

# The GrowSchool Garden

How to make  
a preschool garden that works

For children ages 2-6



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## Overview

**The GrowSchool Garden** is a simple, set design that can be as small as 4 × 4 feet or scaled up to meet the needs of any group. Designed for children as young as 18 months, this model includes all the rules and tools needed to be successful with diverse groups of children and teachers. No prior gardening experience is required for it to be easily enjoyed.

The essential elements of the design are high walls with a smooth, continuous grip surrounding a small, organic flower garden. Around the garden bed are a low balance beam and a small set of steps, creating natural opportunities for gross motor movement.

The primary activities are watching, walking around the garden, and watering the plants using a simple, clean, age-appropriate watering system that is easy to implement and manage.

Each element of the garden is broken down with clear instructions on how to plan, build, and introduce it to your group. We also provide resources to share with parents and staff, helping them understand the purpose of the project and the positive outcomes they can expect for children.

The GrowSchool Garden is quick to implement, easy to maintain, and designed to provide meaningful benefits for years to come.

# The GrowSchool Garden



**Balance  
Beam**



**Stock Tank**



**Stepping  
Stones**



# Common Early Childhood Frameworks

This garden is intentionally designed to function across multiple U.S. early childhood frameworks without requiring separate activities or additional documentation. Daily, natural use of the garden already meets expectations across licensing, quality rating systems, and curriculum approaches.

## Montessori

- Practical Life work
- Movement with purpose
- Independence, repetition, and concentration

## DRDP

- Observable gross motor development
- Self-regulation and persistence
- Social interaction during real tasks

## QRIS

- High-quality learning environments
- Child engagement and well-being
- Intentional use of outdoor space

## NAEYC

- Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)
- Hands-on, play-based learning
- Whole-child development (physical, social-emotional, cognitive)
- Learning through active engagement with the environment

## ECERS / FCCERS

- Outdoor space that supports gross motor play
- Access to nature and varied materials
- Opportunities for exploration, movement, and hands-on experiences
- Environment that promotes engagement and positive behavior

# Gross Motor Activity Integration Rationale

The GrowSchool Garden design integrates permanent gross motor (large body movement) activities around the garden beds to support physical development, concentration, and positive behavior. Gardens that offer only passive observation frequently lead to disengagement or behavioral challenges. By embedding purposeful movement opportunities directly into the garden environment, children remain productively engaged at all times.

## Alignment with Early Childhood Standards

This design supports widely recognized early childhood development frameworks and state early learning foundations through:

### Physical Development – Gross Motor Skills

Balance, coordination, postural control, and controlled movement  
Carrying, stepping, and navigating space with intention

### Approaches to Learning

Persistence through repeated attempts  
Problem-solving and self-correction during movement

### Self-Regulation and Positive Behavior

Purposeful activity reduces idle time and supports calm, focused behavior  
Predictable, always-available motor work promotes emotional regulation

## Montessori Principles

This design directly reflects core Montessori concepts, including:

### Movement as a Foundation for Learning

Montessori environments recognize movement as essential to cognitive and physical development. Balance beams and stepping stones allow children to refine movement through purposeful, repeated practice.

### Prepared Environment

The garden is intentionally designed with permanent, accessible materials that invite independent use without adult direction.

## Practical Life

Watering while navigating obstacles combines real work with physical coordination. Carrying water, maintaining balance, and delivering it successfully to the plants mirrors Montessori practical life activities.

## Control of Error

Children receive immediate feedback through their actions—water reaching the garden bed indicates success, while spills naturally invite adjustment and repetition.

## Concentration and Repetition

Children are encouraged to repeat activities as needed, supporting mastery through self-directed practice rather than correction.

## Recommended Motor Elements

The following elements are recommended as standard components surrounding garden beds:

### Balance Beams

Low-profile

Positioned parallel with the garden bed edge

### Stepping Stones

Fixed or semi-fixed placement

Spaced to encourage small, intentional steps and balance control

**These elements should remain available at all times, rather than being added only during structured activities.**

## Design Rationale

Garden bed edges provide a stable gripping surface that supports confidence and balance. Permanent motor elements ensure children always have meaningful work available in the garden.

