

PEARL'S IN THE GARDEN PROJECT

[Suggestions for growing tomatoes and community in the classroom.]

This project is flexible, fits pretty well any subject and every grade from Jr. Kindergarten to Grade 12 has enjoyed the experience. All one needs are some seeds, soil, containers and a windowsill.

Part 1

- Start by saving **containers** like ones from take-out containers, prepared salad containers, whatever you can scrounge that can hold soil and water.
- Label the containers so you know what seeds are in there.
- layer potting soil on the bottom of container
- add water.



- Sprinkle the seeds more or less evenly.
- Add more soil to cover.
- Place them where there's sunshine [or grow lights if you have or need].

This should be done anytime from January to the end of March. I like to stagger the start so when the plants eventually are in gardens [or pails or pots] they will harvest at different times. You can start as much as you want for your project.



Water occasionally. Don't oversoak as you want the roots to grow searching for the water. But also don't let them dry out. I usually water three times a week as most schools are quite arid. Give them a good soak and let them alone.

I like to keep large **charts**.

- One is a large list of jobs and who has been delegated to do them.

A second chart is a record of the growing plants. When did the first one show up? How many are there? Could be updated daily or whatever you choose.

Part 2

- While the seedlings are popping up, the students are challenged to find someone in the neighbourhood that they might not know very well, but they think would like or deserves a plant. It shouldn't be a parent or relative as you will have more than enough seedlings for the students to take home. But this is more for an awareness of the community around them. Depending on the grade, and the teacher, this can be quite a challenge. We usually have a discussion more than once as to who they might pick. Over the years there's been the neighbour that they don't know very well, but always has a beautiful garden, the neighbour that helped when they moved in, the bus driver who didn't always

ask to see the student ID, the person at the corner store. Younger grades would get together to give the seedlings to a local fire department, or especially all the staff at a hospital or a grocery store. My school also gave plants out to the houses next to the school as a thank you for being a neighbour. It was a welcome change from the few students who had left trash on lawns.

- Each student writes a paragraph or so explaining why they've chosen that particular person or group. Set aside some time for the students to read these out loud.
- When the teacher approves of the person they're giving the plant to, the student then hand writes a note to that person, explaining that they've been given the task of choosing a deserving person for this heirloom tomato plant they'd grown in school, and this is why this student thinks they deserve a plant. I like to use something with the school name and contact numbers.
- On the May long weekend the student will deliver the plant and the note to their chosen person.
- Upon returning to school, the student will write a report about the encounter.
- Finally, each student writes up a report on the entire project as to what worked, what needs improvement and what they've learned.

Part 3

This part actually happens in the middle of part 2



Once the seedlings have reached a height of approximately 2 inches or more, it's time to transplant them into cups. These cups can be found anywhere. We started with collecting staff cups washed out and reused. Then some of the coffee chains donated cups [Coffee Time]. I also found cups online. Whatever way you find them, especially the blank ones, students can decorate them which adds to the project. Also,

when transplanting the seedlings, if they know the kind of tomato planted, they can name the variety on the cup.

- This is where an assembly line works best. One group gently removes the seedling from the tray. Don't pull from the top of the plant. Better to reach under the soil and gently separate the roots.



- A second group adds some soil to the bottom of the cup.
- A third person adds some water to soak the soil.



The seedling is held in place in the cup and soil is spread all around it. The soil should cover the majority of the plant, leaving only the top leaves showing. This way, the covered part of the plant will all turn into roots and feed the entire plant.

Add more water and place the cup in a spot with sunshine or lights.

Water regularly.

This part of the project can be done over days and the work can be distributed various ways. Teams can be split into being in charge of a certain variety of tomato, or they can be in charge of job.

- While the seedlings are growing, it's also a good time to decorate the cups. Save a space to label the variety of tomato if the class chooses



Part 4

You choose.

This project can be altered to fit the class, school and community. In my school, we had enough plants to give one to the deserving neighbourhood person, give some to the neighbouring homes, take some home for the family and also sold plants at school events like open house and Spring concerts. With the money raised, we donated it to Hope for Rwanda Children, an organisation that pays the tuition for students in that country. It was students helping students. Other schools have taken the plants and distributed them to hospitals, fire stations, ambulance drivers, grocery store clerks, new immigrant groups. The list of possibilities is endless. There are great discussions in classrooms as to what can be done with the extra plants. A lot of staff started their



gardens with these tomatoes. Some schools had their own gardens which gave a bounty of fruit in the Fall. [There are ways of maintaining the garden over the summer and often the community pitches in.] I would like to emphasise that the primary aim of this project is to build community, not to be another fundraising activity. The fundraising comes with the extra seedlings as it would be a shame to discard them.



