Step-by-step guide - phase 1
Creating your basic garden

The primary aim of a Dinja Waħda Garden is to increase biodiversity, so priority should be given to planning for nature. It is equally important, however, that the Garden be accessible to people, so if your patch is laarge a pathway will need to be included in the design. Seating for students and staff to enjoy the nature experience is encouraged, but it is important that these and other structures do not dominate the garden. Nature, rather than human features, are the protagonists here. Remember it's a *wildlife* garden.

1. Layout and vegetation plan

Obtain a plan of the area and make a plan of how you want the garden. Ask BirdLife for help with this. BirdLife field teachers not only have experience in devising these plans but also in maximising space for educational purposes while ensuring a balance between human and biodiversity functions.

If you want the students to learn about garden planning for biodiversity, BirdLife can help with guidelines for the teacher that explain the rationale behind the vegetation map, the footpath direction, soil landscaping and the location of other features. This will help teachers guide the students during lessons, to arrive at a plan similar to the one recommended for your school.

2. Cost your plan

The basic project expenses will include: clearing of ground (if necessary), footpath, seating, irrigation and the plants themselves. Discuss how and when you can cover the costs. You may need to spread the actualisation over more than one year. BirdLife services for this project are all free of charge.

3. Factor in maintenance

Many garden ideas fail because the initial enthusiasm and maybe high-profile launch are not followed up by a long-term maintenance plan. This needs a person in charge who will take care of continuity and be responsible for passing this task on if they leave the school. Persons who can take care of the garden during holidays would be ancillary staff or maybe even student relatives with time on their hands (grandparents, etc.). Enterprising schools have also teamed up with Local Councils and neighbourhood active groups of retired persons.

4. Start with the nature trail

Plan the footpath to lead from an entrance, wind around a few shrubs and trees, and towards a seating area. The path needn't be wider than 1.2m and the recommended bedding is a sand-and-gravel mix that will compact nicely into a smooth (and wheelchair friendly), all-weather surface. It will look white and bumpy at first but will naturalise with use and time (see bottom pic p12). Under supervision such a path can be laid out by the students themselves. Do not go for paving: it's expensive and will render the garden formal, giving the wrong message about our relationship with nature. If your garden area is a very narrow strip, forget the trail and save the soil for planting. You can access the area from along the edge.

5. Seating

If your area is large enough, some seating is recommended; if you can seat a class, all the better but do not exceed (at most) a quarter of your garden footprint or you will lose the natural feel you seek. Plan the seating area in a way that students can face a focus person. Decide on the seating material. Stone is permanent, maintenance free and good for wildlife, but needs skilled labour and can be intrusive unless well planned. Wood is natural and widely available, but needs some maintenance from rot. A picnic-style table or simple bench are easy for school carpenters to make but kits are also available from suppliers. Wood-plastic composite (recycled wood) looks natural and is maintenance free. Log seating would be nice but large logs are in short supply in Malta. Stone and plank combinations can work too, or you may wish to promote recycling by using sections of wooden pallets instead of planks. Avoid plastic as it jars with the natural look, will not naturalise and will become brittle and break.

6. Fence

If your garden site is in a busy area of the school and plants are at risk of being trampled, you need a fence. The least visually intrusive fence is the post-and-wire variety. For this you need wooden posts (available at garden shops) and wire or nylon rope to link the posts together. This fence will not physically prevent people from entering but will serve to mark off the area as a no-trample zone, and in this way will protect your plants. A fence that will actually prevent human access would be too dominant and obtrusive for a school garden.

7. Planting

The vegetation plan you made at the beginning has laid out what trees and shrubs are to be planted and where. These will all be native species (plants that occur naturally in Malta), which is always good practice with biodiversity projects. Plants will need to be bought from local nurseries. Some Local Councils, organisations or government departments may provide a limited number of young plants. Planting should be done in the cool months (December to February). Buying and planting can be spread over a number of years, especially if you have planned a large area with many plants. This will stagger both the expense and the effort to plant and keep them all alive throughout the following summer.

8. Watering

Plants are living things and will need a sustained commitment in order to survive the first few years – we cannot stress this strongly enough! Basically this means watering, especially in summer. Luckily technology today can reduce the chore of manual watering, through the use of irrigation hoses, pump and timer. Lay out your irrigation pipes and connect them to a pump, and ideally set the system to run automatically on a timer. This will wneed assistance from someone with experience, but older or vocational studies students may help out. During school times, however, turn off the timer and get students to do some manual watering or at least turn on the tap. This encourages responsibility and ownership of the project.

