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# Garden as a metaphor

## The garden as a metaphor for life – life lessons from gardening

The garden holds a special social and cultural significance that goes far beyond its mere function as a place of food production. With this learning scenario, we discover other, social and humanistic dimensions of gardens and gardening that are related to the organization of society and relationships within society. To this end, metaphors related to the garden and gardening are considered. Although gardening is a very practical activity, this learning scenario does not focus on classical gardening activities, but on the symbolic relationships between humans, nature and the earth.

*garden, gardening, cultural dimension of gardening, metaphors*

### Topic: Garden as a metaphor

Food supply is of particular importance to people in the Anthropocene, especially in the face of global climate change. The question of how to ensure tomorrow's food supply is highly topical, particularly as societies are becoming increasingly disconnected from their food and often hold distorted misconceptions about the origin and the processes involved in production. The garden can serve as a bridge to address these aspects of food supply, as it has in the past and continues to do so by providing people with nutrition. The garden itself is even suitable as a place of learning; the pedagogical aspect of gardening has been emphasized time and again, as Štaudochar does in her *Bean philosophy*:

“The most important thing about a garden is not the rules, but the opportunity to observe and learn. The piece of land where you grow your vegetables and flowers is far from being a complete utopia. It brings many disappointments, but also special joys. The gardener constantly battles with the weather, with weeds, with overzealous animals, and when he sits on his knees for hours, looking at the soil up close and planting tiny seeds, he seems as lost as a believer in a miracle.” (Štaudochar 2022, 12)

The biologist Hubert Markel (1986, 324) sees the garden as a kind of metaphor for the relationship between humans and nature, as it successfully combines nature and culture in a certain way. In the garden, we can learn to live in peace with nature. In doing so, the garden

becomes a model and touchstone for our interaction with nature and the environment. (Kienast 1994, 13–17).

The garden also stimulates our imagination in language. Garden metaphors in particular have a certain cultural significance that manifests itself in language. For example, we and many other languages use the word kindergarten. The term was coined in the 19th century by the German educator Friedrich Fröbel<sup>1</sup> (see fig. 1), whose approach influenced early childhood education worldwide. He believed that the relationship between educator and child was of paramount importance for learning and saw the child as an individual who needed to be respected and nurtured, much like a young plant. Fröbel viewed the kindergarten – or literally, the “children’s garden” – as a fertile space in which young children could blossom and grow (Johnson & McChesney Johnson 2017, 1).



Image 1: Friedrich Fröbel (Frederick Froebel), head-and-shoulders portrait, from the front; public domain. (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frederick-Froebel-Bardeen.jpeg> )

## Didactics

With this learning scenario, we explore the societal and humanistic dimensions of gardens and gardening, which are related to the organization of society and relationships within society. Metaphors related to gardening will be explored. Although gardening is a very practical activity, this learning scenario does not focus on classical gardening activities, but rather on the relationships between humans, nature and the earth. Learners and students work alone or in groups. The individual parts of the learning scenario can be used independently of each other.

Our hands are “dirty”, but the activity washes and “cleanses” our minds, connects us to nature, makes us aware of where our food comes from, teaches us about the needs of all living things and, last but not least, about life in a broader sense and in connection with the environment (ecology). Gardening is also connected to family, to socialising and to society.

There is another biological meaning: This “dirt” contains living beings or their remains that can be linked to the human body. A human being is made up of 10 times as many prokaryotic cells as eukaryotic cells. It means that we live with them, even if they live outside of our bodies.

### WHO is the target group? WHO are possible cooperation partners?

The learning scenario is suitable for all school levels and student teachers. The individual building blocks of the learning scenario can be used depending on age and educational level.

### WHY is this topic relevant for CultureNature Literacy? WHERE will it go?

The learning scenario is thematically linked to the chapters of CNL & Science Education and CNL & Home Economics Education. As part of *GreenComp* (Bianchi, Pisiotis & Cabrera 2022), the learning scenarios promote skills that are particularly relevant to science education and home economics education: Appreciation, promotion of nature, systems thinking, reasoning, problem solving, influencing the future, adaptability, exploratory as well as discovery thinking. Learners and students are encouraged to express their opinions and discuss topics openly.

