

School Grounds

A basic guide to help you know what to consider when improving your school grounds





Introduction

School grounds can be an amazing resource; they can provide teaching areas, space to learn and areas to play. Improving this valuable resource can reap huge dividends.

Some of you may be lucky enough to have a staff member or parent who is knowledgeable and interested in making a change happen. For most schools, though, you know what you want and how change would make a difference to your school but sometimes it can be difficult to know where to start.

So Groundwork has come up with this quick guide to get you on your way.

Groundwork is the community charity with a green heart and, with 30 years' experience in making change happen for schools, we can help get you on the right track!

First steps

Here's a check list of some of the things you might want to think about before you put a spade in the ground:

- **Who is maintaining the grounds?** As they will be the ones responsible for looking after any changes it's best to get them involved and talk to them about any ideas from the outset.
- **What have you got already that you really want to keep?** A good stock take of what you already have and thinking about new simple ways to change them or how you use them can be a quick, easy and cheap way to maximise the benefit of your space.
- **Have you got an active PTA?** Round up any volunteers quickly and ply them with biscuits, make a list of the little jobs that you've been meaning to get round to for ages and turn it into a day's spring clean. You will be amazed at what a good tidy up can do to make you think about the space you have and new ways of using it! If you haven't got many of those willing volunteers, why not round up some local business contacts and see if they'd like turn it into a team building day to boost staff morale and help their local community to boot?
- **Check the location of existing services** such as water, gas and electricity. Nobody wants to put a spade through something dangerous or plan a climbing frame where you have a dangerous man hole. You should have this information in your building maintenance guide but if you don't these can be requested from the utility suppliers.

When you've got a good idea of what you *have*, you can start turning your thoughts to what you *want*.

One of the best ways to start is looking at the curriculum and trying to link your outside space to specific tasks. Some of the simplest improvements that make a big impact are sensory garden areas, growing spaces and wildlife areas.



Sensory areas

The intention of a sensory garden is to provide an area for the children and staff to appreciate a range of sensory experiences within a garden environment. It allows the users to be in such close proximity to plants and materials that it stimulates all their senses.

Elements to include within a sensory garden environment

Sound	Natural Sound	Insects & birds
	Movement	Plants blowing in the in wind, reflective materials
	Features	Musical instruments
	Materials	Interaction with people (noise underfoot)
Touch	Texture	Tactile surfaces, features, foliage flowers and bark
	Materials	Contrasting soft and hard materials
Smell	Planting	Herbs and fragrance planting
Sight	Planting	Flower colour, shape & form, leaves & stems. Includes seasonal variation.
	Materials	Colours, textures & shapes (stone, gravel & play surfaces)
Taste	Planting	Herbs, fruit and vegetables. An educational tool to establish a link between growing plants and eating. It is essential to ensure that plants are edible, clearly labelled and recognised and are used under strict supervision.

Planting schemes

When thinking about planting your sensory garden, try and identify plants with scented leaves that can be used along or on paths and activated by crushing or brushing against them (such as rosemary, thyme, mint, lemon balm and lavender) and things that are soft to the touch (like lambs ear and willow catkins).

The rustling of ornamental grasses and bamboo can create a sense of excitement and activity and are great for marking out areas and using as screens or green fences.

Supplement the planting with annuals each year that the children can grow e.g. sunflowers and tasty herbs.

Sensory play equipment

Throughout the garden a selection of play equipment can be designed into the area to evoke the senses. These range from fun mirrors to music instruments. Here is a list of a few suppliers that can get you started.

www.handmadeplaces.co.uk

www.timberplay.com

www.eibe.net/en



Vegetable gardens

In their simplest form the easiest way to get growing is by introducing a few raised beds. These are easy to access for the children and can be a great way of getting them outside and learning about food and its production. Don't worry if space is at a premium; they can be designed to not take up too much room and if you pick the right fruit and vegetables, they are easy to maintain. (Items such as radishes, lettuces, courgettes and potatoes can all be grown in a short period of time or need little maintenance.) This saves on the argument on who is going to come back and water during the six weeks holidays, which also demonstrates why it's so important to get your maintenance team involved at the start!

If you already have a successful growing team or you know that you want to go big with the space or amount you want to grow then raised timber sleeper beds are great for bigger growing areas. These spaces can be combined with outdoor classrooms and sensory spaces to create something truly spectacular!

Another simple way to get fruit into the grounds is planting fruit trees - any number from one to a whole orchard. Here are a few recommended varieties to start you off.

Apple Cox's Orange Pippin, Braeburn, Discovery - these three are top eating apples and will pollinate with each other. Use "cordons" if space is limited, as these remain small and compact and still provide masses of fruit.

Pear Conference are one of the most recognised and will fit well in any growing area but as with all trees will need regular maintenance and pruning so as not to outgrow your space.

Also planting consider cherries, plums and grapes if you're feeling adventurous!

Fruit trees are often best where children will be monitored, away from main play areas and classrooms.





