

## Record

268

## File Number

10240

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Title: Building an inclusive school community

Original source: TASH Newsletter

Resource type: Written

Publication Date: 01/10/90

Publisher Info: TASH

**Abstract**

The author uses her knowledge of gardening - the vision required and a willingness to try new strategies - to provide ideas about creating and fostering an inclusive school community and to pass on the lessons of variety and support.

**Keyword: Education, School age**

## **BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

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I had wanted to write an editorial on lessons learned - truths that I have come to, through reflection, about creating and fostering an inclusive school community. In reality, everything that I have learned about inclusion has come to me in my garden: lessons about variety and support.

On an unseasonably cool spring afternoon, a new neighbour stopped by the garden to introduce herself and to begin the process of becoming back fence friends. In our discussion of flower preferences and bedding designs, she commented that I was obviously a summer gardener. Unbeknown to her, the intended compliment hit me with great offence. I fancied myself to be a gardener for all seasons - she must have just missed my row of red tulips and newly forming clumps of fall chrysanthemums. Over the ensuing weeks, I kept returning to her comments. I found myself labelling flowers by their blooming season, only to find that mid-July had a flurry of activity, while May and September were dedicated largely to the tasks of putting in and taking out.

Through a slow letting-go process (watching buds open, stroking petals, sniffing scents, admiring composition), I came to accept the movement of some plants to new beds, and the introduction of once foreign bloomers to existing beds. For me it was a reluctant acknowledgment that just because July's garden is full of colours and textures, it does not mean it should stay that way, or that a wide ranging garden, composed of early and late bloomers, many colours, many sizes, some scented, some hardy, and some tender, could not be even more satisfying. Now in early December, when the racemes from ornamental grasses glisten with new snow or in late February, when I catch a glimpse of a snow crocus, or in mid-July when the trusted daylilies spring eager faces, I am thankful for my neighbour's naive comment.

The second lesson I have learned from my garden is about vision and the realities of nature: a true gardener is capable of seeing maturity in young seedlings. In spring, they appear strong, resilient, and plentiful. However, after strong rains and subsequent winds have their way with the plants, flower heads bend towards the ground, foliage falls over neighbouring plants, and insects, fungus, and animals nest in their crowns. My initial response to this state of disarray was to simply remove those plants that required any extra effort on my part to survive. After all, a garden of hardy, strong-kneed lilies, iris, and phlox was appealing and time saving.

I had to make a choice - admire my neighbour's results from afar or explore the mechanics of supporting these fragile bloomers in my own garden. I have come to staking. I know now that my resistance to staking came from apprehension that it would be labour-intensive and costly.

What I have discovered is that staking with florist wire will support a newly forming bed of daisies far better than catch-up staking with England's finest bent willow cage. After-the-rain staking will not lift bent blossoms and only will result in broken foliage. The trick to staking flowers is twofold: 1) place supports very early in the growing process; and 2) in such a way that the plants will totally surround the supports and the foreign helping hands will seem to disappear.

Perhaps the garden is not such a far walk from an inclusive classroom. Both require hard decisions about composition, both require tireless labour and a willingness to try new strategies to maintain optimum development with minimal structure, and both require a keen vision of outcomes. The garden is a patient teacher - the lessons are not always easy. However, the most persistent lesson remains. It is about change and what does not change. What does not change is the will to change.