



Season 2 Episode 3 – School & Community Gardens

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Announcer:

From the Ground Up. A podcast of the Alabama Extension Home Grounds team, educating you about home landscapes, gardens and home pests

Brian Brown:

Welcome to the podcast. Today we have Carmen Flammini. She is the REA in Baldwin County, and she's our guest today. She's going to talk about school and community gardens. She's going to tell us about the process for how to get one started, where to find funding, maintenance, just all the questions you have about how to start a community or school garden. So Carmen, welcome to the podcast.

Carmen Flammini:

Thank you so much, Brian, for having me here. Very, very excited.

Brian Brown:

This is a really interesting topic. There's a lot of people that are interested in creating a community garden or a school garden. I get a lot of questions about school gardens, so tell me what you know about it. What's the first steps you start from the beginning? Where do you, where do you go from there?

Carmen Flammini:

Okay. All there are very good question. I've been working with community and in school garden more than ten years, and one thing I can tell you, and I try to tell people every time they come to me and ask for help, to build a community garden, first you have to create a community to really make a garden success.

So you have to build your community first before you can even think about open the ground or where we're going to put it. You have to have your team. And community gardens are very essential now because the more than we build and even in our area that people consider very rural, we are building houses everywhere, and it's less and less space for kids, especially young kids have the experience to, like how we did it before when we were little, grow things, all things, how things are growing. Besides being just a garden, they offer the experience to talk to other people, to talk to the elder people, to create communities. So community garden essentially are the base for a really healthy community, from my point of view.

Brian Brown:

Right, right. That's one thing that I've seen in my experience, in my limited experience with them, building that community is an essential part of that. So once you have your, I guess your champions is what you would call it, who is going to champion that garden? What's your next step?

Carmen Flammini:

Exactly. So this is the first part. It's always going to be somebody say, hey, let's build a garden because this is the reason. It can happen in the community or it can happen in school. When you have that thought, you have all the willing to do so that's the time that you need to start to recruit who are going to be part of your team and you need to be smart on that. You need to be selecting people that believe in your same thing. Number two, you need to collect people that are going to be your partner, not just partner in money, partner in getting the material ready. Partner in think how you going to get the resources that you need and where to get help you're going to need.

So you need at least, I always say, five people. And not because I like that number. It's because if something happens to you, you will have at least number two, three or four. They know what you guys are doing. Now, that is the limit, but you can have way bigger number than that.

After you have your team, you need to be clear what are the resources that you're going to be using. And when I say that, it's not just the location place. I'm talking about are we going to need money for everything, is somebody else is going to be with us. Now, the school garden is different because you have this school behind you and hopefully you have the district of the school behind you, support you.

Now, when you're a community, let's say ten people decide to open a garden right here in the corner of our office. That is different because usually you don't have that much money unless you're a rich person to start it. In most of the grants, something we can talk a little bit more in a minute, most of the grant are for nonprofit organizations one or 501 organizations. So when that happens, you're just a simple you, this going to be very hard for you to start a nonprofit. The paperwork is unbelievable. So the best way for you is, for your group of people is to found your own municipality or a nonprofit organization or even a school that support you in this community garden. That is my big tip. Don't try to start from zero because it's going to take you years. Try to

find somebody who shared your same vision and be partner with them. If you do so, believe me you take a big break out of your shoulder because you are going to have this organization that is going to support you to get grants. Grants are very, very important for that.

So after you find your team and you know who is going to kind of support you monetarily, then you start to plan. And a lot of people say, but let's just... When we start to break the ground, when we start to build? I say, hold on a minute, okay?

Brian Brown:

People are really excited to start.

Carmen Flammini:

Exactly. And I think that's the hardest part because everybody just ready with the shovels and the gloves and the plan, but that, you have to wait a little bit and say, okay, who is the, who's our team? Who is going to do what? What tasks are assigned? What are going to be the task? When are the deadline for the task, and what is the design of the garden? Our garden needs water. What is the irrigation? The irrigation needs to be put before, put the plant, after you build the raised garden. So all those question, all those tasks needs to be organized before you start breaking ground. Because remember, when you have the plant, the plant will not stop growing, waiting for you to decide who's going to do what. When you get the plant, the plant will grow with the weeds and with all the diseases. So you need to be ready. Planting the garden's the last thing that you will do.

Brian Brown:

Community and school gardens are completely different, right? You said, so let's focus them for a second on community gardens alone. So let's talk about community gardens in particular for a second. So you have your team. You have your land. Where do we seek out funding for this?

