

Looking Forward in the Wild School Garden —age-appropriate exploration of climate, biodiversity, and food

Jim Dyer, Healthy Community Food Systems, March 2023

Age-appropriate Learning: A common initial reaction is that kids, especially young ones, can't understand and shouldn't be worried about such things as climate change and biodiversity. That is where school and preschool educators—teachers, volunteers, and parents—as the audience for this guide, come in. You are the experts as to how and when to talk to children about these topics. Our belief is that climate, biodiversity, and food supply will be instrumental in shaping their world. We also believe that you need to understand the basics in order to prepare kids for their future. This guide is designed to concisely explain why these topics are critical, point to the basics to understand, and help prepare you for this exploration.



Looking Forward: We at HCFS are focused on a better future, and have many background and how-to resources compiled on our [Looking Forward](#) webpages. We approach climate change and biodiversity through the lens of food as a very practical and accessible way to start exploring for greater understanding and potential solutions:

- **Climate** is changing now, industrial agriculture is part of the problem, local sustainable food systems are part of the solution, and climate will shape our children's future profoundly.
- **Biodiversity** is in a critical state with extinction rates rising dramatically, “modern” agriculture is a big part of the problem, climate change is driving biodiversity losses, and biodiversity in and around our farms and gardens can strengthen sustainable local foodsheds and food production.



- **Food choices**, both daily eating habits and support of wise food policies and leaders, as well as the ability to grow food, are lifelong skills that children need to start developing now and increasingly into the future.
- **Wild School Gardens** are our suggestion for the best way to learn experientially about the importance of nature to our food supply, the impact of our food choices on nature and others around us, and to develop the needed life-long skills for a challenging but promising future.

Something for All Ages: School food gardens can be a focus for science, history, language, social studies, art, and other learning from preschool to high school. Again, you as educators are uniquely suited to guide this learning in ways suitable for your students. Simply being out in a garden and paying attention to nature is the key at all stages of learning. The older the student, the deeper and more self-directed the exploration can be. Learning modes range from unstructured observing to Citizen Science activities that help scientists.



Tips and Resources for Getting Started

If reading this as hardcopy, see [HCFS.org/files/Looking-Forward-WSG.pdf](https://www.HCFS.org/files/Looking-Forward-WSG.pdf) for enabled links

- **Learn about gardening with a focus on nature** with our [Wild School Gardens Guide](#). Resources included on starting a school garden, teaching in garden settings, and exploring nature in the garden including topics such as climate, biodiversity, and more.
- **Observe nature in your garden and the surrounding local foodshed**, including Citizen Science activities with our [Exploring Foodshed Health Field Guide](#) and our local version: [San Juan Mountain Watch Field Guide](#). Observing topics in both guides starting on page 17 include:

Insect Pollinators & Bumblebees	Birds & Hummingbirds
Weather & Climate	Phenology (Seasonal Happenings)
Ladybugs	Monarch Butterflies
Dragonflies	Pikas
First Occurrences	Fruit & Vegetable Varieties
Monitoring Migrations & Seasons	Soil
Water	Wildlife
Extreme Events	

- **See our [Looking Forward](#) resource pages** for many links on how gardening, observing, and using local food can be best done with the future in mind.
- **Get help from reputable organizations on teaching activities**—many of which relate to climate and biodiversity. Here are some examples:
 - [Gardening in Our Warming World](#) & [Climate Change in the Garden](#) from Cornell
 - [Kids Gardening Lesson Plans](#)
 - [Understanding Food & Climate Change](#) from Center for Ecoliteracy
 - [Climate Generation](#)
- **Review curricular materials you have already** and select those activities that relate to weather, climate, and biodiversity in your garden setting.