



# School Garden Guides Successful Volunteer Workdays



## Cultivating Fun and Getting Work Done:

This guide is inspired by a series of statewide volunteer workdays that Food-Corps North Carolina organized in collaboration with the Corporation for National and Community Service. These statewide events were in support of food security, and took place as part of AmeriCorp's Martin Luther King National Day of Service. These events gave clarity to the importance and uses of volunteer workdays, as well as the successes and pitfalls that arise while trying to organize and manage them.

There are many different uses for volunteers in school garden settings. These uses require different numbers of volunteers with different amounts of skill. This guide is intended for successfully organizing and managing larger volunteer workday events that can be used to begin creating an ongoing community support network for your school garden. It is the hope, that from the type of volunteer workday events that this guide is intended to create, you will be able to identify community members who will be able to provide you with the full range of support necessary for sustaining a healthy school garden.



# Selecting a Day



It is important to organize a volunteer workday around a caliber of work that deserves volunteers. This means that the work should be important to the health and success of the garden, and it should be ample enough to require extra help. The last thing any volunteer wants to feel is like their participation was unnecessary, and that a task could have easily been completed without them.

This does not mean that cleaning up trash, weeding, or planting are not good workday tasks; however, it means that the amount of trash collecting, weeding, and or planting should require extra help. In our experience, having larger project goals can be a more successful way of revving up volunteer enthusiasm. These are tasks like building new garden beds, raising a hoop house, constructing benches, making a deer fence, and building a cob oven. Note these are all structural projects. When people take part in building it, there's more of a chance that they will feel a part of it. Often, if a garden event is built around these larger structural tasks, it is possible to fold in other smaller garden tasks such as trash collection or weeding.



“Larger projects can be a successful way of revving up volunteer enthusiasm. These are tasks like building new garden beds, raising a hoop house, constructing benches, making a deer fence, or building a cob oven.”

Because school gardens follow school calendars, and because classes will most likely want to get planting at the start of each semester so that they can watch the life cycle unfold during the course of the semester, it is our experience that organizing a school garden workday at the beginning of the semester is a good idea. Now sometimes, unforeseen events happen during the course of the semester. Maybe deer eat all the garden produce, or hooligans vandalize the garden, in either case some emergency volunteer workday help might need to be organized. Ultimately, there is a better chance of organizing this help if you've successfully pulled together volunteers at the start of the semester.

The AmeriCorps calendar has two service day events that are very powerful tools for organizing potential volunteers: 9/11 and Martin Luther King Day. Both of these days fall at the beginning of

the semester and both carry a great deal of civic virtue, which can be helpful in bringing people together around a community event. These are also days that students often have off, and that service organizations like AmeriCorps or FoodCorps have incentives to participate in.

It is important to remember the availability of your target volunteers. Parents might not have MLK Day or 9/11 off, so you might want to schedule a workday aimed at parents for a weekend. It all depends on your target.

Next, consider the hours. Are people more likely to come in the morning? Or Afternoon. This can also depend on how hot it is or available amounts of light. If you start early, how early? If you start late morning, how much volunteering will you get out of people before they want to break for lunch? Often the timeframe of 9am-1pm provided enough time for work and a celebratory lunch from 1-2pm.

# Identifying Volunteers

Finding volunteers isn't always easy, but with creativity, persistence and patience, a community of volunteers will grow over time. Volunteers bring a set of skills, knowledge and desire to facilitate their community to be a wonderful space. The following list describes different categories of volunteer demographics and some ideas for how to approach them.

**Parents:** It is important to remember two general rules: parents want to support their kids and they are very busy. What this means is that doing volunteer outreach with parents is most successful when you go to where parents will be, as opposed to making them one more event they need to attend. Parent nights, PTA meetings, and the pickup line at the school can be great places to do volunteer outreach. Having a specific, concise "sales pitch" for your volunteer workday can be the winning move with parents. Also, having the volunteer workday go through school administration communication channels can be helpful. Does your school's principal send out school wide emails? Does your school's PTA or PTO?

**Service Programs:** Service Programs can be a great place to find volunteers. Your best bet is to contact your statewide Commission for Volunteerism and Community Service and ask what service programs exist in your county. You can try to do the same thing by searching the website for the Corporation for National and Community Service. FoodCorps NC found that Service Programs have incentives to help on projects during Americorps National Days of Service like MLK Day or 9/11. Also, FoodCorps NC discovered that Senior Corps members were often very enthusiastic about preparing food for volunteer workdays.

**Master Gardeners:** Also known as the Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program is a volunteer program through the Cooperative Extension Offices supported by Land Grant Universities. Master Gardeners often have a minimum number of volunteer hours they need to fill. Oftentimes, these volunteers can go on to become permanent allies in supporting school gardens. These potential volunteers can be found by contacting a local county Cooperative Extension Office.