Carmen Flammini:

Okay, that's a great question because most of the time, people say, okay, let's... Like, can you say, let's think about just community garden, ten people. Now say, okay, let's get money to start the garden. But most of the time they forget the garden is going in constant maintenance. And you cannot just get money for this year. You need to think about the following years. You need to put some money in the bag just in case something happened, like a tornado happens or a big hit, a big wind. So mostly growing when you... number one, before you seek any grant, you need to know how much money you need because you can go for a 1,000 to 50,000 to 100,000.

Number two, after you have the organization that's going to support you with the file one, so which is easier to apply to grant. And then you can start. So you have different resources. You have actually the National Agriculture in the Classroom. And even though they say a classroom, it's a community garden, they can offer the member, like, after school programs and they can be just one volunteer, one Master Gardener teaching outside, sorry, outside the school, but in the community garden. And they can be called a classroom out of the hours for

the classroom. So this sometime community garden do not apply that because they say we're not a school. Actually, you can be an after-school program, small one, if you can do it. So don't shut the door on that.

Also, a lot of communities, sorry, municipality have their own grants. That is huge. And most people start to look online, start to go to their own neighborhood, then knock the door to their own municipality. Two, make Alabama beautiful again, correct me on that, I think I mistake that. Even though it's a beautification program, they considering vegetables and garden part of and because in any vegetable garden, any raised garden, you have to put flowers and also you...community gardens are very interesting because they provide not just with vegetable. They also provide with a beautification part.

And then, for very important part to mention, also you have the Alabama Farmers Organization. They do provide with grants for community garden.

Brian Brown:

So once you get funded, you're ready to put some shovels in the ground. What's our next steps? Is there a particular size that's better than one or is there like a rule of thumb? I know a lot of people have a lot of big ideas about how big their garden can be, and I think some don't understand. You can grow a lot of vegetables in a pretty small space. So is there any rule of thumb for that?

Carmen Flammini:

Absolutely. You nailed it. You nailed it on that. Because a lot of people, when they come to say, okay, we want to build a community garden and they're thinking about this giant space. And actually I've been seeing more failure in bigger garden than failure in a small garden. And I'll tell you why, because every time they invest so much money and you have so much to keep it up, and you didn't build your team right. That garden come from failure right after, I call it the second harvest failure, because the first harvest is always the happiest time, and then everybody's ready to work. And after the second one, when you start to pull weed in the summer when it's hot, right, everybody's like, I'm okay. I have other things to do. Somebody else will do it.

So I don't know if I call it all the time, but I would always suggest to start small because if you, even if you have a big area, I always tell the people, let's build just a couple raised beds. Let's get a couple grouped together and just a couple vegetables or fruit for this season. And then they see how it goes.

And two things, though. Well, number one, you get to see how your soil and your area and your microclimate release adjusting to the garden and to the vegetables you plant. And second, you also want to see how the people are working together. Are they really responsible? Are they really saying what they say they're going to be doing? All the resources they will need, are there on time?

So if you have a big area, start it small. Get a full raised bed and do it. If you have a small area, well, you're in the perfect setting because you just can start. Also have way small depend of the people in the resources that you have. And one important thing that you mentioned earlier is when you farm a place, be sure that you have water. That's number one. Number one. I've been in, let me, more than four community garden they have problem. Guess what's the first problem?

Brian Brown:

What's that?

Carmen Flammini:

No water access. So they have to carry the water by different sources and they get tired of, and they give up on the garden.

Brian Brown:

And rainwater is usually not enough because those raised beds will dry out really quickly.

Carmen Flammini:

Great point. Most people think they build the raised bed and put in soaking hose, so irrigation is your point. And actually, that is the biggest problem production in raised beds, that people forget that you need to make this the first time super extremely wet before you put any drip in or hose irrigation because we're talking about ten inches soil deep plus the other width. So you have a big, giant volume. And usually in the soil the water chairs with other areas. But here we just don't chair. We just have a column of dry soil. So yes, you're correct.

The other mistake, the other thing that you need to be looking at it in things also people don't think about that, is to have access with your vehicle along with any other thing, because you are going to need bring mulch and you're not going to be bringing the mulch by shovels. It doesn't work. I've been seeing them. I've been seeing people line up with shovels on.

Brian Brown:

They'll get tired of that real quick.

Carmen Flammini:

Very quickly and you will be, too. So you have accessibility for that, but also accessibility for people in wheelchairs or any scooters. This happen more and more. So water and accessibility. I visit one time a beautiful community garden, beautiful, in Atlanta. However, they could not bring any cars or people in wheelchair didn't have access, so it was a very limited garden. I would not call community garden, that for sure.

