

Educating for *Laudato Si*
Experiential Learning Sessions: Garden Work: Four Stages
Session 1: Planning
Session 2: Planting
Session 3: Cultivating and Maintaining
Session 4: Harvesting (for Vegetable Gardens)

FSE Theme: Little Portion

***Laudato Si* Action Plan Goals:** Ecological Education, Ecological Spirituality

Group: All ages (best for at least 8 years old, and up)

Learning Goals:

- Learn experientially how to plan, plant, maintain and harvest a small vegetable and/or flower garden.
- Reflect on the connection between growing plants, growing in relationship, and growing in our spiritual, interior life.
- Develop a connection with the garden as a little portion that speaks of God's beauty and love.

Pre-planning

1. Identify a good location for the garden. This will be your Portiuncula (Little Portion). Many flowering plants need 6-8 hours of full sun each day, but others flourish with shade. It is best for beginners to choose a flat spot. Your location will help determine which plants you will grow. It may need some heavy preparatory work, like clearing the brush or tilling the soil, which you will probably need to do before the sessions.
2. Identify where you can buy materials, or where you can ask for donations for the educational garden.
3. Produce a plan for how you will execute the sessions. (Review the 10 essentials for starting a garden described at the end of this session.*) The general outlines below provide guides, but your cultivating plan will be carried out based on the time and structure you have. For instance, the cultivation phase can be scheduled with the group once a week if possible. Maintenance, especially watering, will be needed in between.
4. Have Bibles ready for sessions, or print Bible passages out before each session.
5. For Sessions Two-Four, arrange small groups beforehand if necessary.

Materials Needed (also broken down for each session):

- A garden space and/or a patio big enough for potted plants (if possible, with a variety of sunlight and shaded areas)
- A protected space with plenty of sunlight where seedlings and starters can develop
- Notebooks for participants to assist in planning for the garden and to record the process of growth
- Books or electronic devices as resources for planning the garden

- Resources such as seeds, cuttings, small starters from the community. (Garden stores, families, or local food cooperatives may be willing to donate.) Some ideas for easy-to-grow plants for your first garden (in temperate seasonal climates):
 - Annuals: Calendula, cosmos, geraniums, impatiens, marigolds, sunflowers, zinnias
 - Perennials: Black-eyed Susans, daylilies, lamb's ears, pansies, phlox, purple cornflowers, Russian sage
 - Vegetables: Cucumbers, lettuce, peppers, and tomatoes
- Variety of tools such as hand trowels, shovels, hand rakes, soil and soil amendments, watering source and hoses, clippers and garden gloves, rulers for planting at appropriate depth.
- Baskets or buckets for harvesting time

Estimated Time: 2 months for planting and maintenance; several more weeks for continued maintenance and harvesting

Session One – Planning the Garden

Learning Goals:

- Understand and practice the habit of attentiveness to learn about the earth and its needs
- Begin to relate to the land as a little portion for which each of us is responsible

Estimated time for completion: At least 1 hour

Materials Needed:

- A garden space and/or a patio big enough for potted plants (if possible, with a variety of sunlight and shaded areas)
- If you decide to begin in early spring with seeds, a protected warm space with plenty of sunlight where seedlings and starters can develop
- Notebooks for participants to assist in planning for the garden and to record the process of growth
- Books or electronic devices as resources for planning the garden

General Outline of Experience

1. Gathering and Prayer
 - a. Let participants know that today we are beginning a long and exciting process. It will require us to work together, and it will give us opportunities to grow in our relationship with God and one another.
 - b. Proclaim the Scripture passage, or ask for a volunteer: “Jesus said, ‘This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come’” (Mark 4: 26-29).

