

The start of a new school year is just a hop, skip, and a jump away. And isn't it great when our kids enjoy their classes so much that they hop and skip all the way to school? Don't laugh. I've seen it happen, especially with younger children who are fascinated with learning new things.

Schools all over the country are keeping that fascination alive with the utilization of outdoor gardens and teaching areas. These outdoor areas are not only for plant and nature classes, but are used as a teaching tool for nearly every other school subject, as well. Social lessons are also learned in the garden as children work together and practice patience, responsibility, and cooperation.

Children learn and retain knowledge best when they can connect what they are learning to their own lives. Is there a better way to connect yourself to the world around you than be IN the world around you? Touching, feeling and smelling nature where you live, play and learn? You may have guessed it, but I wholeheartedly believe that this place-based learning keeps students involved and excited in their own education.

First Lady, Michelle Obama, has been instrumental in bringing the importance of school gardens to public awareness. Without home or school gardens, how could a young child understand the source of vegetables? It is true that many children don't know where the grocery store gets vegetables. We see it every year during fair time when students attend the Columbia County Extension 'Farm to Table' event. Here they have the opportunity to see what vegetables look like as they come from the field.

There are many things to consider before starting a teaching garden at home or at school; soil, sunlight, water source, volunteer helpers, seeds and material, equipment, safety, lessons, standards and strategies. But there are plenty of resources out there to help you get things started. <http://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/schoolgardens/> is an online resource with loads of valuable information. Please give me a call 752-5384 if you would like to start a teaching garden and have questions. *(Published 8-19-12)*