



Left: A Sharpstein third-grader enjoys a salad he and his classmates made from lettuce and greens, strawberries and radishes the students grew themselves, topped with their own vinaigrette. **Right:** Third-grade students harvest some surplus greens and lettuce to supplement the cafeteria salad bar for that day's lunch.

The Edible Schoolyard

“Can I take some of this home to share with my mom?”

This is the most common question I hear when I'm with students sampling food in the Sharpstein Garden, which demonstrates the power of tasting fresh produce. Hearing this always makes my heart sing, but it's not even my favorite student quote.

The fact that students want to share the flavors they are experiencing in the garden fulfills an important goal of the garden program. Having students enjoy new tastes with friends in the garden increases the likelihood they will not shy away from fruits and vegetables in the cafeteria and that they will encourage their families to buy more fresh fruits and vegetables for home cooking.

When the idea for a school garden was conceived in the spring of 2007, parents and community members wanted to promote healthy foods to developing taste buds. Emboldened by the Alice Waters Edible Schoolyard project and encouraged by a Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

article describing a parent working with an Olympia school district to purchase and serve locally grown foods, the school garden was created as a kind of marketing strategy.

We believed that by allowing students the time to investigate food by growing, harvesting, cooking and tasting, we could provide a compelling way for children to discover that healthy food tastes great.

Could the garden program help students seek additional fruits, vegetables and whole grains to be served in the cafeteria?

This was our shared optimism after a collection of meetings between the school district food administrator, Pam Millison, parents, community members and a few area food producers in 2005-06. During these meetings, we shared ideas and information about school food. Pam described the constraints in serving thousands of meals a day on a budget that met federal nutrition guidelines and met student approval.

Meeting student approval was a complicated topic. The parents and farmers offered suggestions for change which were graciously received but challenged by budget limitations, unknown nutritional values, imprecise recipes, and the belief students just won't eat "whole-some foods."

Indeed, recent research has shown that changes in cafeteria food alone are not effective at improving students' eating habits unless they are accompanied by an educational component. A school garden is the most effective way to expose kids to new flavors while connecting them to where food comes from and teaching them life skills like growing food, cooking, budgeting and maintaining healthy soil and healthy bodies.

It makes sense to have the gardens at schools. According to the school board policy on nutrition and physical fitness, the district "shall take a proactive effort to encourage students to make

nutritious food choices,” and the district has been supportive of the school garden program and even helped install the automatic irrigation system.

Over the years, as in-class and after-school garden activities have developed, we’ve been able to help students investigate not only how to plant, grow, harvest and cook, but also the history and nutritional value of a particular vegetable.

Discussing the history of a vegetable includes geography, world history and science. Other lessons encourage writing and presentation skills, as well as the cycles, science and sustainability of the plants and soil.

Parent volunteers providing these experiential learning opportunities have been welcomed by the teachers and students.

Volunteers have been vital to the success of the Sharpstein Garden. More than 40 volunteers, including Whitman College students, community members and Sharpstein parents, donated money, time, equipment and labor to create the garden.

Now, volunteers coordinate the maintenance and utilization of the garden, and we’ve expanded the program to provide every class an opportunity to visit the garden twice a year — once in the spring to plant and again in the fall to harvest what they planted before summer vacation.

When class activities have not consumed all the plentiful produce, we have provided the school cafeteria with items such as lettuce, greens, basil, kohlrabi, tomatoes and carrots.

Last spring, five classes were treated to a field trip to Welcome Table Farm, and more than 40 students participated in the after-school “garden club” program.

The energy during “garden club” is fantastic. This takes place for eight weeks after spring break on “early release” Wednesdays from 1:45 to 2:45 p.m. We do everything from the down-and-dirty gardening chores to hard science, cooking, art, exploration and quiet contemplation in the new native-plant garden (built in 2010 with volunteers and garden-club help).

Students from grades K to 5 register for

garden club, which is structured to provide three to four activities that students rotate through, but is flexible enough to allow deeper exploration for students who have become captivated with worms and roly-poly bugs. (Did you know they’re not bugs at all? They’re terrestrial crustaceans.)

I think it’s pure fun, but there’s learning going on. Most importantly, the students are learning where food comes from and that healthy foods taste good, which brings me to my favorite student quote heard while walking with students to the garden — “Dude, I didn’t think I liked tomatoes either, until I tasted them in the garden.”

Beth Thiel is a mom, gardener and native-plant enthusiast.

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Welcome Table Farmer Kirk Huffey shows students the pepper plants that had been grown in the hoop houses and how to plant them in the rows now that it was warm enough. Each student planted a pepper plant.



During a field trip to Welcome Table Farm, farmer Emily Dietzman lets each student take a turn behind its horse-drawn plow.

Schoolyard Recipes

SALSA


- 1 cup tomatoes
- 1/4 cup onion
- 1/4 cup bell peppers
- 1 tablespoon jalapeño peppers, without seeds (optional)
- 1 tablespoon crushed garlic
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice or lime juice
- 1/2 cup fresh cilantro
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

Place all ingredients in a food processor and process to desired consistency, or chop tomatoes and bell peppers, mince onion and jalapeño pepper, add remaining ingredients, and stir.

VINAIGRETTE


- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper
- 1 clove of pressed garlic
- 1/4 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1/3 cup vinegar
- 1/2 cup olive oil and/or canola oil

Optional ingredients include honey, herbs, Dijon mustard, garlic, shallots. Try different types of vinegar, or try using lime juice or lemon juice instead of vinegar.



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