Continuous access to purposeful movement reduces waiting, wandering, and negative behaviors.

## Integration with Watering Activities

Watering is a key practical life activity within the garden.

Water access is partially obstructed and distant to encourage navigation.

Children are invited to carry watering cans or garden tools while crossing balance beams and stepping stones.

This integration strengthens coordination, concentration, and functional strength.

## Developmental Expectations

**Initial Difficulty:** Most children will experience early challenges when first using balance beams and stepping stones.

**Rapid Progress:** With consistent access, improvements in balance, coordination, and confidence are typically observed quickly.

**Respect for Individual Pace:** Children are encouraged to work at their own level and repeat activities as needed.

## Observation and Informal Assessment

Educators may observe:

Increased control and precision of movement

Longer periods of concentration and engagement

Greater emotional regulation

# Garden Layout Planning

Any addition to an environment should be **carefully studied to:**

- Ensure children's **safety**
- Comply with all **regulations**.

Size:

- Even a single small potted plant is a good garden!
- Ideally space for all children to stand nearby and see a presentation.
- **Recommended Starter size: Single 6 foot long, 24" tall**

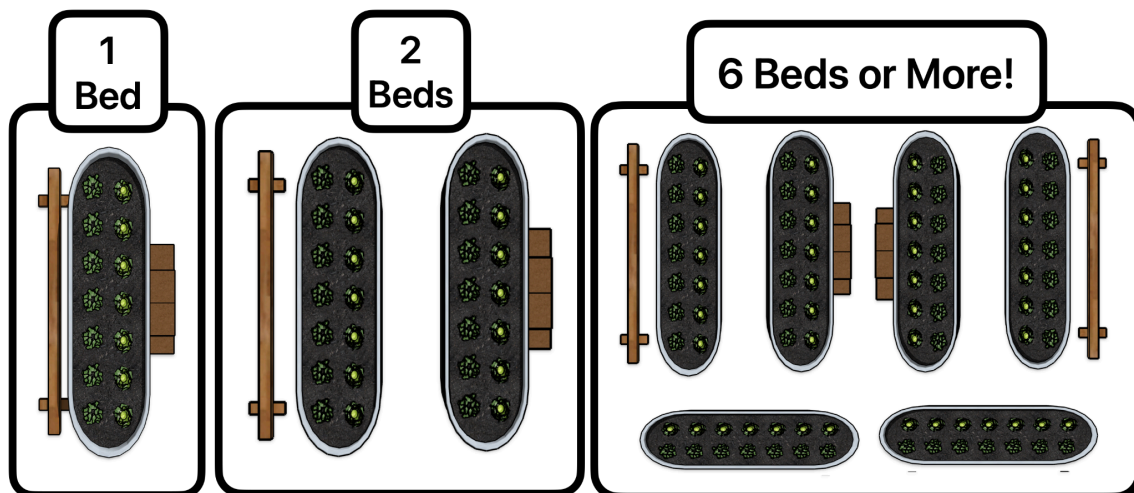
Location:

- Water should drain from the bed (this is good)
- Direct sunlight is ideal
- Gross motor component is essential
- Easy access for children and adults
- Close to indoor areas if possible

**Reach out for free help layouts and planning:**

- [GrowSchoolGarden@gmail.com](mailto:GrowSchoolGarden@gmail.com)

Recommended Layouts:



## Preparing the Garden Beds

The following guidelines are intended as a framework only. Always follow all existing safety, licensing, and child welfare rules in your area.

