Accessible Garden-Based Learning

Approached with intention, the garden can be a positive and effective learning space for all students regardless of age, ability, or developmental level. Here we have outlined some elements - gleaned from our own work as well as the resources listed below - that would be useful to consider in your garden space when working with very young students, neurodiverse students, or students with disabilities. We welcome your feedback, and encourage you to keep exploring!

Hardscape

- Build the garden in an accessible location with easy access to water, bathrooms, and shade.
- Build wide, smooth, non-slip, level, clean, and limited-glare pathways.
- Incorporate a mixture of large and small, open and enclosed spaces throughout the garden. Include quiet and calming retreat spaces.
- Utilize raised beds or other containers at different heights, roll-under tables and garden beds for wheelchair access, containers with wheels, and/or retractable hanging baskets.
- Offer both stationary and mobile seating that includes safe places to rock, glide, or swing.

Plants

- Integrate sensory plants throughout the garden, rather than building a designated sensory area.
- Avoid thorny or poisonous plants.
- Have students with limited fine motor skills plant large seeds like beets, sunflowers, beans, peas, melons, or squash.
- Grow crops that can tolerate heavy picking like beans, peas, berries, “cut and come again” leaf lettuces, greens, herbs, and tomatoes.
- Grow crops that do not require preparation before eating.
- Grow crops that are easily mashed or pureed without cooking like melons, berries, greens, or tomatoes.
- Provide shade with large plants like fruit trees or sunflowers, or with vining plants grown on arbors, trellises, or pole tents.

Programming Tips

- Offer flexibility in garden tasks based on interest and ability. Utilize stations. Incorporate activities that require low physical effort.
- Make room and time for open exploration, play, error, mess, and repetition.
- Practice hand over hand guidance for activities like digging, planting, or watering.
- Provide additional staffing or volunteers for one-on-one support.
- Provide perceptible information through visuals, large print, Braille, or assistive technology.
- Utilize ergonomic, enabling, lightweight, and appropriately-sized trowels, watering cans, and other tools. Modify handles with foam padding or bicycle tape for improved gripping. Offer gloves with gripping. Store tools in the garden and make sure they can be easily accessed and reached.

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Garden Activities for Any Student

- Dig! Dig planting holes, dig for decomposers, or integrate compost.
- Plant seeds or seedlings. Water!
- Create sensory stations or a sensory scavenger hunt.
- Make nature-based art! Press plant parts in clay, make plant rubbings, hammer flower petals to make prints, create mud paintings, or build mandalas.
- Incorporate songs, especially accompanied by sign language or simple movements like Dirt Made My Lunch and Sun, Soil, Water, and Air.
- Harvest, process, and share food. Utilize a mortar and pestle or food mill to mash or puree food.

Books

- *Naturally Inclusive: Engaging Children of All Abilities Outdoors*, by Ruth Wilson PhD
- *Therapeutic Gardens: Design for Healing Spaces*, by Daniel Winterbottom and Amy Wagenfeld

Online Resources

- Green Schoolyards America: Inclusive Design for Outdoor Spaces
- Kids Gardening
    - Create an Accessible Garden for Those of all Physical Abilities
    - Design a Garden that Honors Individuality and Fosters Connection
    - Designing Garden Programs for All
    - Designing Garden Spaces for Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder
    - Landscape Design for Youth Gardens e-Course
    - Plants for Pre-K Gardens
- School Garden Project: Increasing Inclusion in the School Garden