

School Gardens

Funding Strategies

By Cindy Finneseth

School gardens are one of the three pillars of Farm to School (F2S) programs – a living laboratory that complements locally-produced food procurement and agriculture and nutrition educational programs. Less than 10% of Kentucky school food authorities (SFAs), however, are benefiting from school garden programs. In a 2020 survey of the USDA Southeast Region, which includes Kentucky, 77% of respondents identified school gardens as their weakest F2S component. Funding is consistently identified as a barrier for F2S programs, not just establishment of gardens, but also expenses associated with ongoing maintenance, upgrades, and staffing. In the 2023 national Farm to School Census, 43% of SFAs stated more funding would encourage them to participate in F2S activities. Consistent, substantial, and recurrent sources of funding for school gardens is the ideal financial support model for a sustainable school garden program. In reality, most school garden managers leverage multiple funding streams to sustain garden upkeep and programming. Developing a reasonable budget, securing funding, and good financial stewardship is crucial for a thriving school garden program.

Developing a Budget

Budget needs vary widely based on the school garden type and scale. Container gardens, raised beds, in-ground rows, greenhouses, and hydroponic systems all require a different setup investment and vary in on-going expenses. The types of crops grown – vegetables, small fruits, herbs, fruit trees, or flowers will influence setup and maintenance decisions. Each garden site will have unique needs; however, basic supplies, materials, and equipment can be identified to develop initial and on-going budget estimates.



Kingston Elementary School Garden
in Madison County



School Garden Construction at West
Jessamine Middle School in Jessamine
County

Basic School Garden Starter List

Construction Materials • Soil and Soil Amendments • Irrigation Supplies • Seeds and/or Plant Materials • Trellising Supplies • Rain Gauge • Thermometer • Garden Tools • Gloves • Signage • Harvest Equipment & Supplies

Basic School Garden Tool Kit

Shovel • Spade • Rake • Trowels • Garden Fork •
Hoe • Tool Cleaning Brush • Wheelbarrow •
Harvest Tools (knife, shears, clippers)

Common Ongoing Inputs

Seeds and Plants • Compost/Fertilizer • Mulch •
Replacement tools/gloves • Stakes & Markers

Please note that these lists are not exhaustive – more, fewer, or different items will likely be needed to meet the unique needs of the local school garden site and planned activities. For example, a site plan or substantial earthworks may be an important and significant investment to ensure long-term project success.



School Garden Bed Construction at W.B. Muncy Elementary in Leslie County

Estimated cost of materials to construct a simple 4' x 8' raised bed

		Units	Cost	Total
Cedar Planks	1" x 6" x 8'	6	\$ 15.25	\$ 91.50
Cedar Stakes	1" x 2" x 8'	2	\$ 5.06	\$ 10.12
Deck Screws	#10 3"	1	\$ 9.98	\$ 9.98
Compost	1 ft ³	10	\$ 6.48	\$ 64.80
Garden Soil	1.5 ft ³	14	\$ 8.00	\$ 112.00
Total				\$ 288.40

Securing Funding

Consider all sources of potential funding that are allowed by local school authorities. Internal funding, donations, grants, and fundraising events – alone or in combination – can all provide critical funds, supplies, and materials to establish and maintain school gardens.

Internal Funding

Leveraging school and/or district budgets can be a valuable source of recurrent funding. School administrators and parent-teacher groups may be willing and able to contribute to school gardens from annual budgets. In the 2023 national Farm to School Census, 18% of schools surveyed received funding from their local school or district budget. Using quantitative and qualitative examples of learning outcomes and student experiences substantiate the value of the garden and tell a compelling story to support funding requests for school garden programs.



School Gardens at Holmes Middle School in Covington (Kenton County)

Donations

An unrestricted cash donation is extremely valuable, yet requesting specific items – shovels, rakes, or gloves, for example – is often more easily achieved.

Individuals, local businesses, corporations, and community organizations can share ownership in success of the school garden program through general or specific contributions. Posting signage and following up with a note of appreciation and photos from garden activities will strengthen the relationship with donors. Many school garden programs have been successful in soliciting equipment and supplies such as gloves, plants, soil and gardening tools from local hardware stores and other businesses. Create a compelling packet with program objectives, images, student testimonials, and wish list items to share with potential donors.