- i. Jesus compares the kingdom of God to the work of planting and the mysterious growth of plants and the joyful moment of harvesting. So we know the work we are going to do helps us understand the kingdom of God.
 - ii. Have you ever helped with a garden before? What did you like about it? What was difficult about it?
 - c. Close the discussion with a prayer: the Glory be, the Our Father, or a spontaneous prayer.
2. Planning Activity
 - a. Explain to the group that we must be attentive to our environment when we decide what to plant in our garden. Show the group the space that is available for the garden and ask them to take five minutes and explore the space. Remembering what plants need to be happy, what is important to observe about our space?
 - b. After participants explore and observe, discuss the space with them. Lead them to consider things like water source, sun and shade, quality of soil, space that different plants need, and presence of weeds that may need to be cleared. What about the environment might possibly endanger the growing plants? What will help them grow?
 - c. Incorporate this quotation from *Laudato Si'*, n. 68: “This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world.”
 - d. Direct participants to research what plants would do well in our space, considering our climate and soil type.
 - e. Then have them submit three things they would like to plant and three observations they made about the environment.
3. Closing Discussion and Integration of the Experience
 - a. Discuss the theme of God as loving creator of each of us, unique individuals.
 - i. Do you think God is like a gardener? How?
 - ii. Each plant has its own nature and so has special needs and a special beauty. Do you think that is true about people too?
4. Follow-up Activity
 - a. In between sessions, draw a plan of the garden and acquire the necessary materials. Include participants in this preparation if possible. Keep the plan simple, especially if it is the first time you have led this kind of experience.
 - b. Consult the “Clearing the Land” activity for guidance if the plot needs significant clearing to make it ready for planting.

Session Two: Planting the Garden

Learning Goals:

- Relate to the garden as a little portion that needs care.
- Make the connection with each element of creation and each human person as a little portion cared for and loved by God and others.

Materials needed:

- Resources such as seeds, cuttings, small starters from the community. (Garden stores, families, or local food cooperatives may be willing to donate.) Some ideas for easy-to-grow plants for your first garden (in temperate seasonal climates):
 - Annuals: Calendula, cosmos, geraniums, impatiens, marigolds, sunflowers, zinnias
 - Perennials: Black-eyed Susans, daylilies, lamb's ears, pansies, phlox, purple cornflowers, Russian sage
 - Vegetables: Cucumbers, lettuce, peppers, and tomatoes
- Tools for planting: hand trowels, hand rakes, shovels
- Soil and soil amendments
- Watering source and hoses
- Garden gloves
- Rulers for planting at appropriate depth

Estimated time needed: 20 minutes for prayer and discussion and variable time for planting depending on the size of the garden

General Outline of Experience

1. Gathering and Prayer
 - a. Begin with proclaiming the Gospel passage Luke 8:4-9, 11-15. With children younger than 7, only proclaim the text in bold: **“When a large crowd gathered, with people from one town after another journeying to Jesus, he spoke in a parable. ‘A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.’ After saying this, he called out, ‘Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.’** Then his disciples asked him what the meaning of this parable might be. He answered... ‘This is the meaning of the parable. The seed is the word of God. Those on the path are the ones who have heard, but the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved. Those on rocky ground are the ones who, when they hear, receive the word with joy, but they have no root; they believe only for a time and fall away in time of trial. As for the seed that fell among thorns, they are the ones who have heard, but as they go along, they are choked by the anxieties and riches and pleasures of life, and they fail to produce mature fruit. But as for the seed that fell on rich soil, they are the ones who, when they have heard the word, embrace it with a generous and good heart, and bear fruit through perseverance.’”
 - b. Lead a brief discussion on the Gospel, connecting it with the theme of Little Portion. (For more background and information on the Franciscan mystery of Portiuncula, or Little Portion, refer to the write-up on the Little Portion theme in these “Educating for *Laudato Si*” modules):