Then after you have access, be sure that you have area for the vegetable but also area for the people. You need some shade. In the summer, you know how hot it can be, so you need to provide a space for them to sit down, to drink water, to have shade, and also a place for you to plug the tools.

So believe it or not, these are kind of essential thing. Those are the biggest mistake in why community garden doesn't succeed.

Brian Brown:

So shifting gears a little bit from community gardens over to school gardens, there's a lot of interest in school gardens. Everybody that I've talked to that are interested in that, a lot of them have funding for that. So what do we do with a school garden? And personally, I know one of the big problems is what do you do in the summertime, because people are out of school. How do you manage that? If you install a school garden, what do you do?

Carmen Flammini:

Great question. By the way, yes, it's a lot, a lot of money for a school garden. So if anybody's here now running this 'Oh, we don't have money', just dig a little bit and you will find it. If not, call me. I will be happy to guide you so. Yes. And so what you have to do, the difference between a school garden and community garden, is the school garden, beside all of the stuff we already talk about, you need to add a school year. When the kids are present, when the kids are ready to work in the garden, and when the kids are not going to be there. So that change a lot of what you're going to be planting and what you're not going to be planting.

So I usually try to have the garden ready when the kids come back on around September. So on August before the kids come to school, is the time the garden needs to be ready. And as soon they get here, they need to start to plant so we can have the fall season. So the fall season is one of the biggest season for a school garden. Sadly, it's when people lose their time doing nothing in the garden because they think they can plant them later on and that is wrong. So that's every time that I help in a school garden, you need to start to think about next school year and think about between August and December, I t's going to be your prime time.

So right now a school garden should be already planting, if not planting right now, in the fall. But this coming with last year planning, you see that. Then you need to remember that kids are going to be absent in November for Thanksgiving, so somebody have to be watering if you don't have an irrigation system. Something that I truly suggest put an irrigation system.

It's always somebody want to be watering first year. You won't have the same person want to the second year, and nobody wants to do it by the fifth year- period. Nobody. I was the only one for seven years who did Christmas and everything. But because I'm a little too crazy about that.

So after you have that, and also, you need to remember December kids are away for a full month and also winter comes, so as soon your harvest in November, you need to prepare that garden for the winter. Usually homeowners prepared, and community garden, prepared the garden at the end of November. You have to do it before Thanksgiving break. So this, you see the period gets very shorter, so plant it as soon as possible and I can tell you what to plant quickly in fall later on.

And then when they come back, they come back in February. So you have to be ready then to start to seeding right away. So again, preparation came six months earlier. In that time, I usually used for flowers and berry, summer produce, like I would just put beans and tomatoes and something that I know will grow all the summer.

Now what are you do in summer? Amazing question. So a lot of people would they put their school garden and they leave and they come back and they have just a beautiful weed garden with all kind of weeds, tall and short. So to stop that, what you have to do is get cover crops, believe it or not. Cover crops that we use in ag, in the

farm. They're perfect for that. Like a red clover or beans. Just let the beans grow. And you just when you come back, just kind of chop it up and use this as a mulch and great for nitrogen.

Some people would recommend to just put sun flowers. Sun flowers, even though they can get buried root, really hard to harvest, they're really good, beautiful aesthetic, let's call it that way. And when you come back you can have some activities with seeds. So think about the summer with cover crops, the crop they can use all year long. Do not ever, ever leave a raised bed without any crop in the summer because you are going to have weeds. They go sometimes even deeper than one foot, and it's a pain when you have all those weeds in the raised bed.

Brian Brown:

What I've run into is there are schools out there that have a place to put it, but I would suggest that, and you may agree, I'm not sure but I'm asking you, it would probably be best to consult with someone, like a local Extension agent, to make sure they're putting in a right spot. Because I've run into where someone had installed a school garden and they didn't ask, and it was right up next to a really western facing site with a white wall up against that. And it was, you know, they were planting the wrong plants. There were some that were just getting fried from the summer heat, and it hadn't even gotten really hot then. So it's probably best to consult with someone on your location, especially in a school environment, right?

