

All photography by Hilary Inwood

Growing Art in School Gardens

Using the school garden as inspiration, supply cupboard, and exhibition space for students' art

by **Hilary Inwood**

SOMETHING IS GROWING in school gardens in North America, and it's not just the plants. Supporters of schoolyard naturalization have found an unusual way of capturing and sustaining enthusiasm for the garden by having students "plant" art in their school gardens in the form of murals, sculptures, mosaics, and mazes. This innovative approach to naturalization has teachers and students using their schoolyards as sources of natural materials and inspiration for their artworks, as well as exhibition sites. As a teacher educator and parent volunteer involved in the blossoming of an artistic garden at a Toronto elementary school, my aim is inspire you to take a fresh look at your schoolyard and "grow" some art in the garden to cultivate a unique set of benefits for your school and community.

The relationship between art and gardens is not new, as artists have long been involved in designing gardens as well as recording their beauty through drawings, paintings, prints, and photographs. Those who have taken a trip to the gardens of Versailles or to Monet's garden at Giverny have a deep appreciation of the benefits of these artistic interventions in nature. Yet until recently few educators have considered fostering a relationship between student artists and their school gardens. Fortunately, the growing trend toward schoolyard naturalization has planted ideas, as well as trees, in the minds of many educators. For those of us in art education, school gardens are inspiring environments in which to nurture our art programs. By using the garden as a source of images and materials, as well as a site for artistic intervention, we are helping our students develop artistic skills and aesthetic sensibilities, while creating an intriguing space for curriculum integration. Most importantly, we are deepening our students' sense of place, an important step in developing their ecological literacy.

My involvement in schoolyard art was first inspired by an artistic garden in a small park outside my classroom at




Left: Students working on the Hillside Garden Mural at Runnymede Public School. Right: Hillside Garden mural closeup.

the University of Toronto. Situated at a busy intersection in the heart of the city, the park features a nature-inspired installation by local artists Susan Schelle and Mark Gomes. By integrating an existing grove of trees with grassy berms, rock benches, and sculptural elements such as oversized granite dominoes and sculpted metal leaves, these artists have created a peaceful oasis that encourages students and faculty to reflect on the relationship between nature and culture in urban environments. My art classes develop their critical thinking skills by interpreting the installation, and use the garden to study plants for drawings and paintings and to collect natural materials for collage, printmaking, and papermaking. Some have even created their own artworks to place in the garden in response to the permanent installation.

Excited by the multiple uses of the garden, I approached a local public school with a proposal for adding students' art to their naturalized garden. Four years later, the schoolyard of Runnymede Public School boasts five permanent installations of art created by students from kindergarten to Grade 8. The works include a set of six door murals, two pathways made of hand-cast concrete garden stones, a large entrance mural, a 20-foot-long wall mural, and a growing series of fence paintings. These works collectively tell the story of the garden: one shows the garden in the different seasons, another captures its wildlife and student life, and yet another shows the life cycle of the butterfly. Students incorporate these artworks into games at recess; and teachers use them to enhance learning in science, visual arts, and language arts. The student artists involved in their creation proudly show them off to classmates and parents; other students beg to be included in the next art project. Their influence can also be seen inside the school, where two new nature-inspired installations have recently appeared on interior walls.

Other benefits are of a more practical nature. There has been a decrease in graffiti on the doors and walls where the art now resides — even graffiti vandals appear hesitant to tag good art. This has reduced cleanup work for the school caretakers, who are impressed with the way the art has improved the overall appearance of the schoolyard. It has also helped to build a sense of community among parents who have assisted with each project: new friendships have been formed, and the adults feel they have contributed to their children's education. Overall, the benefits are well worth the costs, which are primarily those associated with creating, installing, and maintaining each artwork.

Through these projects I have come to understand that there are three main ways to use a school garden for art: as an image bank, as a source of materials, and as a gallery. What follows is a description of each to inspire you and your students to "grow" some art in your own school garden. Use these as starting points, and remember that in art-making cross-pollination is a sign of a fertile mind, so be creative in mixing ideas and techniques to meet the needs of your students and schoolyard.

School garden as image bank

A school garden is a teacher's best response to the student who says forlornly, "I don't know what to draw." A plethora of images is available in the garden year round to inspire wonder and excitement in even the blankest of minds. Before they make any art, however, have students just look around. Ask them to go on a treasure hunt to search for all of the flowers, insects, plants, or rocks they can find. Have them use a viewfinder made of cardboard to look at long vistas as well as the tiniest of details. Have them search for the basics of visual communication — the elements of design such as lines, colors, shapes, and textures — in plant life as well as in the built components of the garden. Have them talk about what they see, as this will help them to build a language for talking about their own art in future.