### **Stock Tanks** are the Best Option:

- Bottomless can be available - otherwise you need to make holes
- Must have “**rolled edge**” for safety - beware of galvanized garden beds that have a “rubber edge”
- Use the tall **24” deep** tanks - short sides mean they will climb in, and the edge helps with balance
- Fill 1/2 to 3/4 with dirt - it will shrink over time

**All beds will need to allow water to drain easily.**

**If you are making your own garden beds, be sure they are:**

- Chemical Free
- Have tall safe edges

If you are using a stock tank with a solid bottom

- Use a step bit
- Drill 1/2 holes every 5-10 inches
- Drill lightly from the other side to remove sharp edges on both sides
- Clean up all shavings
- Check materials list for links

## Essential Gross Motor Elements

TheGorSchool Garden design integrates permanent gross motor activities around the garden beds to support physical development, concentration, and positive behavior.

Gardens that offer only passive observation frequently lead to disengagement or behavioral challenges. By embedding purposeful movement opportunities directly into the garden environment, children remain productively engaged at all times.

Any addition to an environment should be **carefully studied to:**

- Ensure children's **safety**
- Comply with all **regulations**.

### 1. Balance Beam

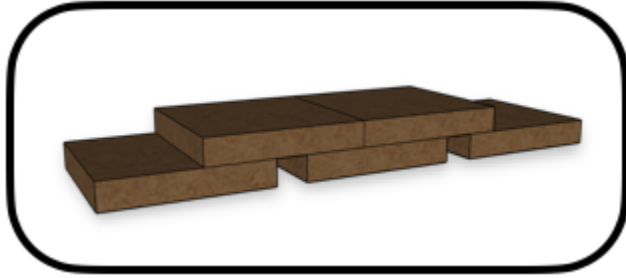


The balance beam is a primary gross motor element within the Fillmore Model garden design. It should feel approachable and confidence-building rather than challenging or risky. Children may use the edge of the garden bed for stability as needed.

How to make your own:

- Length: Depending on available space
- Material: Standard 4x4 beam (actual dimensions: 3.5" x 3.5")
- Wood: Non-treated lumber only
- Finish: Outdoor, child-safe paint or clear sealant
- Attach 12-inch 2x4 feet underneath the beam for added stability
- Beam height should remain low to the ground to support safe, repeated use

## 2. Steps / Uneven Surfaces



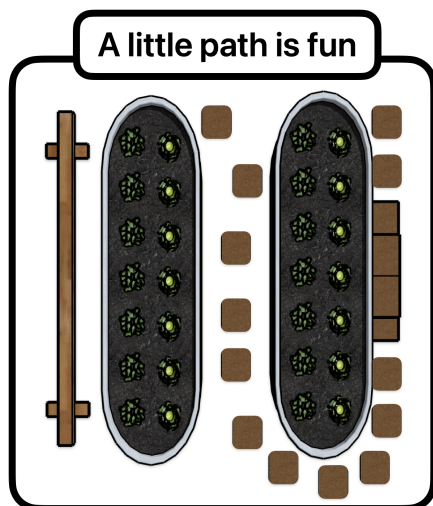
Uneven surfaces provide variety and interest while supporting balance, coordination, and controlled movement. These elements should invite exploration without introducing risk.

Steps may be created using:

- Stepping stones
- Large, stable rocks
- Wooden step sets
- Stacked pavers (two-step stack shown)
- Path made of pavers

### Guidelines

- Surfaces should feel “interesting” rather than uniform
- The edge of the garden bed should remain within reach at all times
- No step or surface should exceed 10 inches off the ground
- Change the arrangement frequently
- Use stepping stones to link areas together
- Create more opportunities by using chalk on the steps (letters, numbers, anything!)
- Make it a little challenging sometimes



# Choosing Plants

Start Safe, Simple, and Successful

**Always confirm that plants are safe for children by talking with your local plant nursery.**

## Start Easy:

- Begin with **easy plants**. When you feel confident you might move on to more challenging plants or vegetables.
- Think about the sunlight available in your garden.
- Best is a **small perennial flowering bush**, such as a **daisy**.
- Start with something children can enjoy right away, before asking them to wait for seeds to grow.