Carmen Flammini:

I agree 100%, and especially with somebody has experience with, because most of the time a school garden go to the website, see this beautiful picture and they think they can do the best. They buy the plant and they go to plant it and it's the wrong location, wrong plant, wrong season. Just like you say. We can provide you with guidance exactly where to put, number one, if the area is good for gardening. Big point. I visited the one time a garden the area which is for rain garden more than vegetable garden. So we turn it in a rain garden after it was put as a vegetable garden. But the rain garden is great. Now the teacher can teach erosion and all this stuff. But yes, we will help you to decide the best place.

Decide also if you need raised beds or you just can do it in the ground. We can also help you to organize your planting season, which is huge. And the most important if you are in the sun, for what you want to plant or if not, what vegetable/fruit you should be planting for the sun that you are in.

And water. Water, water, water. One thing is to have a hose, and the other thing is to have the right irrigation system, two different things. Sometimes I remember going to a garden and it was huge. And they had just one little hose outside in the wall. That wasn't enough. So I will truly recommend that before you put any dollars in the ground or any plant in the ground, call us and we will be super happy to help you.

Brian Brown:

So once you start building your beds, what materials can you use for a bed?

Carmen Flammini:

That's a great, great, also great question. You have different ones, and here to my point of view is when you need to invest more money. Because I know it's easy to buy this metal frame now. Now they're everywhere. There's so many. They're good. They're really good. But metal can be heat very quickly and you can turn your raised bed into a cooking machine. And something the plants do not appreciate, believe it or not. Being a plant for the summer doesn't mean the root likes to be in 150 degrees. That's not the process. So, I do recommend wood. Cedar wood is one of my favorite to build a raised bed if you have to build a raised bed. Of course non-treated. Nothing treated.

If you do plastic, I don't like this compost material because they still have some kind of, forever chemicals. Do you ever hear about those? Those are contaminant. And if you ask me personally, if you're going to be harvesting and feeding the student with the food coming from the vegetable garden, better be wood, and cedar wood my favorite. And if you don't have cedar wood, they just had pine wood, be sure is not treated with chemicals. Can be they do some water treatment now. So that's my recommendation.

Brian Brown:

Yeah. And cedar, it's rot resistant. It's, you know, that's a lot of people use on siding on houses. And there's a reason why they do that. Because it will not rot. So, that is a good recommendation. You know, I've also heard of people using creosote, and that's one that we don't want to use, right?

Carmen Flammini:

Amen. You just say that, done. Stay away from that. And I do not have too much experience with cement blocks. However, my own experience, take it like that, my own experience has not been too good. It's heat very quickly. Some people treat them, which is a big no-no. And then we go, we cannot eat what you put on it. And also, if they're not level, they're literally they will not hold the soil really well. So, take your time planning. Get your wood, its the best that you can use.

Brian Brown:

So what about lesson plans? Is there lesson plans or do you have any ideas for lesson plans if you have a school garden?

Carmen Flammini:

Yes, I think way too many. The other day when we were talking about this, I just start to, in the top of my head, and I came out with 24. So I don't know if we have that much time.

Brian Brown:

Just 24?

Carmen Flammini:

Yes, just 24, top my head. But the good thing about it is because my experience coming backwards. I did build a garden to teach, and I've been using that to teach from pre-K all the way to college students. So even for

colleges, it is 100% more effective to take them outside and talk about vegetable cells and plant cells and animal cells and all that, instead to try to look at in the website. And same thing when talking about nitrogen fixation and all the other things.

So, let's say for pre-K to second grade, and everything changed according to the district, school district, so pointing the course down that exactly is dependent where you are. But for pre-K to second you can be teaching animal and plant life cycle, water cycle, living and non-living, shelters, ecosystem, clouds. For third to sixth, you can teach soil formation, texture, erosion, photosynthesis, respiration, carbon, carbon, nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, atmospheric nitrogen fixation, symbiosis fixation, water cycle, kingdom of living things, vegetable and animal cells.

And for high school and college, you have all the, you will have all the composting concept. Soil microorganism, phenology for plant and insects, symbiosis, sorry, symbiosis, different types of soils and on and on and on. The truth is, every time that I've been called to teach, if I don't have a garden, I build it, because I know it will be easy for me to teach environmental biology, agriculture, and basis of science, if I have a garden. So this is how good can be.

Brian Brown:

And not only that, think outside of vegetables, too. You know, there's a lot of ornamentals you can plant that you can teach, you know, life cycles of butterflies. You know, planting a butterfly garden, especially for kids. Kids love that kind of thing. And they love to watch the butterflies change and metamorphosize and, you know, let them see some of that. So think outside the box when you're creating the school garden.

