

TH Activity Plan – Alphabet Garden

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Materials

Plant materials, soil, garden tools

Signage A-Z

Poster/chalk board, markers

Gloves, wipes

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will plan & plant an alphabet garden using plants/names beginning with the letters of the alphabet. This is a multi-session or full season activity.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Identify as a group, plants that start with each letter of the alphabet; expand letter skills; research plants for alphabet garden

Physical: Prepare & plant specimens; accommodate for physical challenges

Psychological/Emotional: Practice problem-solving skills individually or as a collaborative group activity

Sensory: Touch plants & soil during the planning & planting phases expanding tactile exposure & acceptance

Social: Walk the garden in small groups or pairs experiencing the alphabet garden during its installation & upon completion

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Research plants prior to session so that all letters of the alphabet can be included. Some plants may not be viable in the garden climate so options should be explored. Note that this activity will span at least 2 sessions & can be delivered over a full season or TH program duration.
2. Facilitator begins session by introducing the concept of an alphabet garden. Using a poster or chalk board, list the 26 letters to begin the process of group brainstorming. Having some plants &/or photos of plants whose letters may be more challenging will spur problem-solving.
3. An optional activity can be preparing/making/painting the signage with each letter on a separate stake. Alternatively, these can be available for the sessions or brought out at time of planting.
4. *Facilitator will need to gather plants prior to planting session.* Discussion of each plant, its sensory attributes, plant care & placement in the garden may span several sessions (option – introduce one plant per session). Planting techniques should be covered. *Facilitator needs to be familiar with installing a garden including budget requirements, water needs, irrigation, accessibility issues & needs of participants.*
5. Garden installation begins with design, bed preparations & then plantings. On-going maintenance should be planned as part of the TH program or confirmed that it will be done by facility maintenance staff.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: This multi-session activity can be undertaken by the same group of participants over a series of sessions or it can be divided and shared with other groups or grade levels (classes) with facilitator assigning specific tasks to each group. These types of themed gardens are popular and relevant for school gardens, social service agency gardens, and extension office demonstration gardens.

Therapeutic goals can span all health domains. Cognitive goals can focus on identifying plants by letter, with mature students researching specimens, younger students or individuals with developmental delays matching letter signage to labelled plants, and teams of participants arranging the labelled plants in the order of the alphabet. Each of these is intended to strengthen letter/literacy skills. Goals related to emotional/psychological domains can focus on problem-solving—finding a plant starting with the letter Z, working cooperatively with others, and building self-esteem by completing the multi-step garden planning and/or installation.

Therapeutic horticulture goals for physical challenges will depend on participants. For example, if participants have cerebral palsy or use wheelchairs with lower body paralysis, handling and planting specimens may occur in raised beds or elevated containers (boots attached to fence at waist height) expanding the functional movement of upper torso, hands and arms. For people with mobility challenges, walking in the garden area during and after the garden installation can offer opportunities to navigate uneven surfaces, consider and practice strategies for moving light items (some plants, signage, water can) and building confidence in public spaces like gardens.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: All plants should be non-toxic, without thorns or excessive sap. Plant signage should be free of splinters, sharp or pointed stakes (for populations that may misuse these). Participants should use sun protection, have access to water and gloves. Accommodations for people with physical challenges (mobility, bending, balance or other) need to be determined prior to sessions with appropriate features available like ramps, raised beds, wide-grip trowels, attachable basket for wheelchairs).

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: It can be challenging to find plants A-Z that will thrive in a specific garden zone. Some plants may be viable in certain seasons and not year-round. Having laminated photos of plants, labelled clearly with name and alphabet letter can be an option. Or using garden related items like rain barrel, hose or watering can may substitute for some letters.



Manatee County Extension Office, Florida installed an alphabet garden with animal related plants, integral to their children's programs, master gardener volunteer activities and visited by county fair attendees. [The Brooklyn Botanic Garden uses the ancient Celtic/Druid alphabet](#) representing trees and shrubs for a spring tour event. Toronto Botanical Garden's Teaching Garden includes an [Alphabet Garden](#) and demonstration areas specifically for kids with a Dinosaur Garden and Spiral Butterfly Garden. [Denver Botanic Gardens' Alphabet Garden](#) hosts *Seedlings* programming for kids. [Illinois Extension](#) suggests tips for children's gardens: child-sized scale for hardscapes, features mimicking small hands and scurrying feet, and use of the five senses to engage garden visitors of all ages and abilities.

Online resources identifying plants by letters are available. Some of the more challenging letters/plants: J (juniper, joe pye-weed), K (kohirabi, kangaroo paw), Q (quince, queen Anne's lace), X (xerophyte plants, xeriscape plants), and Z (zebra grass, zoysia grass) (Tilley, 2022).

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Ehlert, L. (1996). *Eating the alphabet*. Clarion Books.

Tilley, N. (2022). Alphabet garden theme: Creating an alphabet garden with kids.

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/special/children/alphabet-garden-plants.htm>

Wildflower Yard. (2023). My A-to-Z list of plants, flowers & trees.

<https://wildfloweryard.com/a-to-z-list-plants-flowers-trees/>

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2023.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2023.