Once students have done some careful observation, have them draw what they see: a leaf, a rock, a snail, or an icicle. Keeping a visual journal is a wonderful way to develop skills of observation and drawing, which are important in both science and art. Just as in learning to read or

to play a musical instrument, students should be encouraged to take adequate time to draw and be reminded that their drawing skills will improve only with practice. Provide them with some basic instruction such as how to draw in contour and gesture styles, or how to shade and crosshatch. If you have reluctant artists ("I can't draw," they will protest), place overhead transparencies directly on the ground and have them capture a bit of the garden by tracing what they find. Have students experiment with a variety of materials and tools — draw with pencils, pens, and watercolors; make rubbings of leaves with pastels; draw on a rock with charcoal; create solar drawings on light-sensitive paper. Their journals will quickly grow to inspire and inform the next in-class art project.

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As students' skills develop, introduce them to examples of professional artists' images of gardens: the history of art has developed by building on the images of others. Move beyond Monet by showing them Albrecht Durer's highly detailed drawings of plants, Georgia O'Keefe's vivid paintings of flowers, Emily Carr's pastels of soaring trees, or Ansel Adams' majestic photographs of nature. Have them talk about what they see, and how the artists used the elements of design to interpret their visions of nature. Ask them to choose their favorites, or to incorporate aspects of these styles in their own work. Build a class library of these images to inspire students to continue looking and creating; after all, a picture is worth a thousand words!

School garden as art store

You need look no further than the school garden to stock your art supply cupboard. With a bit of advance planning, your garden will be a bountiful source of materials to spice up your art program. Leaves are a classic in this regard: with their multitude of shapes, sizes, and colors, they are great for rubbings, paintings, prints, and collages. Along with flower petals and grasses, leaves can also be terrific additives to pulp for papermaking. Scottish artist Andy Goldsworthy shows what a little imagination can do with this natural material: he arranges leaves into glowing color wheels, delicate weavings hung from branches, and exquisite paintings floating on water. Mud, stones, and snowballs become similarly magical in his hands. British artist Richard Long demonstrates a different kind of creativity with natural materials, making patterned rock sculptures to track his journeys and creating mud drawings using nothing but his feet. What could be more fun for children than squishing mud between their toes in the name of art?

Natural materials such as leaves, twigs, feathers, and grasses have tactile qualities that appeal to children and help to broaden their sensory responses to school gardens. Used for sculptures and weavings, these materials bring olfactory and auditory dimensions to artworks and trigger memories of the garden even when displayed indoors, deepening students' experience of and connection to place. Ice, snow, and soil can bring a distinct temperature and moisture level to an artwork, forcing students to think creatively about the use of these materials. In many cases their ephemeral nature will encourage students to revel in the process of art making rather than obsess about the final product. Capturing an ice sculpture in a photo before it melts is usually enough to satisfy any young Michelangelo, especially if the photo gets posted on the school's website.

With some selective planting and scavenging, you can create all-natural pigments for art projects using garden ingredients. Berries, onions, and cabbages can be grown to create a range of colors: boil the plant materials down to concentrate the color or dry and pulverize them. Coffee grounds, tea leaves, spices, and soil can be used in similar ways. Blend the pigments with water, eggs, alcohol, or gel medium (a type of clear acrylic paint) to get the desired effects on paper, fabric, wood, or stones. Or load these pigments into ice cube trays to make frozen markers or into spray bottles for making graffiti art on snow.

School garden as art gallery

Finally, consider transplanting some of that great garden art into the schoolyard permanently. At Runnymede Public School, drawings of the garden by primary students served

Ideas for Growing Art in School Gardens



Handmade concrete paving stone in the garden stones path at Runnymede Public School.

- Plant vegetables and flowers to harvest for materials
- Cast concrete patio stones or mosaic stepping stones
- Make ceramic tiles for mounting on walls, fences, or garden stakes
- Paint murals on walls, doors or windows
- Create asphalt paintings (maps, games, labyrinths)
- Make fence paintings (paintings on wood and wired to a chain link fence)
- Build rammed earth sculptures
- Carve engravings in rocks
- Grow a maze using grasses and stepping stones
- Make chalk and pastel drawings on walls or sidewalks
- Create fence weavings (weaving natural or found materials into fencing)
- Build artistic bat or bird houses
- Engrave or paint large garden stones



as the basis for door murals leading from the yard into their classrooms; every day, proud artists see their drawings writ large for others to admire. Paintings, prints, and photographs can translate equally well into wall or window murals, bench or asphalt paintings, cast-concrete paving stones, and mosaic or clay panels. Individual artworks, such as paintings created on small pieces of fencing or on birdhouses, look impressive if installed as collections in one area. Collaborative large-scale installations, such as murals, mosaics, or concrete stone pathways, develop students' co-operative learning skills by involving them as a group in the work's design and creation. Hiring an experienced artist or art educator to facilitate these types of large-scale installations is of great benefit; such individuals not only bring a wealth of technical expertise, but also provide a unique learning experience for the students who work alongside them.