9. Signage

Put up a welcome sign at the entrance that gives the project a name, with maybe a slogan, e.g. *Our school doing its bit for biodiversity* and put the logos of the entities that helped with the project (ask BirdLife for the organisation's logo and the Ġonna Dinja Waħda logo). If you need help with designing a board, ask the BirdLife field teacher. These signs can be printed at reasonable prices on weatherproof pvc. You may also set up small name tags next to your young plants (and maybe seasonal wildflowers) for visitors to identify the species and appreciate the biodiversity of your Garden.

You have now completed the first stage. Why not make an official launch of your Dinja Waħda Garden?

Step-by-step guide - phase 2
Maintenance and added features

1. Maintenance

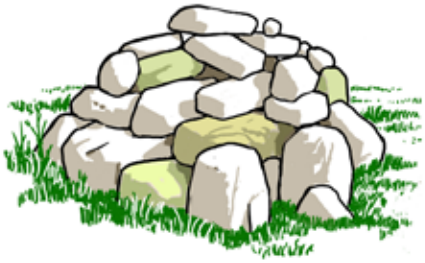
Factor these in your lessons and make a roster of responsibility. You could also use break clubs of Dinja Waħda Rangers if this is more convenient. The tasks will involve:

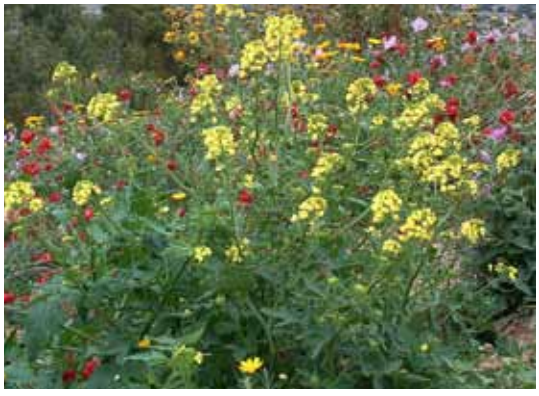
- Watering (unless automated)
- Weeding around new trees and shrubs (but see box below)
- Keeping the shape of the watering troughs around new plants
- Ensuring that fence is tight and in good condition
- Keeping the garden litter free
- Mulching the soil around plants
- Pruning of branches that stray onto footpath
- Removing (dead-heading) withered flowerheads. After shrubs have flowered and dispersed seeds, you may wish to trim the dead flower heads. While it's okay to let them fall off naturally, they may give the impression of neglect.

2. Add homes and magnets

If you have space, add any of the following features, or Nature Magnets as we call them:

- **pond**. Water will add a whole new dimension to the garden wildlife as several animals (e.g. dragonflies, frogs, mayflies, dameselflies) start their life in water. Do not put in a pond if you have cats in the area as they will prey on the frogs.
- **stone pile**. Reptiles like to bask on stones in the early morning and sleep under the stones when it gets cold.





Weeds wild and wonderful

Do leave patches of wild growth as these are vital to biodiversity: wild flowers attract butterflies and other insects and also provide shelter for animals like spiders and harvestmen, who prey on smaller creatures. Giving wild growth its due importance also helps kill the wwhabit of classifying wild plants as undesirable "ħaxix ħażin".

- **rubble wall**. A small section of rubble wall will provide a good home for many small animals, and a great place for seasonal wildflowers to grow from between the stones. Obviously you can do this only if your area is large enough.
- **log pile**. Make one or two log piles directly on the soil, in different areas of your garden. Every now and again (but not too often) check what animals are sheltering under the logs by lifting or rolling them over carefully. Many small animals, especially invertebrates, like dark and damp places, and the slowly-rotting underside of a log can be ideal. Always replace the stone or log as it was before.
- **bird table**: Basically a piece of board fixed to a broomstick and stuck into the ground. Stocked with scraps of cake or seed, it will attract a number of birds to your garden for a snack, especially in winter when natural food is scanty.

Other helpful educational and environment-friendly features include

- **compost bin.** Put your weeds in here, together with twigs. Always mix fresh with dry for a good compost mix.
- **greenhouse.** This could be a small, waist-high affair, some screened shelving on a sheltered area of wall, or a full-blown walk-in greenhouse. Use it as a nursery for growing wild plant from seeds, an ideal way to teach plant growth. Collect seeds during outings, keep a calendar and sow the seeds in the greenhouse. Decide what to do with the seedlings. You may plant them in the garden or in other green areas of the school, or maybe sell them at a school event and raise some funds for the garden.

3. Keep a wildlife record

Start from Day 1, even before the project begins, and continue into the project year by year. Decide on the format according to your class level and age. The two basic data you need are the animals seen and the date but you may wish to add where exactly the animal was seen, how many if there was more than one, and maybe notes on what the animals were doing. A general record should be available to the school, even if different classes keep their own as part of different lessons. This is your proof that your school has made a contribution to biodiversity with its home-grown Dinja Waħda Garden.

That's it! Well done!