## Get Started:

- Re-pot a few large flowering plants directly into the garden bed.
- Or divide the garden, one side with **fully grown plants**, and one side for **experiments with seeds**.

## How to Re-Plant a Potted Flower

1. **Choose a safe plant.** Confirm the plant is safe for children.
2. **Dig a hole** about the same size as the plant's pot.
3. **Remove the plant** gently.
4. **Place the plant in the hole**, set the plant into the hole so the top of the soil is level with the garden bed.
5. **Fill with soil** and press down lightly to hold it in place.
6. **Water well**, keep the soil slightly moist.
7. That's it. You're done!

## Keep It Manageable

Long-term care can be as simple as **replacing plants when needed**, or as advanced as you choose. There is no pressure to do more.

For ongoing garden care, see **Garden Maintenance**.

# Soil for Garden Beds

Only organic soil may be used to fill garden beds.

## Requirements:

- Certified organic vegetable garden soil
- Suitable for raised beds
- Free from contaminants

Avoid products labeled only as “topsoil” unless organic certification is clearly stated.

## Sources:

- Local Gardeners or Grounds Keepers
- Local Garden Centers
- Municipal or Community Compost Programs
- Organic Soil Suppliers / Bulk Delivery
- Parent or Community Donations

**Do not accept soil from unknown yards, construction sites, or roadside locations**

## Safety Notes

- Do not use soil treated with pesticides, herbicides, or chemical fertilizers
- Do not use soil contaminated with debris

## How Much Do I Need?

- Each bed should be about 1/2 - 3/4 full (12 - 18” deep)
- A little more is better
- It will shrink over time
- Online calculators are available
- **2”x2’x6’ round end tank 3/4 Full = 3/4 Cubic Yard of Soil = 30-60\$**

## Educational Opportunity

Soil sourcing can be shared with families and children:

- Emphasize that the soil is organic and safe
- Connect soil choice to plant health, environmental care, and food systems
- Raise awareness about soil safety at home

## Dear Families - We're Growing a Garden!

We are excited to share that our preschool will soon be adding a small garden to our outdoor space. This garden is a hands-on learning environment, and we're thrilled about the many ways it will support children's growth, curiosity, and well-being.

### Why a Garden?

Research consistently shows that gardening experiences offer meaningful benefits for both children and educators. Time spent caring for plants helps children learn through direct experience while supporting physical, social, and emotional development.

### Learning Opportunities Children May Experience

As the garden grows, you may notice positive changes such as:

- Increased curiosity about nature, plants, insects, and the environment
- Improved responsibility and patience through caring for living things
- Strengthened fine and gross motor skills (digging, planting, watering)
- Rich language development through new vocabulary and shared experiences
- Greater confidence and pride from contributing to a shared project
- Opportunities for collaboration, problem-solving, and teamwork
- A deeper connection to where food comes from and how things grow

### What to Expect

- Gardening can be messy—and that's part of the learning. Please forgive occasional dirt on clothing.
- We will be using only organic soil and age-appropriate tools.
- Children will always be supervised during garden activities.

### How Families Can Support

We invite you to:

- Ask your child about what they planted or observed
- Watch for new interests in nature, food, or helping at home
- Celebrate their excitement and sense of accomplishment

We truly believe this garden will be a joyful and enriching addition to our preschool community. Thank you for your support as we dig in, learn together, and grow.

# Hello Teachers!

We are welcoming a **new children's garden!**

This garden is intentionally designed to support regulation, gross motor development, and sustained engagement for children as young as 18 months, all **without adding extra work to your day.**

You will likely see **a period of excitement.** Because it is new, children will be curious, energized, and eager to explore. This is normal and expected. With **clear modeling and simple rules**, the garden becomes a **calming, organizing space.** You should begin to notice:

- Longer periods of focused concentration
- More purposeful movement (walking, marching, balancing)
- Easier redirection during dysregulation
- Improved group manageability overall

The garden is designed so that the environment does most of the work. Watching, walking around the edge, and watering are the primary activities. There is no expectation for children to constantly “do” something, and **no gardening is required from staff.**

Adults should model correct behavior:

- Show interest in the garden
- Look closely and quietly at the garden
- Make simple observations about what you see
- Walk carefully on the obstacles

As you use the space, we ask that you **actively look for the benefits.** Expect better emotional regulation, transitions, and group participation. Many of the strongest outcomes show up subtly over time.