Carmen Flammini:

Yes. And that is one of the big things. For example, the last school garden that I built, it contains all that. It contains not just vegetable gardening, it contain part of the sensory garden where the kids can go and touch it and smell it without worrying they're going to get hurt. They also contain an area where you have just for pollinators. They have houseplant and they have the plant, they provide nectar for them. So we actually we just got around 20 caterpillar in one of the gardens, and the kids can go to see they chrysalis inside and life cycle.

So more than, especially for a school garden and even community garden, I would include everything that you can think about. Vegetable, fruit, herbs, host plants, nectar plants, erosion control, grasses. Do not limit yourself just because you're small. Believe me, I build the small garden with everything on it. If you do so, the students, and just our age too, can learn so much from it because you would have found anything that you feel like the kids needs to know.

Okay, so let me put this in this way. Usually teachers look the lesson plan and say, where I can get, instead to go backward and go to the garden and say, what can I teach from this? And I think that works way better than trying to impose something.

Brian Brown:

And there's a lot of resources out there, too. I know there's some other universities out there in the South that have really good resources on this, and, you know, occasionally we'll do a school and community garden workshop for people. So those options are out there. So just keep your eyes peeled if you're interested in that kind of thing.

Carmen Flammini:

Yes, absolutely. And actually right now is a big boom about ag in the classroom. So for teachers I know it's hard for them creating their own lesson. There's tons of lesson. So you can find that as much as money, as you can find as much of the lesson. So you just got to put lesson of life cycle butterfly and all the lesson, you just got to print it, go outside and enjoy.

And I have to say one more thing that's very important that I've been seeing lately. Plants and vegetables and fruit work as an ecosystem with the soil. They are so integrated. If you try to separate that and teach the same way- separate- it doesn't really make sense. But when you go to the garden and see how the soil interact with the plant and plant interact with the weather and the weather interact with the insects, and the kids can see that in the first hand, everything would come together very easily later on.

So do not plant one flower, do not plant one lettuce. Do not plant, think as a community. Plant a group of lettuce, plant a group of flowers. Get your soil, get some weeds. Weeds are not going to eat you. And they also not going to eat everybody. A couple of weeds around are okay. Kids can learn from the weeds as well. Think of it as a community for the garden, but also think the garden as a community that can teach all of us.

Brian Brown:

So within a school garden, and we've talked about accessibility before, what are requirements as schools are concerned or with the community as well?

Carmen Flammini:

I'm glad that you asked that, because I've been in a couple school gardens where everything has been done. And then they say, oops, we got to get our kids, they are in a wheelchair here. So think about this before you build a school garden. If whatever raised bed you build for people in wheelchair will also work for normal people. Actually, I do like it a lot because they're higher. So if you have people in wheelchair or eventually you will use the garden for them, try to build a raised bed at least two feet tall because they need to have accessibility from their chair. Also, between raised beds and raised beds, they need to be at least four feet apart so their wheelchair, which is around 3.5ft, can move easily. Also put some material their wheelchair can move easily through the area. In every corner, at least five foot between, so the wheelchair can turn around easily. So please think about that. Do not forget about them. It is very important to integrate everybody.

Brian Brown:

What about the width of the bed? So that I would think that would make a difference too, where the people could reach across the entire bed.

Carmen Flammini:

Yes, absolutely. And I always calculate, from you facing the bed and somebody else facing the other side, no bigger than that. So I will say no bigger than three feet, period. Because more than that, you will not be able to reach, especially students in elementary school. The little arms are not that long, so they won't be able to reach. And at the end what happen? They just step on the top of the bed and just try to do it. And that's it of the bed.

Brian Brown:

So this all goes back to the beginning. Planning is essential when you're doing either a school or a community garden. Do your homework. Make sure you know what you need to do. Make sure you have a champion or a group of people that are going to see this through. And we can't say enough about planning, right?

Carmen Flammini:

Exactly, exactly. You have to have your community to have your community garden. If you don't have, if you have 2 or 3 people, the success is not going to be more than two years.

Brian Brown:

And as always, you can always reach out to us. As Extension agents, we'll be glad to help you in any way possible. Carmen is kind of our team expert when it comes to this, but we have others, in our group that have a lot of experience with school and community gardens. So, Carmen, thank you for being on.

Carmen Flammini:

Thank you. Thank you.

Brian Brown:

And we hope to see have you on again sometime soon. And until next time, thank you.

Carmen Flammini:

Happy to do so. Bye, everyone. And please do more school gardens, community garden. We need them. So thank you. Thank you again.

Brian Brown:

From the Ground Up is a production of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.