Tending the Garden
What gardening can tell us about running our centers

by Donna Rafanello

More grows in the garden than the gardener sows.
— Old Spanish Proverb

She who plants a garden believes in the future.
Author unknown

Introduction
Planning and tending a garden can be a great deal of fun. The opportunity to act as creator can be very appealing. But anyone who has gardened for long has learned the necessity of accommodating nature and has developed a sense of humility in the process. Similarly, growing a center takes time, skill, and patience. So how does your garden grow?

- Are weeds stifling healthy new growth?
- Is it disorganized?
- Does it lack design?
- Are plants shown in their best light?
- Are pests eating your healthy plants?
- Do your plants receive sufficient water and nutrients?
- Do you give your garden the regular attention that it needs to grow?

Here are some lessons from the garden that can help you grow a better center. Whether you are a new director or a seasoned administrator, there’s something here for you — some advice on cultivating a better environment for you and your staff and the children and families you serve.

Garden design basics

■ Have a plan. In gardening this involves sketching out a landscape design. For directors, this involves creating plans and goals related to staffing, enrollment, program evaluation, and fundraising among other issues. These activities are informed by strategic plans, annual fundraising plans, and a formal budget process.

■ See the whole. Gardening works best when you see it as a small ecosystem. After the planting is completed, your job is merely to help nature maintain a healthy balance. The same can be said for centers. Established with the right structure and the necessary elements, a sound center helps run itself, each element an integral part of the whole.

■ Don’t fight Mother Nature. Learning how to make your center a hospitable place for children, staff, and families is an essential part of leading a high-quality program. And, as with gardening, your experience will be much more rewarding if you learn to work with nature. Plants thrive in soil conditions prepared specifically for them. The same is true for teachers. While some teachers enjoy the more intimate feel of small centers, others enjoy the high activity level and noise of large centers. In addition, inexperienced teachers may want and need more of your personal attention than a veteran teacher who has been with your organization for years. Respect teachers’ personal styles and preferences: leader/follower, lead teacher/assistant, infant caregiver/preschool teacher. Build environments where all are valued and can flourish.

Planting

■ Decide between seeds or plants. Growing from seed or plants is like hiring inexperienced or experienced teachers. While there are advantages to both, in gardening, younger plants tend to acclimate better to new settings. This may apply to less experienced teachers whose philosophies and teaching methods are more receptive to your ideas and the philosophy of your program.
Give plants the right exposure. Some plants do well in full, hot sun, and others like shade. Similarly, our staff give their best effort when assigned to age levels they prefer and when teamed with teachers they enjoy. Analyze the conditions you have and plant (staff) accordingly. Always put your teachers in the best light when speaking about (and to) them and regularly recognize and reward them for their efforts.

Remember that variety enlivens a garden. A colorful and varied garden is a beautiful sight. A center that contains many areas of interest, interesting programs for children and families, and teachers with a variety of talents is also a wonderful thing. Of course, adding variety to your center can also add work; individuals, like plants, often demand individual attention and perform best when their needs are met.

Use a little elbow grease. Moving boulders and digging holes are some of the hard tasks of gardening. In directing a center, reassigning or firing staff, adopting a new curriculum, and pursuing NAEYC center accreditation are some major challenges. Don’t be afraid to roll up your sleeves and dig in. Your center demands your energy and hard work.

Don’t be afraid to make mistakes. Like the gardener who selects an exotic plant or tries a new fertilizer, don’t be afraid to try something new for fear that it won’t work out. There is a great deal of trial and error involved in being a gardener — and being a director. The sooner we accept this, the sooner we can go about the business of running our centers and leading change efforts to improve our programs.

Pest control

Try to avoid the problem in the first place. Problems are more likely to occur when a plant is stressed by its general condition. Picking the right plants for the right places, planting them properly, and giving them adequate care are key. When we take the time and the steps necessary to select the right staff for our centers, we avoid problems involved in mismatches and unclear expectations.

Utilize natural controls. There are a myriad of natural controls at work in a garden. Lady beetles, mantises, and spiders all eat insects. Healthy plants themselves produce a variety of means for controlling pests. A strong, healthy center is the best prevention.

Pruning and maintenance

Decide how much maintenance you’re willing to commit to. What’s your personal style? Do you welcome challenges or do you need tough, self-sufficient plants? Do you have assistant directors and program directors to support you? What leadership roles have you assigned to your most capable teachers? Your personal style and organizational supports should guide your decision making in areas including recruitment and hiring of staff, staff supervision, and program evaluation.

Select and care for your garden tools well. A gardener’s tools can ease her work or interfere with it. So, too, a director’s toolbox can be used to increase efficiency and create a dynamic center. A variety of skills — from budgeting to staff development and public speaking — can be developed and refined over time to increase your ability to lead a high-quality center. Invest wisely; get the best training you can afford and put it to good use. Involve your teachers in change efforts; this builds strong roots for future growth.

Weed out the bad stuff. Prompt and regular attention to the problems in your center is one of the most important tasks of the director. Weeds that are allowed to grow — like problems in your center with a disgruntled staff member, an outdated curriculum, or unclear policies — can quickly take over the center. Be precise in removing weeds and your center will come back stronger than it was before. Give extra support to your remaining staff to develop new growth.

Remember to water. Once your garden has been planted, nothing is more important to its ability to thrive than water. When provided with too little water, plants are unable to develop properly and become more susceptible to damage from pests. Too much water can of course be equally bad. Attending to the needs of children, families, and staff should be your highest priority. Open, ongoing communication and opportunities for meaningful discussion, as well as personal and professional development for your staff will keep them vital and growing along with you.

Keep an eye to the future. In gardening, as in most endeavors, patience is a virtue. In the long run, impatient gardeners spend more money than do patient ones — and they have less to show for their efforts. A center that has a strong foundation, capable staff, and a visionary leader can weather the storms of any season.

Directing, like gardening, is a wonderful opportunity to create something new and beautiful for people of all ages to enjoy. With attention to detail, a commitment to hard work, and an eye to the future, it is possible to build a center that you will be proud to show off.