



Schools resources

How to create your own Psalm 23-inspired garden

School gardens offer both staff and pupils a place where they can be quiet and reflective, be surrounded by nature – even in the middle of a city – and engage with the natural world. Bible Society's garden at the Chelsea Flower show drew inspiration from Psalm 23. There are just four basic steps to creating your own Psalm 23-inspired garden in your school.

1. Meadow

Britain has lost 97 per cent of its meadowland since 1945, impacting on the wildlife which uses it as a habitat, especially a wide range of insect and butterfly species. So, in creating your Psalm 23 garden, why not incorporate an area of meadow and help redress the balance?

A meadow, which can be of any size or shape, will add colour, movement and texture to your garden. You create metre-wide strips of wildflowers on either side of a path. With larger areas of meadow, mow paths through it so that the children can get into the middle.

Creating an area of wildflower meadow should increase both the number and variety of wildlife which the children can see. Not only bees, butterflies and dragonflies, but also grasshoppers, bugs, spiders and even the odd shrew will appreciate the long-grass habitat. Children can become more familiar with the wildlife around them, and perhaps learn to overcome any fears of creepy-crawlies!

The sort of grass found in British lawns and school fields is pretty tough stuff, which makes it hard for wildflowers to get a hold. So there are a couple of options you could follow.

The first option is to take up the existing grass and lay wildflower turf in its place. These are pre-sown with annual wildflowers such as cornflowers or poppies. It is important to let the flowers go to seed, so that the seeds can then germinate and provide next year's flowers.

The second option is simply to let an area of your existing grass grow long and see what comes up through it. There are usually wildflowers in grass which, if given the opportunity, will grow to their full height and flower.

With either of these options, you can also add in some pockets of perennial wildflowers such as ox-eye daisy, ragged robin, cowslips and scabious, which can be bought as small plug plants, or ornamental grasses.

A really good plant to introduce, however, is yellow rattle. It is a parasitic plant and lives on the thatch of the grass. So it reduces the grass sward and makes space for wild flowers to seed themselves and get established.

If your school has only hard-surfaced outdoor areas, wildflowers will also grow in containers and raised beds as long as they are at least two to three feet across. Areas of meadow are easy to maintain. Mow them once everything has flowered and the seeds have set (but remember to mow around any perennials).



Wildflowers do best in poorer soils, so gather up and remove all of the mown grass so that it doesn't enrich the soil.

If you are putting in plant plugs, or laying wildflower turf, remember to keep them watered while they establish themselves, especially if you are planting in summer. Even then, it's worth keeping an eye on the weather and watering if it doesn't rain for a few days.

You could try a stick sundial in the middle of an area of meadow, or you could put up a chalk board and ask the pupils to write down what wildlife they see every month. This will get them really interested and engaged, and it will help them to see the difference the meadow area has made.

2. Seating

Providing a seat in your garden encourages the pupils to stop and enjoy it. The ideal would be to provide enough seating for a whole class to use the garden together.

Alternatives to buying new benches include finding some pre-loved garden seats at your local recycling centre, or looking on recycling sites such as Freecycle, Gumtree and Facebay. Raised beds are sometimes formed using recycled railway sleepers, and these can double-up as seating as well.

3. Tree

Every garden – no matter how small – can have a tree. It creates a focal point for the eye, gives shade and brings in wildlife. Trees can create the illusion that your space is bigger than it is, and bring both shade and interesting shadows into the garden.

Like Britain's meadows, orchards have also suffered, with 90 per cent being cut down since the Second World War. But it takes just five fruit trees to create an orchard, so we can all help change that.

The Psalm 23 garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show demonstrates what can be done with one, impactful tree in a garden only 10m (30ft) square.

If you are fortunate, there might already be some well-established trees on your school site, or on neighbouring land. If not, consider the space you have. Do you have enough room to start off a large tree that generations in the future will enjoy? Do you want something smaller like a shade-tolerant acer, with its colourful leaves? Or a small conifer for year-round foliage? Or do you want to plant a group of smaller shrubs such as cornus, which have vibrantly-coloured stems in winter?