Thank you for your openness and trust. This project is meant to support you as much as it supports the children, and we're confident it will become a valuable part of our program.

Please reach out with any questions or observations as we begin.

Warmly,

## Garden Rules

The GrowSchool Garden is designed to be regulating, engaging, and manageable for both children and adults. The garden works best when staff trust the design, model calm confidence, and allow the environment to do much of the work.

### General Guidelines:

#### **Be respectful of the garden**

Treat the garden as a living part of our environment. We model care, patience, and attention, just as we would with children.

#### **Do not show fear of bugs or dirt**

Children take emotional cues from adults. Calm curiosity (“Oh look, a beetle”) supports regulation and confidence.

#### **Redirect to what children *can* do**

Avoid saying “no” without offering an alternative. The garden provides many appropriate options for movement and engagement.

#### **Model care as mutual respect**

We speak for the plants just as we speak for each other:

“I’m going to keep this plant safe.”

“These little plants are still growing.”

This models self-respect, boundaries, and advocacy in a concrete way.

#### **Notice and name the calming effects**

Pay attention to changes in focus, body control, mood, and group flow, especially after the initial excitement fades.

#### **Stay open-minded**

Some benefits are subtle and cumulative. Adults often find the garden supports *their* regulation as well.

### Rules for Children:

1. No willful destruction.
2. Touch gently with one or two fingers.
3. Tools should be used for their purpose.

## Behavior and Scripts

These are common phrases we can use to redirect behavior or instruct children in the garden. With modeling and support, the garden helps children slow down, regulate emotions, practice gentle care, and engage their bodies in purposeful movement. They might need several chances, that's ok!

### **Core Messages**

- "We are gentle with the garden."
- "These little plants are still growing."
- "We take care of the garden like we take care of each other."
- "You can watch the garden." - "Wow! look!"

### **Bugs & Dirt - Stay calm, children learn from our reactions.**

- "Oh look, a bug! Let's watch what it does."
- "These bugs are my friends. They are helping the garden."
- "Dirt is part of gardening, we can wash our hands."

### **Touching Plants**

- "One finger or two fingers—so gentle."
- "This plant is my friend, we will be so gentle."
- "What does it feel like?"

### **When Behavior With the Plants Is Too Rough**

- "I will need to keep this plant safe, we can try again later."
- "You can throw a ball if you want to throw something."
- "Watching body." (Watching body = holding your hands behind your back)

### **Watering**

- "You can choose a watering can."
- "If none are ready, you can wait."
- "We carry the water carefully to the garden with two hands."
- "We can water the plants only."

### **If watering is paused:**

- "The garden has enough water right now."
- "We can look at the leaves."
- "We can sing a garden song."

### **Regulation & Redirection - Change the mood**

- "Let's walk slowly around the garden."
- "Your body looks like it needs movement— let's try the steps."
- "What can you see?"
- "Wow, look at this small flower"
- "Would you like to help me water the garden?"

## First Presentations to the Group

You will need to repeat the lessons over and over. You can start with a large group, or just a few kids. Present actions silently, if you need to speak, stop moving so they can focus on listening.

Children will naturally begin circling, balancing, and watching. Don't stop them unless they are being destructive or dangerous.

Bring children to the garden area and say something simple:

"This is our new garden. The plants are growing! We can be so gentle!"