The content of the learning scenario is dedicated to the cultural and social components of the garden and gardening, with a focus on the metaphorical use of the garden for life in its various forms and for society.

### WHEN, in which period does this take place?

The time frame of the learning scenario can be adapted as required to the respective learning setting. Limiting factors such as time of year, age and curriculum relevance must be taken into account. This learning scenario can be used as a supplementary learning unit to introduce a topic or as a stand-alone learning unit, for example to explore topics such as plant and food production, nutrition or sustainability issues.

### HOW do you proceed?

Although the garden is a very practical thing, it is full of metaphors. Let's try to find some of them!

**Step 1:** Explain the word *kindergarten* or look for the word *kindergarten* in your language and then try to clarify its meaning.

Example: slovenian *vrtec* (diminutive of *vrt* (= eng. *garden*))

**Step 2:** Let's try to use the metaphor of gardening to gain an insight into the convergence of nature, environmental protection with culture and society (see section "Didactics"). Explain the metaphor "When we are dirty from the earth, we are clean." (Štaudohar 2022, 15).

Provide a practical example from your own life.

**Step 3:** Think about the idioms or metaphors in which we can still find the garden and its components or the plants in it. The teacher can add more as they go along, for example: Taking root; you reap what you sow; being green behind the ears; the apple doesn't fall far from the tree; the grass is greener on the other side; every rose has its thorns; being in the spring / fall of one's life; planting seeds, feeding a nation; separating the wheat from the chaff; pumpkin head; more grows in the garden than the gardener sows.

**Step 4:** Explain the following quote from Jorge Luis Borges<sup>2</sup>: “So plant your own gardens and adorn your own soul, instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers.” *What could the garden and the flowers stand for here?*

**Step 5:** In his comments on corporate culture, company founder David Bellamy explains: “Don’t blame the plants if they don’t grow in your garden.” (Bellamy 2016, n. p.; translated by JAD) He uses a horticultural metaphor for corporate culture. *Explain it. Now find another or similar metaphor that could be used for your school class.*

**Step 6:** Voltaire was a philosopher and one of the most famous people of his time. He was a provocateur, an entertaining rhetorician and he despised authority. And Voltaire was in love with his garden. It was full of fragrant plants like thyme, mint, basil, tarragon, shetter: “Everything is fragrant to purify our souls.” (Štaudohar 2022, 75–77) He found happiness in his garden. His garden was not just for decoration, but also for nourishment. He was a fastidious and meticulous gardener who bought rare and exquisite specimens of cultivated plants and had many trees planted. He owned vineyards, a silk farm, a cow farm and much more. One of Voltaire’s most famous sentences, with which he ends his philosophical novella *Candide or Optimism* (1759), is: “One must cultivate one’s own garden.” The philosophical background of this sentence is still being researched by many philosophers today (Štaudohar 2022, 75–77; Dolar 2020, 155 f.).

Awaken the philosopher in you, explore the background of this sentence and explain it. Give a practical example from your life, from the lives of your friends and family or from life to which this metaphor applies.

### WHAT do you work with?

The learning scenario does not require any specific materials.

### WHERE does the learning scenario take place?

The learning scenario takes place in the classroom, in other areas of the school, outside the school or in the school garden.

## Literature

Bellamy, David (2016). Don’t blame the plants if they don’t grow in your garden – A gardening metaphor for your company culture. In harkn.com. <https://harkn.com/blog/don-t-blame-the-plants-if-they-don-t-grow-in-your-garden-a-gardening-metaphor-for-your-company-culture/>

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<https://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/articles/return-to-kindergarten>  
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Voltaire (1759). *Candide oder Der Optimismus*.

## Quality criteria | SDGs

**Sustainability:** Education for sustainability is the goal of this activity – it is the glue that holds it together.

**Inclusion:** Children with special needs are included in all activities.

**Digitality:** Digital resources are used for researching, selecting and using images, films and apps.

**Target group correspondence:** The learning scenario is suitable for all school levels and for student teachers.

**SDGs:** SDG 4 (Quality education)

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## Anmerkungen

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Fröbel – German pedagogue, founder of the kindergarten concept, who coined the word kindergarten.

<sup>2</sup> The poem is often attributed to Jorge Luis Borges, but there are also versions attributed to Don Herold and Nadine Stairs.

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