Lists, Charts and Jobs

I found that students enjoy taking responsibility for jobs. At the beginning of the project, I explain each job and responsibility and the students themselves delegate once we put a project manager in place. Here's a list of some of the jobs; more can be added or some compressed as necessary.

1. Project Manager

This person oversees the entire work. They meet with the teacher and schedule class time to work on the seedlings. They delegate the jobs that need to be filled if no one volunteers. They keep the larger list of everyone's duties and keep the project on schedule. There should also be an **Assistant Project Manager** in case the Project

Manager is absent or in need of a helping hand. When students ask me a question, I always referred them to the Project Manager. If the Project Manager doesn't have the answer, the Project Manager can ask the teacher.

2. **Chart Creator**

This person will both create charts and assist others with their charts.

- Firstly, would be a list of the Jobs and the name of the person [or persons] responsible.
- Secondly, a list of the names of the varieties of tomatoes, the day planted, the weekly count of seedlings, the day seedlings were watered, the number transplanted.
- A list of who had chosen the person they were giving plant to, who had written the note about the receiver, who wrote a rough copy of the note that will go with the plant, who has written the good note, when the plant and letter was delivered, follow up report on the delivery, follow up report on the project

3. **Editors**

- When students write the letter to their chosen recipient, they first hand them to the Editors. These are usually two or three who already are avid readers and make suggestions on how to improve the note. They might suggest punctuation, a completion of ideas, information that might be missing, choice vocabulary. Of course, the teacher will assist, but it's remarkable how well these editors work.

4. **Station Directors**

- A station director is needed both when the seeds are started and especially when the seedlings are transplanted.
- **First** when seeds are planted. You need **one station in charge of labelling** the containers. A **second to put down the first layer of potting soil**. A **third to add water**. A **fourth to sprinkle the seeds**. Then either back to the potting soil or another station to do the topping off. And more water.
- **Second** when the seedlings are transplanted to cups. You need **one station** to label the cups for the variety of tomato seedling. **Station two** puts soil in the bottom of the cup. **Station three** adds water. **Station four** has divided the seedlings carefully and holds the plant in the cup as soil is placed around it, leaving only the top part of the seedling showing [the rest of the plant will turn into roots and speed the growth. Add more water and place in a sunlit spot.

5. **Custodian[s]**

- This is an extremely important job. The custodian will constantly keep the area swept and clean. No matter how hard classes try, there is often a bit of soil spillage and that needs to be tidied up as soon as possible. The custodian also makes sure all is put away at the end of each

6. **Documentarian**

This person records the group's process. Some have used a camera, others their phone. It's often a good finale for the Documentarian to give a presentation at the end of the exercise.

7. **Water Boss**

This person makes a schedule for watering and makes certain nothing is missed or dries up. There are various ways to have a water crew.

- You can have specific team for watering

- You can rotate groups to water and document growth with the Water Boss overseeing the operation
- One class let the first group who finished an assignment to do the watering.

It's easy if the plants are on the windowsill in the containers. It takes much longer when the seedlings are in cups and there's lots more to do. The Water Boss makes the watering cans available and instructs on the proper way of watering.

There are other job positions available or you can create your own, such as a distributor of the letterhead paper for the good note. Also, when there was a sale of plants, there was an **Accountant** and **Publicity** head. There was also an **Administriviate**. This person was in charge of communication with the school office when forms were needed filled. For instance, we used our lunch hour to walk the neighbourhood and distribute plants. Now, one needs permission slips filled and signed by parents. Also, we informed the office when we would be making seedlings available to staff or other such events. Publicity was involved for any of these events and created announcements for the school news or intercom.

There is a children's book by Laura Alary, titled **What Grew in Larry's Garden** by KidsCan Press, that takes its inspiration from this project. It's well worth reading. Often schools have read it alongside the project. It includes samples of the letters students wrote.

There's a Youtube video my son filmed –simple instructions on starting seeds and transplanting:

https://youtu.be/NctE13_nHxs?si=w6lKuOyA-037ohQq

My aim is to get the ball rolling [or actually, plant the seed] so students, teachers, classes and schools can do this annually on their own. Anything I can do to help, let me know. I'll deliver the seeds, the soil and the cups. But you'll have to share the process and results with me and the rest of the communities that are participating. The impact has been heartwarming and incredibly positive. You'll see that you'll get much more joy out of this than the effort it takes to create.

Keep in touch.

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