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Introduction

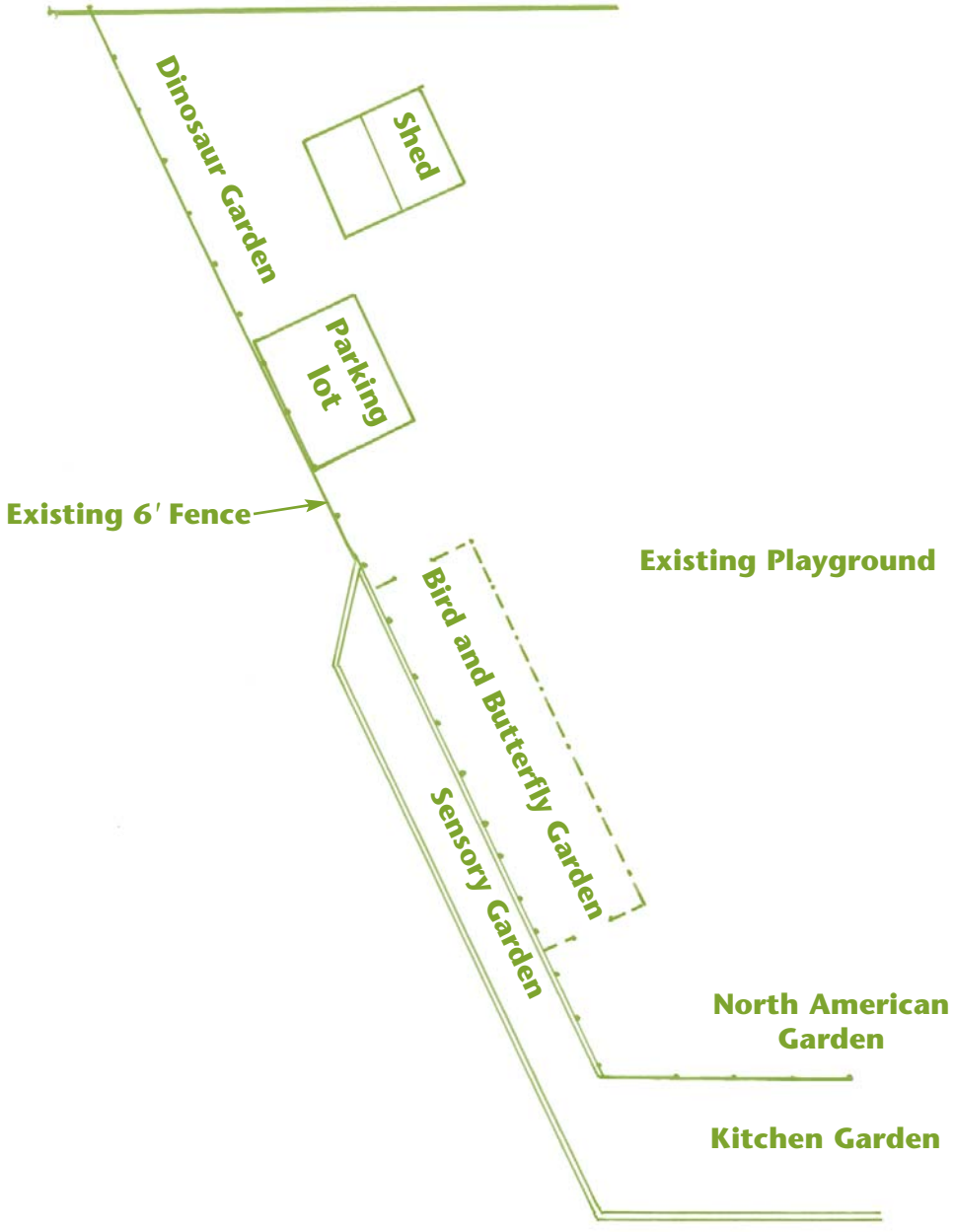
This book is the work of three women—one a parent, one a teacher, and one the director—at the Child Development Laboratories (CDL) at Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC). Southern Illinois University Carbondale is located in extreme southern Illinois, 350 miles south of Chicago. The Child Development Laboratories are part of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction within the College of Education and Human Services at SIUC. CDL provides half-day and full-day care to children six weeks to six years of age. It also serves as a teacher-training facility for students enrolled in Early Childhood Education and provides opportunities for research for faculty members and students. Gardening has been part of the curriculum at CDL since the early nineties. The garden highlighted in this book was built in 1997. Through this book, we hope to share with you not only the joy but also the intellectual depth that gardening has brought to the curriculum at CDL.

Sara Starbuck has been the director of CDL since 1992. Before that, she was the preschool master teacher there for seven years. Marla Olthof was the preschool master teacher at CDL from 1993 to 1998, during the years that the garden was developed there. Karen Midden is a landscape architect and an associate professor in Plant and Soil Science at SIUC. Her two daughters, Lonzie and Nyssa, attended CDL from infancy until they started kindergarten.

In 1996 Karen approached Sara about starting a garden at CDL. Karen had come across a grant application and thought we might be able to get funding to help us start the garden. Karen also introduced Sara and Marla to Jessica Chambers, a master's student in Plant and Soil Science. Jessica researched children's gardens and came up with a wonderful design that would actually incorporate a number of children's gardens into our playground. We sent off the grant application and waited.