Fruit trees might be best avoided, unless your pupils all understand that they mustn't eat unripe fruit and will be able to resist the temptation. If you do choose a fruit tree, don't plant it in your meadow, because any windfall fruit will break down and add nutrients to the soil.

The best time to plant a tree is when it's dormant, during autumn and winter. Dig a hole large enough to more than accommodate its root ball. Add a modest amount of well-rotted manure or compost to give it a good start.

If you can, shake some mycorrhizal fungi onto the roots. These effectively extend the tree's roots, enabling it to gain more nutrition from the soil and can take up water better. Don't forget to water your tree regularly until it is established, especially if you are planting between February and September.

For schools with only hard-surfaced outdoor areas, many smaller trees grow well in pots or tubs, including acers, cornus, bay trees and (in more sheltered areas) even an olive.



There's a great option on trees, if you are planting your own Psalm 23-inspired garden. We are working with our friends at the Woodland Trust. The Woodland Trust wants to make sure that everybody in the UK has the chance to plant a tree, so it's giving away hundreds of thousands of trees to schools and communities who want to plant on publicly-accessible land.

Its packs come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Create homes for wildlife, or brighten up your view with year-round colour. Harvest fruit and nuts or grow your own log burner fuel. Whether your plot is big or small the Woodland Trust has the right pack for you.

Apply now at woodlandtrust.org.uk/freetrees. Tree planting and care advice for schools and much more, also from the Woodland Trust, can be found at treetoolsforschools.org.uk.

4. Water

Water adds a sense of relaxation and tranquillity to any garden, however small or large. It's a real pleasure simply to sit and listen to the sound of the water, and watch the light on its surface.

And, of course, water attracts wildlife. Animals and birds will come to drink. Create the right habitat and you may get frogs, newts and a world of insects including damsel flies and dragon flies.

Obviously, however, water can be dangerous, and features such as a pond or a fountain would require fencing off so that pupils can only go near to them under adult supervision, even if they are only shallow and have gently sloping sides. If you intend to install one of these features, you should seek further advice about the safety measures which you should take.

Other ways of bringing the water into the garden include a solar-powered water feature. These are available in a wide range of designs and different materials and use a solar-powered pump to re-circulate water. Or perhaps a bird bath to further encourage wildlife into the garden, or indeed just a water butt to store rainwater and to teach the children the importance of conserving resources.

Other thoughts

Look around you to see what kind of trees and plants do well in your local area. Investigating which plants are right for your chosen space could be a project which develops some of your pupils' science and research skills.

There's no need to be over-ambitious. Starting off small, and expanding the garden once the first area is established, is a very practical way to go about a project like this, especially if you are creating the garden from scratch.

The four elements of the Psalm 23 garden are all low-maintenance once they are established, but it is still important that before you begin you have considered how and by whom the garden maintenance jobs will be done.

Consider what local organisations might be willing to provide some help for your garden. Local nurseries, landscape suppliers, garden centres or reclamation yards might be willing to offer a discount or sponsorship – perhaps writing to them to explain about the garden would be a literacy activity for the children to participate in.

A plant amnesty, in which parents donate unwanted plants or seeds (or indeed anything else useful to the garden), could get the garden kick-started. Local horticultural societies might also be a useful source of help or advice.

Before you begin, carry out a thorough risk assessment of the work involved in making the garden and of the finished garden itself.



Account for, and mitigate, the risks associated with things such as water features, plants and their flowers or berries which might be harmful, tools and implements and poor handwashing and hygiene routines. You might want to consult the advice from the RHS, which can be found at schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk/resources/info-sheet/health-safety-in-the-garden, which is part of an extensive resource bank which the RHS provides.

Show your design to a wide variety of people with different roles in your school before it is finalised – their different perspectives might reveal something which requires changing or an improvement.

Follow these simple tips and you too will have a wonderful basis for a Psalm 23-inspired garden.

We'd love to know how you get on with your Psalm 23-inspired garden. So, send your photographs and stories from the garden that you create in your community to: education@biblesociety.org.uk.



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