



DESIGN WITH SUSTAINABILITY IN MIND

To Keep Your Project Alive



Why Maintenance Planning Starts Sooner Than You Think

School grounds have the potential to be living landscapes where students and teachers connect through actions that are both educational and ecologically sustainable. Significant time, energy, and financial investment go into creating climate-ready school grounds that enhance learning, strengthen student health and well-being. To ensure these spaces deliver lasting value to the school and wider community, supporting learning, climate resilience, and local biodiversity, it is essential to plan early for their ongoing care and maintenance.

Long-term success begins in the design phase. This means understanding the time, resources, and routines needed to care for green school grounds and designing with these maintenance realities in mind. The act of creating and caring for the space becomes its own learning opportunity. Success also depends on supportive school leadership and on embedding care practices into school culture and the annual cycle of activities, traditions, and events.



Lasting projects grow from thoughtful planning. *Key steps include:*

1. BALANCE PROJECT GOALS WITH LIMITATIONS FROM THE START

- Engage your Board's Facilities and Maintenance staff early in the planning to help inform the design and bring clarity as to what role the Board can play in long-term maintenance.
- Acknowledge and plan for limitations such as time, budget, water access, care routines right from the start.
- Begin with a phased approach to maximize the potential and complexity of your design slowly, in alignment with the capacity of your site, people, and resources.

2. INTEGRATE CARE TASKS INTO TEACHING AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Design spaces that connect care with educational outcomes, planning in advance how ongoing and annual maintenance of living landscape elements will support real-world experiential learning.
- Treat the care of the living landscape as part of environmental literacy—fostering reflection, observation, and shared responsibility through hands-on learning activities such as:
 - Plant identification and removal of invasive species
 - Measuring the area needed for a garden, mapping the school grounds, and calculating soil or mulch volumes
 - Observation and journaling on plant growth and seasonal change
 - Monitoring and data collection for biodiversity or weather impacts

3. DESIGN TO REDUCE FUTURE MAINTENANCE

- Work with your site conditions, not against them:
 - Soil type, sun exposure and existing trees
 - Drainage and stormwater management: capture and direct runoff to reduce erosion and watering needs. Consider drainage, permeability, and safe surfaces for all users.
 - Work around snow plowing and storage locations, parking, public site use, etc.
- Optimize future site conditions and maintenance needs with practical features and strategies:
 - Containment: Concrete curbs, raised beds, and path edging made of logs, stone, or timber, help to keep mulch, and sand from spreading, reducing regular clean-up needs.
 - Pathways: Paths made of mulch, limestone screenings, or asphalt help guide people moving through the site, supporting flow, safety, accessibility, and access for people and maintenance equipment.
 - Protection: Fencing, barriers, and cages protect young trees & plants from the rigours of play and installing pathways early helps protect future gardens by establishing a route to direct foot traffic
 - “Right Plants, Right Place”: Select plants native to your ecological zone for increased hardiness. Group plants with similar sun exposure, soil, and moisture needs. Place salt-tolerant species near walkways and consider traffic flow, and shade tolerance when planting.
 - Visibility: Spaces that look cared for discourage vandalism.
 - Materials: Ensure durability and ease of replacement, reduce toxic exposures, and keep efforts climate positive/low tech through people and clean energy-powered tools.



4. BUILD ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES AROUND OPPORTUNITIES

Long-term sustainability relies on coordinated contributions from many people. Consider the potential roles each group can play in supporting, using, and caring for the school grounds.

Who	Potential Roles
School Board / Caretaker	Safety checks, mowing, snow removal, and long-term green infrastructure maintenance - for example, dedicating a crew to the watering and mulching of newly planted trees, and to the replacement of dead trees. Also providing mulch to schools at no charge for spreading by the students.
Teachers	Lead programming, and make connections to the curriculum in addition to, establishing low-risk routines and roles for students, such as ‘keepers of the garden/trees” to help integrate the care of the space into learning.
Students	Engage in project-based learning and contribute to shaping and caring for the grounds by watering, planting, mapping, monitoring, weeding, planning and collecting data. Small, structured tasks can meaningfully support caretaking teams while reinforcing a culture of care and responsibility.
Parents / Volunteers	Lead seasonal cleanups, watering during breaks, and provide material donations and/or support for coordination.
Partnerships	Build capacity, provide funding, establish community connections, and fill in stewardship gaps over the summer.



Design Elements

Every design feature brings its own maintenance needs. This overview helps you understand the level of care each element requires, so you can make informed choices that set your school ground up for long-term success.

Level of Care Overview		
Design Feature	Level of Care	What to Expect
Gardens (rain, vegetable, pollinator, butterfly, etc.)	High	Regular watering, weeding, mulching, and seasonal tasks. Butterfly Gardens will require significant ongoing maintenance, needing to be weeded and watered over the summer.
Trees	Moderate	Regular watering for the first 2–3 years. Once established, provide shade and habitat with minimal care. Tree protection is recommended in high traffic areas.
Tree Groves	Moderate – High (in the early years)	Require group watering and weeding during establishment; benefit from mulching; become low-care over time.
Nature Study or No Mow Areas	Moderate	Require edge maintenance, litter cleanup, and spring trimming. Weed to remove non-native invasive plants.
Mulched Areas (play and non play)	Moderate	Need topping up every 1–2 years; help with weed control and safety cushioning; monitor for compaction. Areas without edging or curbs will need constant maintenance to keep mulch and sand where it is intended.
Sandplay Areas	Moderate - High	Require regular raking, debris removal, and topping up; may need covering or periodic cleaning.

Level of Care Overview (continued)

Design Feature	Level of Care	What to Expect
Shade Structures	Low	Minimal maintenance beyond inspection and cleaning; check anchors and stability annually.
Activity Walls (chalk/white boards)	Low – Moderate (for first 10 years)	Clean or repaint periodically; ensure secure mounting and safe surroundings.
Outdoor Classrooms with Armour Stones	Low to Moderate	Very durable; may need weeding between stones and debris clearing; ensure accessibility.
Log Seating	Moderate	Natural logs weather; inspect for rot, stability, and splinters; replace as needed.
Wooden Play Structures	High	Require safety inspections annually, surface maintenance, and sealing or sanding to prevent wear and splinters.
Play and Learning Spaces	Low – High (varies)	Depending on materials and design—e.g., natural play areas need seasonal upkeep and regular inspections.



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