- i. St. Francis had a phrase he used to describe a place very dear to him and his brothers: Portiuncula, or Little Portion. This was a small piece of land that had been given to him, and on it was a little church called St. Mary of the Portiuncula. He and his brothers lived in huts around the church. He knew it was a very special place, though simple, where he and his brothers could live their vocation, the life to which God was calling them. They took very good care of it and it was a place of prayer, joy, and living together for the friars in his new order.
 - ii. We all need “little portions” in our lives. In the Gospel passage, Jesus is pointing out that place matters.
 - iii. Are we in a place that is like the path, the brambles. . . or like the good soil? Are we “good soil” where God’s Word can take root and bear fruit?
 - iv. Our garden, just beginning, is a little portion. Where else is a little portion in your life?
 - v. How can we cultivate God’s gifts (like joy, peace, and patience) within ourselves and others?
 - vi. What threatens our little portions?
 - vii. We can experience God’s gifts in our garden, which we are planting today, and in one another.
- c. Close the discussion with the Lord’s prayer or the Glory be.

2. Planting Activity

- a. Show participants the plan of the garden and divide them into groups to take responsibility for planting different sections.
- b. With the rulers, have participants measure the distance between their knuckle and the tip of their pointer finger, or between the tip of their finger and their first joint. Tell them that this will give a sense of the depth they should plant their seeds, according to the instructions on the seed packet. Also have them measure the distance on their outstretched palm between the tip of their thumb and the tip of their pinky. This can be helpful in guiding them as to how far apart they should plant their seeds or seedlings.
- c. Instruct them to pick up their seed packets or seedlings and read the instructions for planting with their group members. Adults should circulate among the groups and answer questions.
- d. Once they have been given time to understand their plants, provide a demonstration, both for seeds and seedlings. Indicate how small a planting depth or planting spacing is ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch depth, for example, or 6 inch spacing). Remind them to use their finger and/or palm lengths as a reference.
- e. Indicate how important it is to water the seed appropriately, so as to moisten but not flood it out.
- f. Send the groups into the garden to plant and water.

3. Closing Discussion and Integration of the Experience

- a. Gather the participants, consider washing hands and serving a snack.
- b. Discuss the experience of planting, choosing from the following questions and comments as applicable.

- i. What did you enjoy about planting? What was difficult?
- ii. In his letter *Laudato Si'* n. 9, Pope Francis calls attention to something Patriarch Bartholomew (a leader in the Orthodox Christian Church) said: "It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet."
- iii. Did we meet God in the seeds and seedlings we planted today? How?
- iv. The seed needs darkness, to be down in the soil, in order to grow. What does darkness symbolize in our lives? Sometimes we are afraid of darkness. Why?
- v. What do the seeds need now in order to grow?
 1. To what, in our lives, can we compare water?
 2. To what can we compare sun?
 3. To what can we compare soil?
 4. To whom can we compare those who weed and protect the plants?
- vi. What does a seed, in its smallness and potential, symbolize?
- vii. Ask participants to describe their seeds. Why does each seed look different? The seeds look insignificant, but are they? What will come from them?
 1. Lead participants to make the analogy with human person, each of whom is unique, some of whom appear insignificant, but no one is.

Session Three: Cultivating and Maintaining the Garden

Learning Goals:

- Practice consistency in caring for the garden
- Understand that persons (including self) need cultivation as the garden does

Materials needed

- Garden gloves
- Trowels and shovels, rakes
- Water source and hoses
- Poles or fences for staking
- Products to treat diseases or kill bugs
- A place to bring weeds

Estimated time: Create a plan for maintaining the garden. The following reflective session can be short or long as you desire. Conduct this session the day after a rain, if possible.

General Outline of Experience

1. Gathering and Prayer
 - a. Now that we have planted our garden, we have to pay close attention to it and care for it. Let us reflect on a Gospel passage that helps us understand this.
 - b. "Jesus told them this parable: 'There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, "For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree

but have found none. [So] cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?” He said to him in reply, “Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down.”” (Lk 13: 6-9)