### Taking interest:

- Become silent
- Gaze at the garden with interest
- Walk around the garden showing interest

### Stepping Stones:

- Carefully look at the stepping stones
- Use the edge of the garden bed to balance
- Pretend it is a little tricky

### Balance Beam:

This has levels based on ability:

1. Hold the edge and step up, that's enough for some!
2. Shuffle sideways
3. Walking the beam foot over foot
4. Walking without holding the edge

### Make Observations:

- Talk about the plants
- Talk about the bugs
- Describe what you see
- Ask questions

### Sing

- Sing with the kids in the garden!
- Please!



# Garden Maintenance

This garden is designed to be easy to maintain. How much care it needs depends on:

- Your location
- The time of year
- What you choose to plant

Any garden children enjoy is a good garden.

## The Easiest Approach

- Water as needed
- Remove plants that are no longer thriving
- Replace plants when needed

It is completely fine to treat plants as temporary. Plants are tools for learning, not permanent fixtures.

## Optional Ways to Go Deeper

- Harvest herbs, flowers, or vegetables
- Save and plant seeds
- Add compost or fresh organic soil to amend beds

## Support

- Talk to a local garden center or nursery
  - Ask a community gardener
  - Reach out to GrowSchool for guidance
- There is no failure in replacing plants  
The garden's primary purpose is engagement, movement, and learning

# Family Observation Checklist

Your child has access to the school garden. We invite you to share any positive changes you notice at home or during drop-off/pick-up.

Please check any that apply. There are no right or wrong answers.

## Movement & Physical Skills

- Improved balance or coordination
- Enjoys carrying objects (watering cans, buckets, bags, etc.)
- Shows more confidence with climbing, stepping, or movement
- Appears stronger or more physically capable

## Independence & Responsibility

- Shows pride in helping or doing “real work”
- Wants to do tasks independently
- Talks about taking care of plants or living things
- Shows follow-through with tasks

## Focus & Regulation

- Appears calmer after school
- Shows improved patience or persistence
- Stays engaged in activities for longer periods
- Handles small challenges with less frustration

## Curiosity & Learning

- Talks about plants, soil, bugs, or watering
- Asks questions about nature or growth
- Shows interest in planting, gardening, or outdoor activities

Notices changes in the environment

#### Social & Emotional Growth

Uses more cooperative or helpful language

Enjoys working alongside others

Shares tools, space, or ideas more easily

Shows pride in contributing to a shared space

#### Family Observations (Optional)

Anything you've noticed that isn't listed above:

## How to manage garden activities

There are many things to do in a garden. Here are some guidelines to help keep activities manageable and age-appropriate:

### Digging

Use hand cultivators (small tools that look like a little rake) instead of shovels to prevent children from moving soil out of the bed or throwing dirt

Use the whole bed. Do not expect children to dig only around living plants

If you have several beds, keep one bed open for digging at all times

### Picking Flowers

Only allow children to pick flowers when there are plenty and they are easy to pick

Teachers can also cut flowers and create a flower play station

### Eating Vegetables

Do not allow children to eat food directly from the garden or “graze”

Edible parts should be carefully handled and prepared in a food-safe manner

Expect more interest in picking and preparing than eating, that’s okay

### Playing with Leaves

Children should play with fallen leaves, but should not pick living leaves

You might say:

“The plant still needs this leaf. When it is finished with it, it will fall to the ground and then we can collect it.”

Leaves help children understand the idea of living and non-living

### Teacher Interest

The garden is also a place for teachers to enjoy

Showing genuine interest helps model respectful behavior for children

### Bugs

Bugs are our friends, so please be kind to them

Bugs help our garden and our ecosystem

Take interest in their parts, behavior, and their connection to our daily lives

## Watering the Garden with Children:

Watering can be paused at any time, but should be available as much as possible.

This system encourages patience, turn-taking, and self-regulation.

If you are not familiar with Montessori-style sharing, this may feel unusual—but it works remarkably well. Children might be unable to get much water into the garden, that's ok.

