Grow NE

Gardening Tracks Overview 2026–27

Beyond School Bells
nebraskachildren

Beyond School Bells is excited to reaffirm support for Grow NE in 2026–27 afterschool programs. Grow NE supports afterschool and summer Expanded Learning Opportunities related to food systems: gardening, agriculture, local foods and so much more. Grow NE contracts and technical assistance support high school student leadership of afterschool and summer clubs and activities.

NEW THIS YEAR

Service-Learning Training for High School Leaders:

BSB will introduce High School Leaders to the service-learning process, support student completion of the National Geographic Slingshot Challenge and service-learning activities and introduce Nebraska career connections.

What's new: BSB will train high school club leaders to teach afterschool lessons so they can confidently lead club activities.

How is this different from club support?

BSB's club support (below) helps your program run its club. This training goes directly to your high school leaders, with:

- Training and peer learning with other student leaders
- Support tailored to their club leadership and service-learning project
- Professional Development opportunities designed for student leaders
- Leaders can't attend? Program staff can train high school youth with support from BSB

Learn more and have students apply on BSB's Service-Learning through Conservation page.

What's Required:

Schedule Grow NE clubs quarterly, with support for fall, spring, summer or a combination that fits your program. Clubs must include:

- High School student leadership
- The National Geographic Slingshot Challenge
- Leading youth and peers in environmental education
- Monthly meetings for adult staff, alternating Community of Practice and individual site meetings
- An introduction to local food systems and food systems careers

How BSB Supports Clubs:

- Technical and growing questions
- Youth leadership support
- National Geographic Slingshot Challenge support
- Connections to relevant careers, farms, partners and experiences
- A flexible club guide with a week-by-week structure, plus lesson, activity and supply ideas (available on request)

Four Tracks to Choose From:

BSB designed four tracks to help structure and support your Grow NE programming, each aligned with the Grow NE goal of empowering Nebraska's young leaders to engage in and lead local food systems. Details are on the following pages.



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GROW NE GARDENING TRACKS 2026–27

Choose Your Track:

Pick the track that fits your programming best, all through a local food systems lens.

INNOVATIVE AGRICULTURE

Best for: *hydroponics or indoor gardening in your classroom*

There's more than one way to grow food. This track engages students in innovative ways to grow food locally all year using STEM and creativity, such as hydroponic towers, greenhouses, aquaponics, or ag technology like the Flex Farm or soil sensors.

LEARNING GOAL

Introduce youth to new and engaging ways of growing food.

Why choose it?

- Engage kids who aren't predisposed to gardening outside
- Garden through STEM and experimentation
- Extend your growing season

Resources:

Camp & Club Guides – Nebraska Farm Bureau Foundation (Let's Get Growing) and **Exploring Hydroponics: A Classroom Lesson Guide**. Both include lessons with hands-on activities.

Example activity

Set up a hydroponic grow tower and have students track plant growth each week, comparing it to plants grown in soil.

LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Best for: *teaching students about their local food system and the agriculture around them*

Functioning local food systems are essential for sustainable, healthy and happy communities. This track emphasizes where food comes from, why local food systems matter and how students can be part of theirs.

LEARNING GOAL

Engage youth in local food systems and connect them to local agriculture.

Why choose it?

- Instill value in local food systems from a young age
- Cultivate interest in eating healthy and sustainably
- Provide opportunities for students to grow their own local foods

Resources:

NDE Farm to School Harvest of the Month, **Walk to Unlock Nebraska** and **UNL Food Programs**

Example activity

Choose a food item to explore using Harvest of the Month materials, which include lessons, handouts, activities and procurement ideas.

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SUSTAINABLE GROWING

Best for: *emphasizing nature and ecology when gardening with your students*

Nature is part of us and improves our wellness, and it improves the wellness of gardens too. This track lets students explore regenerative agriculture and view gardening through the lens of ecology.

LEARNING GOAL

Introduce youth to the benefits of using ecology in agriculture.

Why choose it?

- Get students outside learning hands-on in the garden
- See firsthand how outdoor learning impacts kids
- Teach ecology and life sciences in a different way

Resources:

Kiss the Ground and **Regenerative Farmers of America**

Example activity

Read *The Little Regenerative Farmer* together, then use the regenerative agriculture coloring sheets.

AFTERSCHOOL TO TABLE

Best for: *engaging students in the seasonality and preparation of local foods*

Have a cooking club, or want to teach life skills? This track introduces kids to food seasonality, culinary skills and how they can help prepare food for their classmates.

LEARNING GOAL

Teach students about the seasonality of local foods and how to prepare them, engaging youth in Farm to School efforts.

Why choose it?

- Build skills to grow, process and prepare their own food
- Offer a fun, creative outlet that builds life skills
- Build students' confidence

Resources:

NDE Farm to School Harvest of the Month, **UNL 4-H WeCook** and **UNL Food Programs**

Example activity

Complete WeCook activities, then share what students learned and prepared with their class the next day.

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GROW NE GARDENING TRACKS 2026–27

National Geographic Slingshot Challenge:

Step by step. BSB provides resources and direct support along the way.

1 Gauge student interest:

What environmental passions, problems or challenges do students have in these categories?

CLEAN THE AIR | ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE | PROTECT NATURE | RESTORE THE OCEAN | REDUCE WASTE

2 Brainstorm

Research and brainstorm with students on ideas for addressing their challenge.

3 Research

Learn more about the challenge, the solution and its impact on their community.

4 Plan and record a 60-second video

The video tells the story of the students' ideas and solutions for their community.

5 Submit the video

Then engage students in the action they chose through their club track.

Read the National Geographic Slingshot Challenge overview.

QUESTIONS?

Contact Alexus at *ahansen@nebraskachildren.org* to learn more.

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