A large crew for a workday can get multiple projects done and build community commitment to the garden.

# Identifying Volunteers

**Military Personnel:** The United States Military is a large supporter of volunteering. In 1993, President George H.W. Bush even created the Military Outstanding Volunteer Service Medal for service people who “perform substantial amounts of volunteer service to the local community above and beyond the duties required as a member of the United States Armed Forces.” FoodCorps NC was able to identify interested service people by contacting local base’s Army Volunteer Services. Some bases have listservs, which post local community service opportunities.

**Juvenile Justice:** Many Juvenile Justice Courts have community service requirements for youth offenders. Contacting the local Juvenile Justice Court and asking who is in charge of community service initiatives is a great step toward identifying potential volunteers. Often there is an adult in charge of such matters who takes youth by van to different community service opportunities. Schools usually allow these youth on school grounds when school is not in session, such as weekends or holidays.

**Other Schools:** Reaching out to local high schools can be a wonderful way to get volunteers. Many schools have community service requirements. BETA Clubs are always looking for community service projects, and ROTC cadets are also civically minded. The best way to get to other schools is often reaching out to parents or teachers you already have relationships with in your own school and asking if they have any contacts in other schools. There are so many potential benefits in creating ongoing volunteer opportunities for upper-classmen to mentor and support the health and wellbeing of under-classmen. FFA programs will often work with elementary and middle school gardens as well.

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**Colleges:** Many colleges and universities have community service clubs. In creating relationships with these clubs it is important to make in-roads with the permanent employee who helps advise the club, so that working with your school garden becomes part of the club’s culture. Targeting students will still work; the only problem is students have a relatively quick turn over, so if you focus only on recruiting student volunteers, you will have to keep recruiting as opposed to the club sending people to you. Many sports teams also require community service hours. So taking the time to make a connection with athletic department heads can also be a great method to create allies.

**Places of Worship:** Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and other religious centers can all be great allies in finding volunteers. It works best if the religious organization is in close proximity to the school garden, as there will be a better chance for a shared sense of community. Often religious organizations have community service groups that school-gardeners can tap into. To identify these groups simply call a neighboring religious organization and ask them if they have any members who do volunteer or community service projects.

# Budgeting and Procuring Materials

Creating a detailed material and resource list and an accompanying budget can help ensure that your volunteer workday runs smoothly. A materials list allows you to think creatively about what materials to purchase and what materials might be donated. Making sure you have all the materials and resources necessary for the tasks you've brought volunteers together to accomplish is crucial. It can be frustrating and unproductive to bring people together and have them stand around because you have forgotten something essential to a project's completion. A little extra planning on the front end will make all the difference.

Begin by building the material and resource list and the accompanying budget. Then try and secure needed materials and resources through donations and purchase what cannot be donated. When done in this order, it allows you to evaluate the scope of a project. For you might quickly find that you cannot get anything donated in the time you need it, and if you cannot afford to buy the rest, it could be time to think about different workday projects. The following is a list of community businesses and organizations to potentially approach for materials and resources.



Having all the materials organized and ready to use by the volunteers makes a workday run smoothly and allows everyone to have the tools they need to complete the projects.

**Cooperative Extension Office:** Local Cooperative Extension Offices can be great places to identify sources for many kinds of materials and resources. Extension agents might have connections in getting donations of plastic for hoop houses, water catchment materials, plants, seeds, tools, and even municipal sources for compost and mulch. FoodCorps NC has had a great deal of support from local extension agents including borrowing tools, equipment, and procuring compost and mulch donations. Warning: In getting mulch and compost donations, always ask for some background information on source materials. For example, many municipalities put old telephone poles through the chipper to make mulch. These poles are often treated with creosote, which can be harmful when used in proximity grown food.

**Hardware Stores:** Hardware stores can be another ally in procuring resources and materials. Often, hardware stores enjoy supporting their local communities. Their desire to support your project can be aided by giving them some visible credit in your school garden. This could be a painted stone with their name on it, or it could be giving them a “shout out” if a local news station covers your school garden workday. Knowing your specific material needs and how they fit into the larger picture of your workday project is important in connecting with local businesses like a hardware store. Business tend

# Procuring Materials

to be more likely to offer donations if they understand that they are donating specific materials to a larger project to which other businesses are also donating materials. This is for two reasons: one, they feel like they are not the only ones responsible for this project. Two, its possible to incentivize their desire to donate knowing that other businesses in the community will also be contributing. Some businesses like to be a sole donator to a community project and you will have to weigh whether this fits with your larger funding scheme. It can be limiting, but potentially fruitful.