- i. Why did the owner of the tree want to cut it down? (A fig tree is meant to bear figs. Maybe he wants to replace this one with one that will bear fruit. His fig trees give nourishment to his family, and they may be the way he supports his family.)
 - ii. Why did the gardener not want to cut down the fig tree? How can we act like the gardener, who cares for the tree? (Speak about our care for plants proceeding from our observation of their needs. Are they dry? Are they attacked by bugs or disease?)
 - iii. Is God like the owner, the gardener, or both?
 - iv. Consider drawing out the following themes: We all need help from others to bear fruit; things that “fertilize” us spiritually; the need for mercy and patience.
 - c. Close the discussion with a prayer.
2. Weeding Activity
 - a. Explain to participants that we pull up weeds because they sap energy from the soil or from the seedlings, and they will choke out the little plants.
 - b. Demonstrate how to carefully pull weeds up by their roots and not uproot the plants. Demonstrate using a trowel if necessary.
 - c. Instruct participants to reflect on what needs to be “pulled out” of their own lives.
3. Staking or Fencing Activity
 - a. If you have planted tomatoes or peas, provide for their growth by establishing stakes and fences. Some possible themes/questions to use with participants when carrying out these activities:
 - i. The stakes and fences give support for the growth of the plants. What or who provides support and structure as we strive to become more “fruitful” people?
 - ii. How can human beings contribute to the flourishing of plants?
4. Watering Activity
 - a. Guide those who are watering to reflect on the following quotation from *Laudato Si'*, n. 84: “The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.”
 - b. By watering plants, how do we participate in God’s love?
5. Closing Discussion and Integration of the Experience
 - a. After washing hands and enjoying a snack, discuss the experience.
 - b. What was enjoyable and what was difficult about the experience of maintaining our garden?

- c. We have been caring for our garden, our “little portion.” When we care for our souls, what activities can we compare to weeding? Staking? Watering?
- d. We are aware that the Earth, our common home, is suffering in many ways because human beings do not care for it properly. Can our little portion garden make a difference in the effort to restore creation? Consider Pope Francis’ words in *Laudato Si’*, n. 211: “There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions. . . Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings... All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity.”
 - i. What do you think Pope Francis is saying about *little* actions that care for creation?

Session Four: Harvesting

Learning Goals:

- Experience one purpose of gardening is nourishment for human beings, both spiritual and physical
- Connect material and spiritual harvesting

Materials needed

- Buckets or baskets
- Knives or kitchen scissors
- A place to store produce

Estimated time needed: 15-20 minutes for opening and closing; harvesting time depends on the size of the garden

Pre-Planning

Before harvesting, arrange a plan for how the vegetables will be distributed to nourish the families involved or a ministry that provides for those in need. Consider coupling this session with the “Cooking” session and share a meal with the group.

General Outline of Experience

1. Gathering and Prayer
 - a. Share with participants that you have reached the culminating moment of our little portion gardening: harvesting!
 - b. In the Bible, Jesus talks about the action of harvesting in a spiritual way. As you listen to the Gospel, try to understand what Jesus means by harvesting: “Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. At

the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Matt 9: 35-38).

- c. Lead the discussion following these possible themes:
 - i. We human beings are like plants to be harvested. What goodness, beauty do we have to give that is much greater than flowers or vegetables?
 - ii. Jesus had compassion on the people. Did we have “compassion” for our little portion garden?
 - iii. Today we will harvest our vegetables in order to use their goodness to nourish ourselves. How does God use us to nourish others?
2. Harvesting Activity
- a. Give demonstrations of how to harvest each vegetable with care. Show participants how to be attentive so that vegetables are not damaged in the process of harvesting.
 - b. Encourage participants to taste the vegetables as they go.
3. Closing Discussion and Integration of Experience
- a. After washing hands and eating a snack, choose from among the following questions and themes:
 - i. What was enjoyable about harvesting? What was challenging?
 - ii. What will happen to the plants after they have finished bearing fruit this season? (They will decompose and enrich the soil.)
 - iii. How is it different to eat the vegetable straight off the plant or vine, rather than buying it from a grocery store?
 - iv. How long ago did we start planning our little portion garden? At that time, did we know all the work and all the challenges that would be involved? What surprised you about the process?
 - v. Would you like to plant the garden again in the spring?
 - vi. In what way are our lives like a garden?
 - vii. How are human beings like gardeners in relation to the rest of creation?
 1. Our unique capacity to cultivate, and for care, compassion, and reverence
 2. Our intelligence, which allows us to understand the unique natures of creatures, how natural systems coordinate, how to creatively interact with our environment
 3. Our love for beauty which brings joy into our relationship with the earth
 - viii. Some would say human beings are like a disease of the earth. Why do they think this? Why is it an analogy that falls short of understanding our place in creation?
4. Auxiliary Activities
- a. Consider using the fruits of your harvesting activity for the activities “Flower Arranging” or “Cooking” to complete or extend the experience of Garden Work.