Grants

Grants can provide a substantial, one-time infusion of funding to launch or expand a school garden program. Both public and private entities offer F2S and school garden grant programs and eligibility varies by program. Schools, municipalities, non-profit organizations, state agencies, private business, and even growers may be eligible applicants, depending on the grant program.

Typically, a funder releases an announcement, commonly called a Request for Applications or RFA. Applicants are given a period – often 60 to 90 days – to develop a project, complete the required application, and submit the packet to the funder.

Each funding agency or organization announces grants in different ways and an internet search using school garden key words can help identify potential programs. Several F2S related websites maintain grant lists, including the Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development (KCARD). Sign up for newsletters and alerts and follow state and federal agencies and non-profit organizations on social media to learn about grant opportunities and submission deadlines.

The first step to grant success is to read the RFA or call for proposals thoroughly to determine eligibility, objectives of the program, and submission deadline. Critical elements to a successful application are: projects that align with established program objectives; a clear, concise narrative describing project need and activities; a detailed and reasonable budget; and anticipated project outcomes and impacts.

Fundraisers

Creative fundraisers can help fund local school garden programs. Understanding the target audience – community members, parents, staff, or students – will influence selection of events that resonate with potential contributors. Fun and engaging options that relate to the garden (a plant sale, raffle, auction, a ‘Donate a Tool Day’, or a dinner using produce from the garden, for example) may be suitable options that can also connect



Garden Sign Recognizing Donor Contributions at Williamsburg City Schools Campus (Whitley County)

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 authorized and funded the USDA to establish a program funding projects implementing farm to school activities in eligible schools. Between 2013-2024, the USDA Farm to School Grant has awarded \$2,084,040 for projects in Kentucky.



In 2024, the Kentucky Farm to School Network awarded \$5,000 mini-grants for school garden projects to 4 schools

directly to classroom educational activities. Online fundraising or affiliate programs can be effective options and may require less time to organize and manage. An internet search can spark ideas to customize for the local community. Setting a target with a visual element to track progress engages students, parents and the broader community.



School Garden Harvest at Kingston Elementary School in Madison County

Resources

Burt, K.G., H.B. Luesse, J. Rakoff, A. Ventura, and M. Burgermaster. 2018. School Gardens in the United States: Current Barriers to Integration and Sustainability. *Am J Public Health*. 108:1543–1549.

Courtney, A. 2012. Kentucky Farm to School Program Kentucky Handbook. Kentucky Department of Agriculture, Frankfort, KY.

Elwell, J. Ready Set Grow: A Kentucky Educator's Guide to School Gardens and Hands-On STEAM Learning. Kentucky Agriculture & Environment in the Classroom, Inc. www.kyreadysetwork.org

Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development (KCARD). 2025. Active Grants. www.kcard.info/active-grants

Kentucky Farm to School Network. 2024. Resources – Grants. www.kyf2snetwork.com/

Machata, N., L. Jennings, H. Morrison, and M. Boyle. 2024. 2023 Farm to School Census Report. Submitted to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, Houston, TX.

National Agriculture in the Classroom. 2024. School Garden Center – Funding Opportunities. National Center for Agricultural Literacy, Washington, DC. <https://agclassroom.org/school-garden/funding/>

National Farm to School Network. 2016. Starting and Maintaining a School Garden. National Farm to School Network, Chicago, IL. www.farmtoschool.org/

Nelson, M. 2021. Farm to School and Early Childhood Education in the USDA Southeast Region, Arkansas Department of Agriculture, Little Rock, AR.

School Garden Support Organization Network (SGSO). 2024. Funding School Garden Work. <https://sgsonetwork.org/>

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). 2024. USDA Grants and Loans that Support Farm to School Activities. United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC. www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/grants-and-loans

Reviewed by: Jennifer Elwell, Agriculture Communication Specialist, University of Kentucky and Bethany Pratt, Extension Specialist for Food Systems, University of Kentucky. Published November 2025.

Cooperative Extension Service

Agriculture and Natural Resources
Family and Consumer Sciences
4-H Youth Development
Community and Economic Development

MARTIN-GATTON COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENT

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, physical or mental disability or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity. Reasonable accommodation of disability may be available with prior notice. Program information may be made available in languages other than English. University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Kentucky Counties, Cooperating. Lexington, KY 40506



Disabilities
accommodated
with prior notification.