**Teachers/Principals/School Administration:** Teachers, principals, and school administrators are important allies in identifying parents and other school community members who might have access to different materials and resources. Taking your list of resources and materials to them and asking if they know of any parents or anyone in the community they could reach out to for some of these supplies can go a long way.

**Parents:** Parents can be a great source for donations. Many parents have tools that they can bring for the day of the build, some parents are contractors, and some are just willing to purchase materials. Again, knowing what your material and resource needs are in a timely fashion that give parents time to contribute is crucial.

**Craigslist:** Scouring Craigslist's "Free" category can also be a helpful way to find materials. Many building sites put surplus materials on Craigslist for pickup. This can be a great way to find bricks, cinder blocks, and even lumber, as well as miscellaneous materials. Common sense should apply, if you're picking something up from a stranger online be cautious and maybe bring a friend.

**Hypermarkets:** Hypermarkets and other large-scale retailers can often be allies in procuring donations; some even have community-oriented grants available. Many hypermarkets have started selling garden supplies. It can be possible to get donations of older seedlings and plants from these garden departments, as well as large quantities of used cardboard, and pallets. Often, these businesses are looking to secure a positive relationship with the communities they do business in, so making sure you can clearly communicate the reason for the specific donations, the larger picture of what you're trying to do, and why it's important to the community is helpful in persuading these businesses to help.

**Commercial Composters:** Some commercial composters are civically and socially minded and will make donations to school projects. FoodCorps NC has had a great deal of support from local commercial composters. Again, making sure you can clearly and concisely communicate your project goals is crucial. As is finding a way to show your gratitude for the donation.



# Feeding Volunteers

Meals are an age-old method for creating fellowship and community. They are a great way to show your appreciation for volunteers' time and hard work, as well as to celebrate what you have all accomplished.

Often, a meal can seem like a daunting task for one person to take on. The important thing to remember is that one person does not have to take it on. In fact, the more people are responsible for preparing the meal, the better a chance at creating team cohesion. It is possible to build meal prep and supplies into your volunteer recruitment. For example, letting potential volunteers know that one of the areas the workday needs support is in groceries, and prepared foods.

Local grocers, caterers, and restaurants can also be great allies in getting food donated. Again, when approaching these local businesses, it's important to have a clear, concise pitch for what your specific needs are and the larger mission behind your workday.



Another ally FoodCorps NC has held is with the Senior Corps programs. These are service programs with older participants. Often, these participants are hesitant in doing heavy lifting or rigorous work, but they are a great resource in helping to prepare food, especially if there is an important mission behind the event. To identify potential Senior Corps allies, follow the same steps as identifying Service Program volunteers.

Produce from the garden that the students have grown make a perfect snack to feed volunteers!

# Planning for the Day



A workday checklist allows all the volunteers to know what tasks need to be completed and to empowers them to tackle what interests them the most.

There are four goals for a successful volunteer workday:

- Thoroughly accomplish projects
- Have fun
- Be safe
- Add volunteers to the school garden support network.

All four of these goals require planning. It is important to plan how your workday is going to unfold, as well as having back up plans.

Workday tasks vary in their intensity. Primary tasks are the larger projects that you have built the workday around. They are the projects that require the support of many people. If you follow this guide, it should already be clear that this is a project that adds to the capacity of your school garden. It is important to remember that many of these primary tasks can require special skills to complete. Planning on having a team leader and back up team leader is vital to the thorough completion of these tasks.

Sometimes, a volunteer workday has the good fortune of having more volunteers sign up than are needed for the primary task a school garden needs accomplished. In this situation, it is helpful to have secondary projects for the spill-over. These secondary projects can be cleaning, building, planting, and or smaller building projects. Remember that you

might also need team leaders for these projects. Also, keeping a few secondary projects that can be accomplished by one person can also be a good idea. Now and then, you might get a volunteer that doesn't play very well with others, or doesn't want to participate with others. Having a task that they can volunteer to do by themselves, or that you can diplomatically ask them to do themselves can be a saving grace.

# Planning for the Day

Remember that one of the reasons to have this volunteer workday is to build your volunteer network for ongoing school garden support. This means crafting ongoing outreach mechanisms into your workday, so that you can call on these volunteers again.

Finally, planning a successful volunteer workday means weaving the mission of your workday and the big picture importance into everything your doing. You want your volunteers to understand that they're not just building a square box for soil, a bench, or a weird little hoop structure, but that they are contributing to the completion of different components that when put together will contribute to an important social, environmental, and economic mission. Taking the time to introduce people to this mission as an introduction to the day, and following up with them during the course of the day, or even inviting them into conversation about these issues throughout the day can make all the different. Also, crafting this mission into the meal. Be it by having people talk about the current food system, children's health, agriculture, or some other topic can be helpful and rewarding.

## Prepared by:

Sebastian Naskaris  
FoodCorps NC Fellow



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