



Tips for establishing a school garden

Landcare Fact Sheet No. 10

Planning

A native garden needs careful planning and will need to be cared for. Is your native school garden being built for educational purposes, appearance, or both? Do you want shade trees or a screen?

Consider the area you want to plant. Some common aspects to consider are:

Gardens for wildlife

All plants attract insects to a degree, and so in turn will attract insect eating wildlife including birds. Consider a diversity of plants (big, small and in between) as well as logs and rocks to attract a range of birds and other animals.

Frogs need shade and protection from predators but not necessarily water.

Keep in mind that the flowering plants that attract native birds and butterflies will probably also attract bees, which may be of concern if there are young children with allergies around.

Compaction

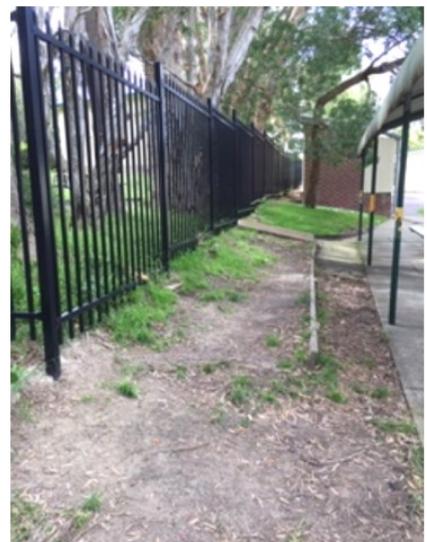
Soil compaction is a common problem in schools and playgrounds. Compacted soil prevents air from reaching the roots of the plants and also prevents water and nutrients from getting to where they are needed. The soil will need to be aerated, best done by using a garden fork as deep as possible to lift slightly, over the whole area. Then compost or other organic matter should be added, and the area barriered and left for at least two months, before planting.

Location and orientation

Even if you're starting with a bare patch of ground, its north/south orientation, slope and size will determine much of what you can do. Take note of factors such as shade versus exposure to the sun, frost potential, wind levels, rainfall etc. When you head to your nursery for advice, they'll be able to recommend plants that suit your unique site.

Hot sites

Small or narrow gardens next to north or west facing walls or those surrounded by concrete paths or carparks, can be subject to fiercely hot temperatures in summer. In addition, the soil in these gardens is often too alkaline for most plants (due to the chemicals in concrete and brick mortar). Have the soil pH tested and treat with a soil acidifying agent before planting. These gardens will need to be well mulched and watered and species of plants selected carefully for success.



School garden area with compaction issues

Water

You might want to install two drip-line irrigation systems on either side of a row of trees to ensure even watering. Consider installing a rainwater tank or collecting grey water for the garden.

Tree roots

Trees have extensive root systems, and the establishment of plants in areas under trees are less likely to succeed. Mulch around the tree to improve water infiltration and reduce weed growth, plant shrubs and ground cover or grasses outside the dripline of the tree.



Tree roots can create a challenge for gardens

Sloping ground

Steeper slopes may need a weed control mat such as coir matting, as loose mulch may wash down the slope. Less steep slopes should be mulched with a shredded mulch with uneven sized pieces, this will hold better on a slope. Logs and rocks can also be used to advantage to improve soil/mulch retention. Grasses and strappy leaved plants have fibrous roots these are best at preventing soil erosion, but any plant that slows down the movement of water is better than none.

Preparing the area

Weeds and unwanted grass should be well controlled before planting, a mulch layer between 5 and 10cm deep will help reduce weeds regrowing. If you're building a garden bed where grass exists, don't remove it. Just mow it close to the ground and then cover with a layer of wet newspaper, then mulch.

Mulching is important to retain soil moisture and to discourage weeds. Mulches made from plant material breakdown and improve the soil over time but will need renewing. Sometimes a non-organic mulch (like stones) is appropriate (e.g. in bushfire prone areas).

Ensure that the base of the stem is kept clear of the newspaper and mulch for several centimetres.

Planting

Cooler Autumn weather is the best time to plant most plants.

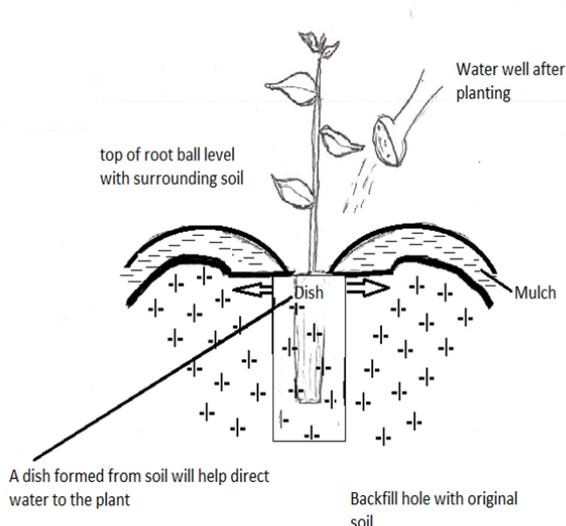
If possible use a mattock or trowel (depending on the plant size) to dig a hole considerably bigger than the size the root ball. The idea is to have a nice lot of loose soil around the root ball to make for much easier root penetration. You can incorporate some good compost into the garden soil at this point, mixing it well in. It is important that the soil used to backfill the planting hole is not different to the original soil, although addition of decomposed organic matter can help improve clay and sandy soils.

Make sure the plant is well watered before planting. If the root ball has a mass of tight roots, roots can be teased or trimmed to ensure that they quickly grow into surrounding soil.

Form a saucer around the plant to retain water while it is soaking into the soil. This is particularly important for soils that allow only very slow percolation of water into the surface.

Do not bury the stem of the plant deeper or higher than the potting mix in the top of the pot.

Water well after planting and if possible, occasionally for a few weeks after planting, especially during hot weather. Fertiliser is not essential for most natives, but you will see improved vigour if you decide to use fertiliser. Chose a fertiliser designed for native plants.



Ongoing Maintenance

Ongoing maintenance is a great way to get the kids involved (consider a roster), even if they haven't been part of the planting process.

Once established, aim for infrequent, deep watering to encourage deep and strong rooting. Young trees will benefit from watering in their early years.

Most shrubs and groundcovers benefit from a light prune after flowering. Tip pruning is another must if the particular shrub you are planting lends itself to a dense, bushy habit. Simply pinch out the growing tips at planting time and repeat this every couple of months during the first year of growth. Not only does this keep the plant more compact, it also greatly increases flower production.

References and further information

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www.coolaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/How-to-plant-a-native-garden.pdf



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Lake Macquarie Landcare is proudly supported by Lake Macquarie City Council

Produced at the Landcare Resource Centre 2020