

What's the Right Garden Signage for You?



City Blossoms has been co-designing and building kid-and-youth-driven outdoor classrooms for over 10 years. We collaborate with students, parents, educators and neighbors, and we aim to create safe green spaces that provide opportunities for educational and social growth.

We often get questions from partners about how to create great, lasting garden signage, and about what materials work best when making signs for outdoor spaces. Here is information about how and why we make signs for DC gardens to begin with, along with details about which materials we like to use.

WHY MAKE SIGNS?:

In order to make growing spaces more inviting, and to ensure that we can incorporate art and expression even in the off-seasons, we design durable and kid-friendly garden signage. We think that bringing art into community spaces like this helps nurture a sense of joy and ease, and we highly recommend it.



In addition to drawing people in, garden signage can help set the tone or theme for a space. This theme acts as a sort of branding, which can help folks attach meaning to the green space. To find a theme, you might ask yourself these questions: Does your school have a mascot or a set of school colors? Is your neighborhood home to local pollinators or wildlife? Are you close to a river or a stream? Are you on a hill or near a local landmark? All of these elements can be inspiration for a signage theme, which anchors the garden in the community.

Signs can also be a tool for celebrating the community itself by reflecting the people who grow in it. To keep our projects grounded, we find it helpful to ask ourselves a few questions: What languages do folks speak? Are there street or neighborhood names that mean a lot to people? Are there widely used mottos associated with the school? Questions like these can help guide your choices.

WHAT WILL YOUR SIGNS SAY?:

We tend to think about some of our garden signs in three categories: inviting, inspiring, and informative. The signs we put in these categories usually have words in them and compliment any image-based installations.



Inviting Signs welcome people into a garden space by letting them know that it's open to the public or the school community. We think this kind of sign is so important because they can dramatically increase the number people that feel comfortable entering the green space and enjoying the garden.



Inspiring Signs put garden-goers further at ease and can make them feel more included in the growing efforts. At City Blossoms, we think that signs like these may help us all feel more connected to the ecosystem in which we live.



Informative Signs can provide folks with all sorts of useful information. Rules signs can let people know how to stay safe in the garden, and garden-bed labels can provide information about what's growing. Signs with information about when the garden is open during the week and throughout the year, along with any community events that may be taking place, can help people know when and how they can interact with the growing space.



HOW DO YOU MAKE A SIGN?:

1. Buy and transport your wood, or select your mural placement.
2. Select your theme colors. We usually select three to five theme colors to use across all the main signs in a garden. This makes the signage visually cohesive, and the pleasing effect of that aesthetic can contribute to a sense of intentionality and ease in the space.
3. Select your shapes, if you're cutting your signs. We usually select one to four shapes to use across all the main signs in a garden. This helps with cohesion the same way that color choice does.
4. If cutting your sign out of a larger piece of wood, outline your desired shape onto the wood with pencil and then bold marker.
5. If applicable, cut out your sign with a jig saw.
6. If applicable, sand down your freshly cut shape.
7. Clean off your painting canvas and prime it.
8. Paint the background color.
9. Apply a second coat of paint.
10. Map out the details with marker and/or painter's tape.
11. Use outdoor acrylic paint to finish your masterpiece!

We have included photos of each step on the next few pages.