We waited a long time and, in fact, never did hear a word. However, Jessica was invested in building the garden as the focus for her master's thesis and the rest of us were determined to get the garden off the ground. We decided to build as much as we could afford of the gardens Jessica had designed.

Our goal was to develop a garden that provided diversity: areas for vegetables and flowers, areas for quiet play, and opportunities for exploration. We wanted to invite insects, frogs, butterflies, and bunnies into our garden. We also wanted to share the beauty of our garden with all the people who passed by our playground. However, our space had definite limitations. The CDL facility and playground is located on the north side of a four-story building. Between the shade from the building and the large trees on the playground, we have few areas that receive sufficient sun for a garden. We determined that the best space was on the east side of the playground along the fence. Although this space left us with a long, narrow garden, most of it would get enough sun for flowers and vegetables.



We decided to place part of the garden inside the fence, where children would have constant access; we would place the other part outside the fence, where the children would need to be accompanied by a teacher. To develop our space to the best advantage, we chose to break up the length of the area by incorporating several themes, developing smaller gardens within the large garden area. We ended up with a dinosaur garden, a bird and butterfly garden, a North American garden, a kitchen garden, and five separate sensory gardens—one each for taste, smell, touch, hearing, and seeing. Suggestions for each of these gardens are included in chapter 3.

Since we're at a university with union laborers, we didn't have the flexibility that many schools have in building the garden. A family workday was out of the question. Fortunately, however, we were able to gain cooperation from Bruce Francis in the SIUC Grounds Department and his staff. They offered to donate their time and some materials to get us going. Since we were not allowed to do any carpentry work, we bought the biggest pieces of wood we could find (10 inches by 10 inches by 10 feet) for the boundaries of the raised bed. The grounds crew put these in place, donated topsoil and compost, tilled the ground, and got us ready to go.

We began searching for donations. We wrote to seed companies, enclosing a list of seeds we needed, and we visited local businesses to ask for contributions. We made a list of plants we wanted, ranging from the inexpensive to more costly shrubs, and posted it in our lobby along with a request that parents donate one of the items listed. We approached other parents for specific tasks. One of our fathers, who taught art, made models of a dinosaur footprint and created molds for stepping-stones. Karen took these molds to one of her classes and, over a period of time, her students made enough footprints to fill the dinosaur garden. Another father, who also taught art, had previously provided us with dinosaur sculptures made of rebar. These were originally covered with chicken wire and papier-mâché. Now they had been stripped back to the original rebar and would be used as trellises in the dinosaur garden.

We ordered some seeds that we didn't think would be donated, and a couple of companies sent boxes of the seeds we had requested. Jessica started these at the greenhouse. Her husband, Jason, built a trellis house for the North American garden. A CDL mother scouted around the university until she found some bricks that weren't being used and secured permission for us to use them in our bird and butterfly garden. Other parents donated bird feeders, birdhouses, and gardening books, sometimes in honor of a child's birthday. One mother agreed to paint the signs that would be posted to identify each of the gardens. Karen's class donated their time to help us install heavy materials and plant the garden.

The preschoolers, who had raised money from crushing and selling soft-drink cans, voted to buy a butterfly house for the garden. And a parent who was the curator for the University Museum arranged for the donation and installation of a sculpture in the sensory garden. In the end, we received so much cooperation that very little of our original plan had to be scuttled.

We've taken the garden through a few summers now, and it continues to bring joy into our lives and those of our children. We have learned much and continue to learn as we involve our children in gardening. Sometimes children who have moved on to elementary school return to visit, and they often fondly recall their time spent in our garden. This book was written to share with others just a bit of what we have gleaned from our experiences.

Kitchen Garden

Many teachers will want to use their garden to teach how vegetables grow and meet the interests of children who are fascinated by cooking and tasting new foods. The kitchen garden fulfills this purpose. To get maximum use out of this area, you can plant several times throughout the growing season. For instance, spring and fall plantings can include cool-weather plants such as lettuce, spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, and radishes. These plants not only can be planted early or late in the season, but also develop rapidly from seed to edible vegetables, satisfying the shorter attention spans of some children.

Plants that can be grown during the hot summer, and that you will certainly want to include, are tomatoes, green bell and banana peppers, green beans, and cucumbers. Also try eggplant, potatoes, melons, carrots, and onions. We try to include some vegetables that have edible roots, some that have edible leaves, and some that have edible fruit to expose the children to a variety of plant parts as food. We also like to include produce that can be eaten fresh directly out of the garden, as well as vegetables that need to be cooked.

If you have space, you might want to include a small patch of strawberries. These ripen early in the season and the plump, sweet berries will delight most children. However, strawberries do tend to take over the garden, so you will need to periodically pull up the vines to protect the rest of the garden.

Since some of these plants require significant space to grow, you won't be able to plant as closely as you can in some of the other gardens. This can result in more weeds, if you're not careful. Heavily mulch this area to control the weeds, as well as to help the plants retain moisture. Materials that work well for this include wood chips, newspaper, and straw.