### Does my garden need water?

1. Stick your finger 2–3 in (5–7 cm) into the soil:

Dry soil = water

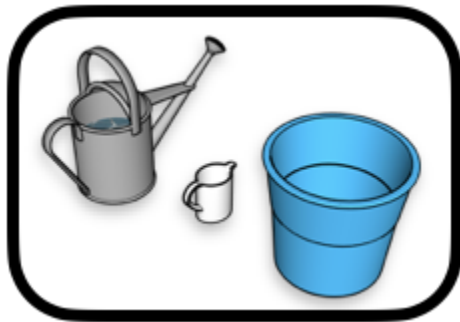
Damp soil = wait

### Materials

A few children's watering cans (not one per child)

Small bucket (too small to fit the watering can inside)

Small scoop cup with handle (for transferring the water, a pouring spout is idea)



### Setup

Place the small bucket far from the garden (distance and obstacles are intentional)

Bucket may be filled by teachers, or by children if appropriate

Place a small handled cup next to the bucket

Presentation:

1. Choose an available watering can.

“If no watering cans are available, I can wait..”

“I am going to water the garden.”

2. Sit or kneel next to the bucket

3. Use the cup to transfer water silently

4. Stand up

5. Pick up the waiting can with one hand on the handle, and one supporting the spout.

6. Walk to the garden - Setting the can down to navigate an obstacle like a step

7. Water the garden!

8. Return the can to the watering bucket

“I am all done, would you like to try?”

- Let them repeat as many times as desired
- No forced turns
- If there is a “line” the oldest child writes or a teacher holds a list of names

## Pausing Watering

If watering needs to stop, simply do not refill the bucket.

Use calm redirection:

“Oh, the garden has enough water already.”

“We can look at the beautiful leaves.”

“You can help the garden by singing a garden song.”

## Archway Trellis - Optional

Highly Recommended

### Purpose

If you have two garden beds, or some other nearby structure, you can add archway trellis. This creates a magical and visually engaging transition between spaces. This feature adds imaginative and emotional value to the garden environment.

### Design Intent

The archway is not a jungle gym and is not designed to support a child's full body weight. It is intentionally somewhat fragile.

This means:

- It may bend or It may break
- It may require repair or replacement

This is an intentional part of the design and should not be viewed as a failure.

### Adult Response to Misuse

When misuse occurs, respond calmly and clearly:

“Oh, you can hang on the monkey bars. This is the garden trellis for the little plants.”

- Do not be punitive
- Redirect gently and matter-of-factly
- Fix any broken pieces peacefully

### Function

The archway may support climbing plants, but it functions equally well when left open. Its purpose is to:

- Attract children visually
- Create a cozy, clubhouse-like feeling
- Invite hiding, observing, and imaginative play