Considerations of safety and maintenance should play a role in determining the nature of permanent installations. Artworks should be inflammable, and securely attached to a surface to avoid becoming flying or tipping hazards. Unfortunately, little can be done to make them graffiti-proof, although a layer or two of a protective UV-resistant coating can make some graffiti easier to remove. Maintenance related to this also needs careful consideration: for example, if an artwork is vandalized, who will be responsible for cleaning or repairing it?

Not all of the installations in the garden need be permanent, however. Letting nature lend a hand to the transformation of artworks over time can be fascinating to watch; artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Roy Staab, Chris Drury, and Diana Lynn Thompson have built their careers on this approach. Through the design of plantings in a school garden, it is possible to create wonderful combinations of color, shape, and texture over the course of a year. Using the bounty of materials left in the garden after the summer season (such as dried grasses, twigs, flower petals, and garlic tendrils) to create site-specific temporary artworks is equally satisfying. In the Runnymede garden, a rich harvest of grapevines each autumn provides material for wreaths; this year the vine may form the basis for fence weavings as well.

No matter which approach you take to planting art in your school garden, be sure to follow some of the basic tenets of art education: ensure that the activities and materials are age-appropriate, provide a range of materials and techniques to inspire experimentation, focus on process as well as product, and stimulate students' imaginations by showing examples of others' art. Above all, encourage creativity and individuality; if all of the students' garden art looks the same at the end of a lesson, something has gone amiss! And once you have planted the seeds, stand clear and see what takes root — art will be sprouting in your classroom as well as in the school garden, demonstrating that your students are growing and learning in ways you've never dreamed of!

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Resources

Gardening Artists

Introduce students to the works of artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Maya Lin, Richard Long, Ian Hamilton Findlay, Chris Drury, Alan Sonfist, Roy Staab, Isamu Noguchi, Susan Schelle and Mark Gomes, James Pierce, Walter de Maria, and Diana Lynn Thompson. Information about many other artists who have worked in and with gardens and other natural environments can be found on the Green Museum website at <http://greenmuseum.org/>.

Artistic Gardens

Many urban communities are growing or enhancing their own artistic gardens with innovative plantings, pathways, sculpture, or artistic installations. Some are legendary — think of Central Park in New York City or the Tuileries in Paris — while others are quietly waiting for you to find. To stir your imagination, here are a few examples of Toronto parks that take artistic approaches; look for the ones in your community by contacting your local parks department for more information.

The Music Garden <www.city.toronto.on.ca/parks/music_index.htm>
This garden, situated on the shore of Lake Ontario, was designed in conjunction with cellist YoYo Ma and inspired by one of Bach's suites for cello. It is a true integration of art, music, and landscape design.

Spiral Garden <www.bloorviewmacmillan.on.ca/Spiral/>
A wonderful garden that encourages children with special needs to create and exhibit their art in a natural setting.

Yorkville Park <www.crave.com/yorkville/ypark-tour.html>
An urban park that presents native-plant environments in creative ways.

Cloud Forest Conservatory
<www.city.toronto.on.ca/parks/parks_gardens/bayadelaidegdns.htm>
Squeezed into the heart of Toronto's concrete jungle, this lovely oasis features a waterfall, raised pathways, a plant conservatory, and a large-scale relief mural to celebrate the heritage of the area.

Garden Artworks

These websites offer a bounty of ideas for making garden-related art. Some describe projects made by professional artists, while others offer ideas that teachers can replicate with their own students.

<www.communityarts.net/archivefiles/environment/index.php>, Community Arts Network — Arts and the Environment. Articles and news on community eco-art.

<www.ecoartspace.org/introduction.htm>, Ecoart Space. Features the work of international artists creating art that inspires a sustainable relationship between humans and the natural world.

<www.evergreen.ca/en/lg/designideas.html>, Evergreen. Instructions for making murals and mosaics in the school garden. Follow the link to the PDF file "Murals and Mosaics" under "Artistic Elements."

<www.enviro-explorers.com/kidsprojects/decorativestones.htm>, Iowa Department of Transportation Enviro-Explorer's Club. Instructions for making decorative garden stones.

<http://greenmuseum.org/>, Green Museum. Features environmental art and artists.

<www.kidsgardening.com/themes/art1.asp>, Kids' Gardening. "Bringing Art to Life in Schoolyards" includes stories of a variety of schoolyard art projects.

<www.thetreemuseum.ca/>, The Tree Museum. A photo gallery of outdoor art installations.

Readings

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