



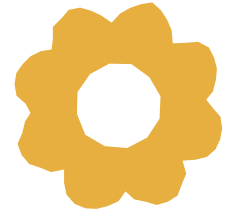
Selecting plants

A National Education Nature Park guide

The Nature Park programme aims to increase young people's connection to and understanding of nature – by beginning this programme your school are already learning new things about your outdoor space, your local environment and what can be done to improve this for nature. However, when making decisions about changes in our space, the choices we make about what, how and where we grow our plants will play a huge role in how successful and beneficial they will be. This guidance aims to demystify some key elements of selecting plants to enable you to make informed decisions with learners that will improve your space and thrive in your local environment.

However, as well as brushing up on your plant knowledge, it's also good to experiment and be creative! The following guidance will introduce the key considerations to selecting plants for your Nature Park, but the important thing is to have fun, try things out and learn along the way – growing plants is a creative process as well as a scientific one.

We have developed resources to help young people explore and choose plants as well as linking to existing guidance and resources from the Royal Horticultural Society.



Right plant, right place

The principle of 'right plant, right place' encourages us to understand our growing conditions before going ahead with planting. By choosing the right plants for the right places, we can make our planted areas more climate resilient, more beneficial to wildlife, as well as reducing the likelihood of plant health problems or disappointment when things don't grow according to plan.

The first step of the Nature Park encourages learners to explore and understand their site from their own perspective as well as that of wildlife. Our GIS mapping activities such as **Shade mapping**, **Investigate environmental quality**, and **Investigate weather and microclimates**, will help you gather data on your surroundings, ready to start planning for nature. The Nature Park **Habitat Mapper tool** will also help you to understand what habitats you already have, and where there could be gaps to create more spaces for wildlife or improve your grounds.



Key things to consider when assessing what to plant where:

- Is the area in sun or shade?
- Is it sheltered, or open to the elements?
- Do you know what type of soil you have? Is there good drainage, or is the ground often wet or waterlogged? **Try this quick test** to determine your soil texture. You can also use a pH test (available from garden centres) to see whether your soil is acid or alkaline – this affects which plants are best suited to your ground
- How much time can you dedicate to nurturing and establishing your plants? If you don't have the time to care for plants that need more specialist care or maintenance, it is best to select low maintenance or easy to grow plants – that don't need regular feeding, pruning or protection
- How much space do you have to grow, both vertically and horizontally? i.e. if you have a small space or only containers available, don't select plants that will grow too big



The **RHS 'find a plant' search tool** enables you to find plants suitable for specific conditions or with certain attributes. Use the **Find that plant!** activity to encourage children and young people to explore this tool and find plants that suit your site's needs.

More information

The **'plants for places'** RHS webpages give advice on suggested plants for different soils, climates and areas. The RHS books *Plants for Places* (Dorling Kindersley, 2011) and *What Plant Where Encyclopedia* (Dorling Kindersley, 2013) also provide growing information and inspiration for thousands of plants to suit different growing conditions. These resources are great if you're looking to learn more or provide research opportunities, but it is also important to try things out and get planting! Experimenting and observing how your plants are doing can provide a valuable learning experience for making future decisions.



Planting for a purpose

If you're at this stage, you and your learners have already thought about what you'd like your outdoor space to do for wildlife, and what that could look like in the future. Choosing plants that provide certain benefits for wildlife or people or perform specific services for the environment will help you make these goals a reality.

When thinking about what plants you want to grow, it can be helpful to remind learners of what they'd like to achieve, and what change they want to see. If children and young people have already **written a vision statement**, refer back to this when thinking about what to grow and where – if not, this is a great time to create one!

What problems or opportunities for improvement have you identified in your site? Looking at **ideas for improvement** can help learners to identify what challenges your school faces and what kind of actions will help. The **Design a plant** activity introduces different functions and benefits of plants' features, encouraging learners to think creatively to imagine a plant that will help improve their space. After this activity, can learners research to find an existing plant with similar features or benefits?