Step 1



Step 2



Step 3



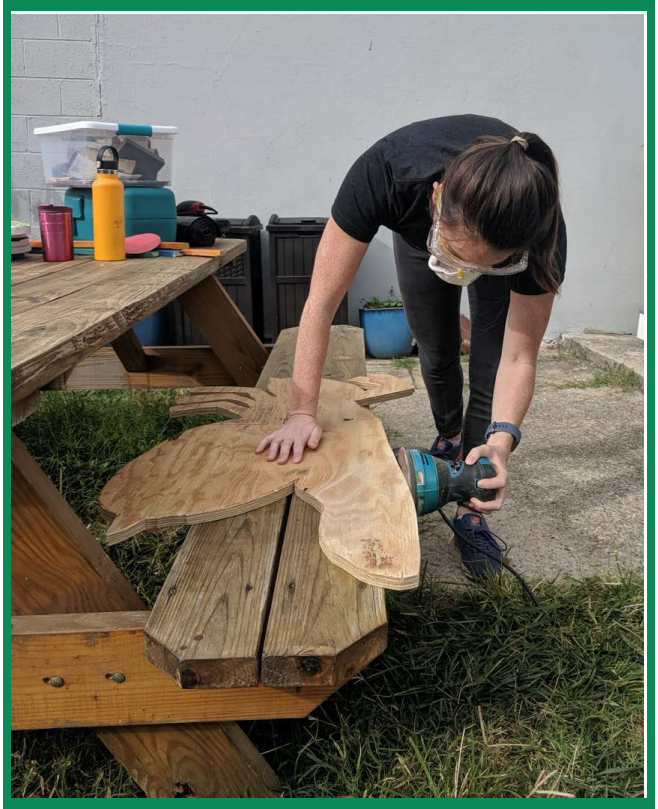
Step 4



Step 5



Step 6



Step 7



Step 8



Step 9



Step 10



Step 11



HOW CAN YOU GET KIDS INVOLVED?:

When starting a sign project at City Blossoms, we like to bring as many young members of the garden community into the effort as possible.

In the design process, we often ask kids to draw their dream garden signs, prompting them to make choices about shape, color, and content. Depending on the age-level, we talk to them about the types of signs we make and why we make them. The blueprints they draft can then inform the final products.

In the painting process, we like to bring interested kids in to paint the sign details. Once the wood has been cut, sanded, primed, and painted with a background color, it is ready for young hands.



TIPS FOR PAINTING SIGNS WITH KIDS:

- Provide smocks, and spend some time talking about how the paint they're about to use will not wash out of clothes.
- Keep them in small groups, working on one section at a time.
- Dole out paint in small amounts on a pallet or a plate, and model how much paint they should put on their brushes each time (it's less than they think).
- With younger artists, use painters' tape to block out large sections for them to fill in with paint. If helpful, you can put a drop of the appropriate color into each section for them to match.
- Set everyone up for success. Remember that it's hard to create intricate signs with small details as a community. Big blocks of color work well, especially if you're bringing in young artists.
- Don't sweat it – you can always touch the paint job up later. Prompt the kids to do their best, but you can help polish their masterpieces after they dry.



WHAT MATERIALS DO YOU WANT TO USE?:

Wood: At City Blossoms, we buy large sheets of ¾ inch CDX plywood to make garden signs. Some lumber yards and home improvement stores will cut these large sheets into smaller pieces to make for easier transport. They'll often charge for this service by the cut.

Primer: At most hardware stores, you can buy outdoor, acrylic primer, which is what we use to prep our signs.

Paint:

For the main background colors: We use cans of outdoor acrylic paint like the kind one might buy to paint a house. You can select from a wide variety of shades at most hardware stores, where staff members are available to mix it for you. For each signage project, we select one to three main background colors.

For the details: We use small tubs of non-toxic, outdoor acrylic artistic paint. Our favorite kind is FolkArt. While this type of paint is more expensive, it's durability and non-toxicity means that we can use it to craft projects that will last, and it also means that we can bring kids into the most creative part of the process, which is the detailing.

Tools

- Saws: To cut the wood into varied shapes, we use a jigsaw. If this doesn't seem like a good option for you, consider asking the folks at your lumber yard to cut the wood you're buying down to size.
- Sawhorses: We use sawhorses to support the wood while we're sawing.

- Sanders: To sand the wood down after cutting it and before we prime it, we use a combination of power sanders and hand sanders with medium-grit sandpaper.
- Tarp: During these projects, we lay tarps down to protect the surroundings from falling wood chips and paint.
- Safety gear: To use these tools, you'll need ear protection, safety goggles, and, for sanding, a mask. These items should all be available at local hardware stores.

SAFETY REMINDER:

Please only use power tools if you've had the training to do so correctly and safely. Get in touch with Willa at willa@cityblossoms.org, if you need help accessing such a training.

ADDITIONAL TIPS:

- Give yourself plenty of time to complete a sign project, and to allow paint and primer coats to dry thoroughly. At City Blossoms, we usually tackle these projects with a lot of hands and over a period of days.
- Set yourself up for success – map out sloping, forgiving lines and simple shapes when you are drawing a shape to cut out. The jigsaw is not an exacting device.
- When you are cutting, create rounded rather than sharp edges. This will protect young gardeners when they are playing in the green space. Sanding well can also help smooth out any sharp edges created when cutting.