Wildlife gardens

Creating a wildlife garden can be truly rewarding when the birds and insects come rushing in. It can be as simple as cordoning off an area of the school field and leaving it to get growing, mowing a few paths through the middle to allow access for intrepid bug hunters. However, if you want to get more involved with your local creatures, here are a few ideas of things you could include.

Planting for wildlife

Groundwork has a free guide to planting for pollinators specifically written for Hertfordshire schools. You can grab a copy of this by contacting Charlotte Ball at either 01707 260129 or charlotte.ball@groundwork.org.uk, but here is a quick list of plants just to get you started!

Good nectar flowers for butterflies

Butterflies' taste in flowers will vary slightly from year to year, depending on climate and alternative food sources. These common plants are some favourites

Spring

Blackthorn
Bramble
Willow
Valerian
Red valerian
Honesty
Forget-me-not
Aubretia
Hebe
Woundwort
Alyssum
Wallflower
Primrose
Hyacinth

Summer

Campions
Ragged robin
Birdsfoot trefoil
Raspberry
Teasel
Hemp agrimony
Common fleabane
Yarrow
Cranesbill
Purple loosestrife
Knapweed
Thistle
Chives
Wild Thyme
Buddleia
Field scabious
Lobelia
Phlox
Lavender
Mint
Privet
Statice
French marigold

Autumn

Goldenrod
Devil's bit scabious
Honeysuckle
Nasturtium
Ice plant
Michaelmas daisy
Verbena



Other items to consider:

Ponds these are definitely for those that have a space that can be excluded from day-to-day use and they depend heavily on being close to a water source. We recommend that you seek professional advice when installing a new one.

If you already have a pond, why not make a bog garden around the edges to help give access to shallow water for damp-loving creatures? Make an artificial bog in much the same way as you would create a shallow pond: by using traditional clay lining or a liner. The essence of a bog garden is to keep the hole shallow so that it doesn't become a pond and you can plant emergents without them becoming water-logged.

At first your mini-wetland may look like a mud bath but the soil should soon settle. A damp, boggy area will encourage a variety of insects and the animals that feed on them; frogs and toads like boggy conditions.

Birds information on planting for birds can be found in Groundwork's free pollinators guide, but some of the simplest ways to attract birds is providing food and water in the form of some feeders and a bird bath away from noisy areas and predators.

Wormery worms are the gardener's friend and a wormery can be a fascinating way to encourage these creatures and learn about their important role in the garden.

Weather station monitor rainfall and wind direction in your area and start predicting when those wet play-times are going to be heading your way.

Wildflower meadows these can require some intensive research and hard work to set up but are amazing at attracting wildlife. Please see the pollinators guide for details on how to set up one of these fantastic areas.

www.wigglywiggles.co.uk and www.greenfingers.com are good starting points when looking at suppliers for all your wildlife needs.





Play

Play is the main function of school grounds and can be used intensely for this throughout the year. The safety of new (and old) equipment and the surfacing underneath needs to be considered carefully and must all adhere to European Standards (EN1176 for equipment and EN1177 for safety surfacing). These must be inspected at regular intervals that will be determined by the type and height of equipment. These intervals should be provided to you upon installation.

There are many suppliers of this type of equipment and the surfacing but here are just a few to start you off:

www.sutcliffeplay.co.uk

www.wicksteed.co.uk

www.handmadeplaces.co.uk

www.timberplay.com

www.eibe.net/en

There are many types of safety surfacing and each has its merits for different areas:

- Grass mat safety surfacing is suitable for areas where the play equipment is below a certain height and the grass is able to grow through it allowing a more natural feel
- Wet pour is chipped rubber bound together that provides an impact-absorbing surface. It comes in a variety of colours and can be laid over existing hard surfaces.
- Play sand is a great shock absorber and its play value is incomparable but it can be messy and maintenance intensive.

Most suppliers of equipment will give you advice on the best kind of surfacing for the equipment you have chosen and will often supply and install the safety surfacing as well. Alternatively seek professional advice before installing any equipment to make sure it's the right item for you for in the long term.



There are lots of other items to consider that will improve your school grounds. Shades, canopies, outdoor class rooms, playground floor paint, seating and climbing walls are all great items that can improve the value of your outdoor space.

You should also think about fencing areas off such as the wildlife or sensory gardens and providing path access to them for use throughout the year.

The final item to consider is funding. You may already have funding to work on your grounds but if not, there are many funding streams that you can tap into.

Awards for All is one of the most common schemes applied for and they require you to have a priced plan of what you are looking to fund. If you already have a good idea and a cost estimate this is a great way to raise funds. If not, it is a good idea to get a professional designer to draw up a plan and cost all the elements you need so that you can fundraise appropriately.

If you need help with any of these elements Groundwork is here to help.

We can provide professionals to draw up plans, estimate costs, organise team building days and help you fundraise. If you already have your area sorted, we can help you link your outdoor spaces to the curriculum and provide teacher training to make the most of your outdoor space.

If you need any advice or would like a free advisory visit, please contact Groundwork on 01707 260129.