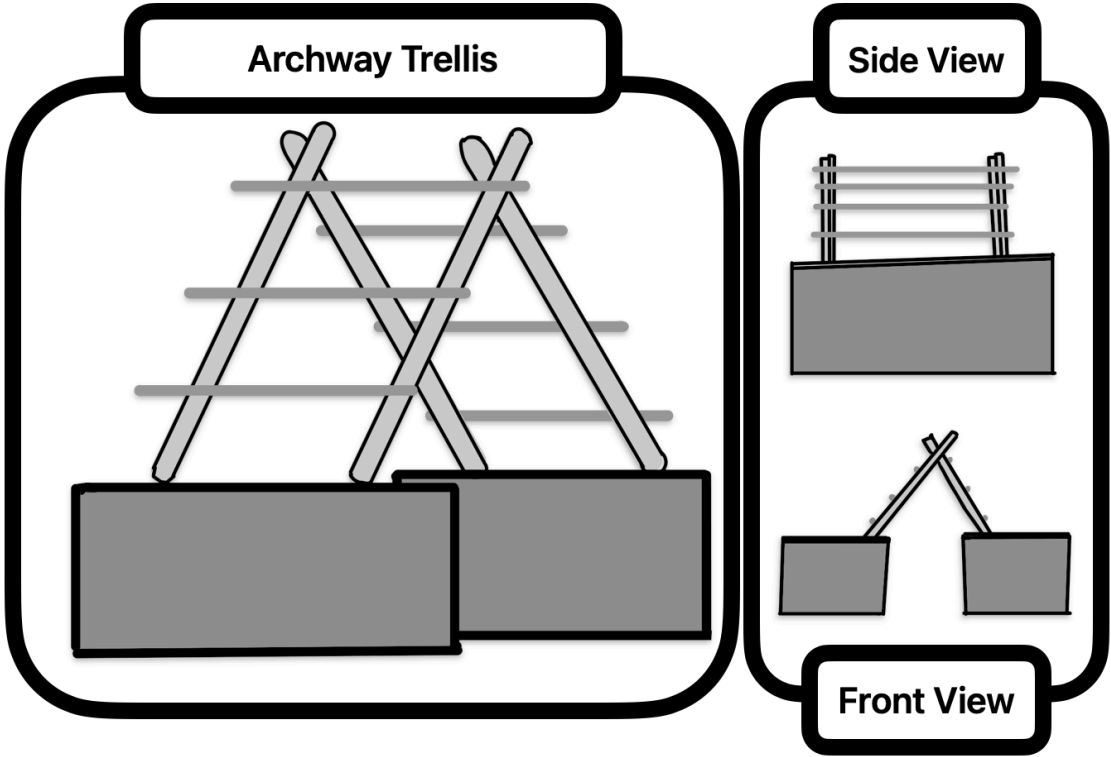
### Construction:

This can be built many ways. Keep it safe

Bury the ends in the dirt to give it some stability

Lashing with twine is the simplest method, no need to be fancy.

Flimsy is ideal to discourage roughness



# Paper Cup Bucket Brigade

A fun way to introduce the garden. A fun thing to do anytime!

## Preparing the Space

- Removing the balance beam is a good idea for this one
- Surfaces are cool enough to touch (spray with water if needed)
- Bucket and paper cups are ready
- Bucket is placed far from the garden (distance matters)
- One teacher is stationed near the bucket or water source

Say to the group:

“Our new garden is very thirsty, It needs lots of water. You can help!”

1. Give each child one small paper cup
2. Children scoop water into their cups
3. Children carry cups to the garden and pour them in

## What to Expect (and Accept)

- Cups will be crushed
- Water will spill
- Some children will arrive with empty cups
- Some children will get wet
- Younger children will mostly enjoy the running

Use forgiving, friendly, and encouraging language:

“You worked so hard!”

“Let’s try again.”

“The garden loves your help.”

## Adult Role

- Stay seated and calm
- Join as one of the children
- Refill the bucket quietly
- Avoid directing too much
- Let children repeat as many times as they want
- Do not rush the process

## Supply List

<b>Item</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Source</b>
Garden Beds			
Plants			
Balance Beam			
Stepping Stones			
Water Source			
Dirt			

Optional for Children Watering Activity:

<b>Item</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Source</b>
Children's Watering Cans			
Small Buckets			
Small Cups with Handles			

## Help Get Our New Garden Started!

We're excited to begin our new preschool garden and would love your help!

Work Day

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please add your name to any line below if you're able to help.

We'll reach out to coordinate details with you. Thank you for supporting our garden!

Work Day Volunteers

Pickup & Delivery Help

Time:

Date:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

All help is appreciated—thank you for being part of this growing project!

Contact

GrowSchoolGarden@gmail.com

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[growschoolgarden.org](http://growschoolgarden.org)

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Gardening songs for staff to sing with kids:

Interactive songs for teachers, look for the garden playlist



## About and License

We are Montessori teachers in California. We believe this is the best garden design for a busy preschool.

Every school should have a garden. We made this resource to help make it easy.

Please give it a try, or at least try to incorporate some of these concepts into your practices.

Any garden can be a special garden if children enjoy it.

### **This work is meant to be shared.**

The Fillmore Model Garden was created to support children, educators, families, and communities. Our hope is that this work spreads, adapts, and grows.

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