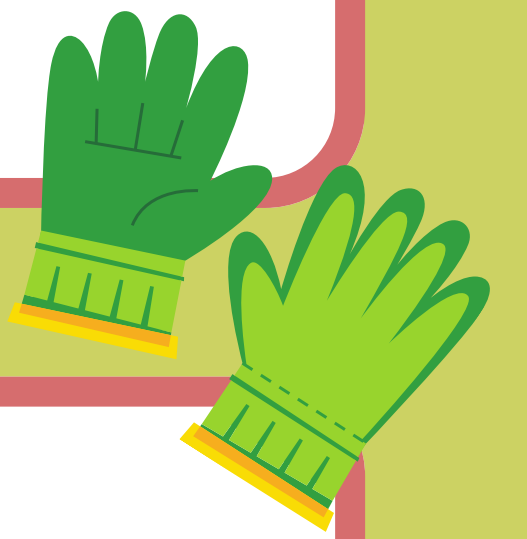


# Getting a Garden Started: Equipment and Building a Gardener Network



## Equipment

- Gardening doesn't have to be an expensive undertaking, but there are a few essential pieces of kit, some of which you or your students might have at home. When it comes to tools, ask colleagues or parents if they have second-hand tools that they can contribute to the cause. A basic tool kit will consist of the following:
  - Spade
  - Fork
  - Hoe
  - Rake
  - Hand tools: trowels, hand forks, secateurs, and scissors
  - Pots, seed trays, yoghurt pots etc.
  - A protected warm space for seedlings
  - Labels and a Sharpie
  - String
  - Watering can and rose attachment
  - Bucket
  - Canes or sticks
  - Gloves (always encourage children to put their hands in the soil)
  - Seeds



## Building a Gardener Network

- Take a look at our sheet of organisations offering support and sign up to any you think might be useful. Many of the groups are free to join and can offer a huge amount of support. Being part of a network of like-minded people will be useful on your growing journey.
- Look around for local gardening groups and societies.
- Connect with local allotment organisations. There may be experienced gardeners there who are happy to share advice or visit your plot.