The RHS Science team have suggested some plants for different environments or goals:

- *Allium schoenoprasum* 'Forescate' (chives) - great for attracting pollinators, as well as being an edible herb (on the RHS Plants for Pollinators list)
- *Aruncus dioicus* (goat's beard) - suitable for damp soil, as well as growing tall and bushy to filter out noise pollution
- *Eryngium giganteum* 'Silver Ghost' (Miss Willmott's ghost) - grows well in sunny and dry spaces, and is on the RHS Plants for Pollinators list
- *Stachys byzantina* (lamb's ear) - soft, velvety leaves that are great for sensory planting, can tolerate windy or exposed areas and air pollution
- *Geranium macrorrhizum* 'Ingwersen's Variety' (big-root cranesbill) - can grow in shady spaces, is low-maintenance to grow and is on the RHS Plants for Pollinators list
- *Origanum vulgare* (oregano) - aromatic, edible herb, flowers are loved by pollinators (on the RHS Plants for Pollinators list)



What about invasive species?

Although invasive plants can pose a threat to other species and habitats, most garden centres and nurseries will not stock or sell invasive species, so you shouldn't need to worry. To be on the safe side, buy from reputable suppliers, and use plant guides or online resources to help you select the right plants for your site.

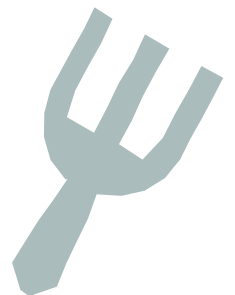
You may, however, already have invasive species growing on your site that you didn't put there, such as giant hogweed or Himalayan balsam. You can find [RHS guidance here](#) on invasive species, including how to responsibly remove and dispose of them.



Giant hogweed



Himalayan balsam, ©RHS,
RHS/Barry Phillips



While not invasive, some plants can have the potential to become a 'nuisance' by spreading or taking over your space. They may require lots of pruning or thinning to keep under control, so if you are looking for low-maintenance plants it may be best to avoid these. See this RHS page on [Garden thugs: potential nuisance plants](#) for more information.



What about harmful plants?

We know that taking learning outdoors can feel daunting, as can keeping children and young people safe when in nature. Our [Nature Park Health & Safety guidance](#) can reassure you on how to keep learners safe around plants, animals and fungi.



Although some plants can pose a hazard, serious poisoning by plants is very uncommon in the UK. Some quick and easy rules to follow include...

- Not to eat or put plants they find near their faces/mouths
- Washing hands with soap and water before eating and drinking
- Washing hands with soap and water after working outside or with items they have brought in, such as soil and leaves
- Warn learners that attractive looking fruits and seeds should not be eaten
- Warn children that fungi should not be touched or eaten



More information

Refer to the RHS page on [potentially harmful garden plants](#) for more information and guidance, as well as a list of plants that may cause harm. However, all of these plants are safe to grow provided they are treated with respect.

How do we know where to buy or source plants?

Garden centres can stock a wide range of plants, but you might struggle to find anything more unusual. They usually buy in their stock rather than growing it themselves so you may not know if the plants are suitable for the weather conditions in your local area. [This RHS webpage](#) offers simple guidance on selecting plants from garden centres. A **nursery** however, will grow their own plants until they are ready to sell. Supporting independent, local garden centres or nurseries can be a great way to positively impact your local community through your Nature Park journey.

Alternatively, **seed and plant suppliers** may be able to offer you wholesale prices if you have a large order to make, particularly if it consists of lots of plants of the same type. Some suppliers may also offer discounts to schools – tell them about your Nature Park goals and they may be able to offer support!

Online stores also offer more opportunities for buying unusual plants that you can't find locally. You can often contact suppliers for advice before buying, and many specialist nurseries will be happy to advise on your choice of plants, offering alternatives if necessary. The disadvantage of online purchases is that you can't see the plants before you buy and the image online may not represent the actual plant that you receive.

You can also call out to your **local community**, parents and carers for plant or seed donations. You may not be able to receive specific plants on your school's wish list, but holding a seed or plant swap or setting up a donation station could help you start gathering plants to improve your site.

For links to organisations that can offer funding or materials, see our [Finding Funding](#) page.

Top tip!

Once you've bought your plants, remember to make a note of what they are – you could also write down when and where they were planted, or ask learners to make plant labels for your outdoor space. This means you'll be able to remember exactly what you're growing and can refer back to this list whenever you need.



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