September-October

**Harvesting:** September, October, and November (weather-permitting) mark the culmination of the entire gardening experience, so make use of this bountiful time by involving students and faculty in harvesting, bringing food-related activities to the classroom, and incorporating the produce into school meals.

- Ripe tomatoes and greens like lettuce, chard, and kale can be harvested at any time.
- Colored peppers can be harvested either green or ripe.
- Cucumbers and squash must be harvested every two or three days or they will become too tough to use and will stop producing.
- Melons turn yellowish and often slip off the stem when ripe; watermelons are ripe when the tendril at the base of the stem (where it meets the vine) turns brown.
- Potatoes should be dug once the plants have died back.
- Winter squash, pumpkins, and gourds should be harvested once the vines have died but before hard frosts (30°F or lower) damage the fruit.

**Garden Clean-up:** Established gardens should be cleaned up before the first snow. This can be done any time in the fall. Pull all dead plant material and compost if an official compost pile has been established at your school. If not simply pile all refuse in an out-of-the-way corner of the garden. Eventually the humus that results can be incorporated into the garden.

**New Garden Preparation:** New gardens should also be broken in during the fall. Since most will be placed on what was once lawn, sod should be tilled under when the ground is moist (not soggy) at least once in the fall and once or twice in spring.

**Planting:** If you want spring spinach you can direct-seed it into the garden in early September. It should be ready for harvest early in the spring.
November-December-January

Planning Spring Planting: Choose crops and varieties, keeping in mind what students and teachers would like to plant and which crops food service personnel are willing and able to use. The plants listed in this guide are a great place to start!

Obtain seeds, ensuring that the varieties are suitable for this growing zone by checking “time to maturity” in catalogues, or by using knowledgeable sources like Seed Savers Exchange or the Pepperfield Project. Seed Savers has seeds available free through Herman’s Garden, and Pepperfield is often willing to donate site-specific seeds to school gardens in northeast Iowa.

Design garden layout, paying particular attention to the space needs of the various crops. (See Planting Guide for details.) Plan indoor locations for seed-starting and growing where maximum light is available. This may not be possible in every classroom, so if sufficiently sunny windows are not available, consider investing in grow-lights or a greenhouse.

February

Review Planting Guide: Develop a planting schedule for the crops your school has chosen to grow. Timing is very important for producing transplants strong enough to plant outside. Take inventory of what supplies you have on-hand and procure materials such as potting soil, containers, label sticks, and watering tools that will be needed throughout the spring.

March

First Week of March: Start broccoli, kale, chard, and kohlrabi in pots inside.

Mid-March: Start peppers and eggplant inside.

Check Plants Regularly: Indoor plants should be checked daily to ensure adequate thinning, watering, and light are being provided.

April

Re-till: It’s important to re-till any new garden spaces that were sod in the fall. If the new space wasn’t tilled in the fall, till sod under once ground has thawed in the spring, then till again if possible once more before planting time. You could also rent a sod cutter, remove the sod, and till the bare soil.

Early April: In the garden, direct seed any peas, spinach, radishes, greens, cilantro, and dill. If planted early, it’s possible these crops could produce a nice harvest in time for summer programs!

Mid-April: Plant tomatoes in pots indoors.

Looking Ahead: Begin to seek volunteers for summer garden maintenance. It works well to have families adopt a week. Plan a few garden orientation meetings for these families prior to summer.
**Your School’s Garden: What to Do and When to Do It**

### May

**Early May:** Seed potatoes and onion sets are available in early May.

**Final Tilling:** Can be done any time soil can be worked before the late May planting. (Be careful not to disturb any seedlings already planted!)

**Infrastructure:** Ensure all infrastructure, such as fencing and trellises, is in place before planting day.

**Planning a Planting Day:** Planting day should take place mid-to-late May. Planting ideally will involve as many students as possible. Establish groups of students (5 to 12 suggested) and adult helpers (probably one per every 3 or 4 students) to plant in shifts. Larger groups can be tough to coordinate; small groups are recommended.

**Planting:** After the danger of frost has passed, tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant can be transplanted outside. Cucumbers, squash, and melons can be direct-seeded in late May or planted inside in early May and transplanted out later.

### Summer

**Summer Garden Maintenance**

**Establishing Community Ownership:** This is the best way to ensure success in the garden throughout the summer. Here are some essentials:

1. **Leadership:** Every garden needs a gardener! The lead gardener can be someone from the school, a parent, or someone else from the community.

2. **Maintenance Team:** It tends to work best if one family per week “adopts” garden duties. Families should sign up in advance for their week, and it’s recommended that a garden orientation be held in the spring for families that have signed up.

3. **Regular Garden Checks:** The garden should be checked at least once a week (more during droughts or following adverse weather) by the lead gardener or another representative.

4. **Oversight:** The lead gardener is responsible for oversight of summer maintenance, including reminding families of their scheduled adoption week.
Summer Garden Maintenance, continued

Tasks:

1. Water: Check for water needs every week. Seed beds require much more frequent watering until seeds germinate. If there is not much rain, deep watering will be necessary for established plants. This means really flooding the ground while making sure to not displace seeds.

2. Weed: Frequent weeding is best. Light scraping of small weed seedlings on a hot, dry day takes only minutes. Pulling once the weeds get big can take hours. Timing is important – the more often, the better!

3. Trellis: Trellising of tomato vines by tying them to their panels every foot or so of growth is important. In addition, gourd or squash vines need help finding their way up and over arbors.

4. Hill: Hilling potatoes may be necessary mid-summer if tubers are pushing up into the sunlight.

5. Damage Control: Storm damage should be checked for promptly if heavy wind or rain has occurred. Any downed plants should be tied up.

6. Plant: Since schools aren’t in session during the summer when early-planted crops will bear fruit some summer planting needs to be done in order to ensure a fall harvest. Be sure that any late June plantings of summer squash, cucumbers, etc. happen on schedule.

7. Harvest: Harvest anything that becomes ripe, even before school starts. It is important to pick summer squash, cucumbers, and beans regularly (at least every 3 days), because bigger fruits begin to stop future production. Consider coordinating with food service to freeze some of this food for later use in school lunch or donating it to a local food pantry or meal program. Families adopting the garden may also enjoy taking home some of the produce!

8. Pests: Inspect for pests that may be causing problems in the garden. Some of the main pests to watch for: flea beetles on brassicas (kale, cabbage, broccoli, kohlrabi, etc.) and eggplant, cabbage butterfly larvae on brassicas, cucumber beetles on cucurbitis (squash, melons, cucumbers, etc.), squash vine borers on all squash species but butternut squash, and potato beetles. For details, see Diseases & Pests Guide.