*Keep in mind 10 essentials for starting a garden:

1. Consider what to plant: which types, vegetables and flowers, annuals, perennials or a combination. Research which species are best adapted for the climate and soils in your area. It is best to start small . . . there is always next year.
2. Pick a good spot. Many flowering plants need 6-8 hours of full sun each day. Also observe where the shady spots are, as there are many plants who thrive in the shade. Also, if possible, choose a flat spot, at least for this first garden.
3. If you decide to plant directly in the ground, you will need to clear the ground. Cut through the soil with a spade and find a good spot to pile this soil; then spread a 3-inch layer of good compost and turn it in to the existing soil. (If you want to prepare the soil well, do this in the fall, and you will have a great garden space in the spring).
4. Have the soil tested, sending the sample in to a local soil testing cooperative, or use a DIY kit. Depending on the results, you will know what to add to your garden soil.
5. If you are making a patio garden, just have some good, rich potting soil with healthy, organic material already part of it.
6. Prepare your planting area with a tiller or dig it up by hand. Work the soil only when it is moist enough to form a loose ball in your fist but dry enough to fall apart when you drop it. Gently turn the top 6-8 inches of soil, mixing in some organic matter at the same time.
7. Choose your plants. This would be a good time to decide if you want it to have a theme. Either way, choose plants adapted to your climate, soil, and sunlight.
8. Start planting. Many annuals are easy to grow from seed sown directly into the garden, using the seed packet directions for planting time, depth and spacing. Or, you can begin sowing seeds indoors a few weeks before the last frost date. There are seedling starting kits at many stores and garden centers. Be sure to place the containers near a sunny windowsill. For a container garden, buy young plants and use a hand trowel to dig holes in the prepared soil based on the tag instructions given with the plant. Remove plants from the container by pushing up from the bottom and untangle any roots before setting it in the soil. If the seedling is root-bound, be sure to break the circular roots before planting, or the plant may strangle itself in the soil. Pat the soil into place around the plant and “tuck it in” for its next phase of incubating in the soil. Then soak the soil and roots well with water.
9. Seedlings should never be allowed to dry out, so water daily and taper the plant off as it grows. After growth is well underway, how often you water depends on your soil, humidity and rainfall. Sunny and windy days will require attention to check the soil 3-4 inches below the surface. If it feels dry, it is time to water. Water slowly and deeply so the water soaks in and does not run off. A good tip is to water early in the morning.
10. To help keep weeds down and moisture in, cover the soil with a couple of inches of mulch. By preventing the sun from hitting the soil, you will prevent weeds from germinating. Some mulch suggestions are: shredded bark, compost, straw or river rock. Organic ideas such as bark, compost, or cocoa bean shells will nourish the soil as they decompose. For vegetables choose a mulch that will decompose in a few months, while for perennials, a more slowly decomposing mulch like bark chips is good.

A final pointer: Maintenance is important, so water regularly, pull weeds often, and get rid of dead or dying vegetation. Support tall plants like tomatoes with a trellis, stakes or a teepee. And remember. . . Stop and smell the flowers always.

5. Cross-reference to related experiential activities:
 - a. If you need to clear the garden plot, consider the experiential activity: Restoring Land.
 - b. To bring the experience of garden work full cycle, consider using the fruits of your own garden for the activities: Flower Arranging or Cooking.