

Walla Walla students serve their own harvest

Students in Walla Walla schools tend to gardens that add to their education as well as the lunch table.

By WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

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WALLA WALLA -- It started a bit like a treasure hunt.

And treasures quickly emerged from the fresh earth, looking more like rocks than something edible.

A group of children eagerly dug shovels into a bed of the Sharpstein Elementary garden, exclaiming as more and more of the hidden treasures were unearthed.

"Potato! Potato! Potatoes, guys!" some called, as white, yellow and purple potatoes were brought to the surface and placed in crates.

After planting seeds in the spring as fourth-graders, Sharpstein's fifth-grade students recently harvested a potato crop to prepare and share with the rest of the school.

Sharpstein's potato harvest is a relatively new tradition, yet is among several activities at the school that blend education and nutrition with the garden as a foundation. Established about four years ago, the Sharpstein garden is now a prominent fixture at the school and involves all grade levels in activities at peak planting and harvest times.

It starts with kindergarten students planting a salsa garden in the spring, which yields salsa-making in the fall. First-graders tended corn last year, and ground corn as second-graders around the time of the potato harvest to make masa for tortillas. Third-grade students plant greens for a salad that is ready to eat soon after planting.

And fourth-graders plant potato seeds in the spring, then coordinate the potato harvest in the fall as fifth-graders.

Sharpstein and Garrison Middle Schools were the first in the district to plant gardens, and since then several more schools have followed. Prospect Point Elementary, Green Park Elementary and Lincoln Alternative High School students have all cultivated gardens recently, and other schools are either discussing or preparing to establish their own.

School gardens are encouraged by Walla Walla Public Schools as one way to promote healthier eating habits, while also teaching children about the basics of growing food. And while fresh fruits and vegetables are offered daily at Walla Walla schools, the chance to plant and grow the food children eat adds added appeal, while also offering learning lessons.

"We try to reiterate certain themes, like nutrition, and I really like history, " said Beth Thiel, a parent volunteer who was among the early supporters of the Sharpstein garden. To fold in some of the history behind potatoes, Thiel reminded the students about their lessons on the Irish potato famine, and the

history of potatoes dating back thousands of years to the Andes regions in South America.

Volunteer support is key to any school garden, and part of what has made the Sharpstein garden a success is a team of willing parent volunteers. Having parents ready to help made the potato harvest possible earlier this month.

"This year I got more volunteers, so we could set up these stations and rotate them through," Thiel said.

The stations included digging and rinsing outside, then scrubbing at sinks in the kitchen. In the cafeteria, another group sat at tables either slicing the potatoes or tossing them with oil and seasonings for roasting. The close to 80 students in the school's three fifth-grade classes eventually rotated through the stations and helped out.

With careful concentration, Alex Tello sliced his way through a pile of potatoes.

Tello said he remembered planting the potatoes in the spring, and summed up the end result as "so cool."

"They got all bigger," he said.

He was also looking forward to eating the potatoes when they were prepared.

"They taste so good," he said. "Plus they're healthy."

Jaelyn Pineda, 10, was able to conclude that there were three varieties of potatoes unearthed.

"There's a yellow one, a white one, and a purple one," she said. Thiel mentioned there was also likely a fourth, red potato variety.

Others admired the shapes and colors of the assorted potatoes.

"The potatoes are pretty!" called out Jordan Wicklund, 11, while slicing through a purple variety.

"Aren't those amazing? Look at those colors," said Nicole Gryler, a volunteer mom who helped out for the morning's work.

Gryler said she has been helping with the garden since it started several years ago.

"My ultimate goal is to see our kids eat better in general," she said. "The garden helps them understand that nutrition tastes good, and it helps them to eat better while they're here."

Gryler said her own daughters typically pack their own lunches for school, unless something on the menu sounds appealing.

Gryler said she appreciates the hard work of her school's kitchen staff, and that it may need to be a collaborative effort to break from an abundance of processed foods.

"I think our district in general is where the changes need to be made," she said.

The quiet of the morning's work was broken shortly before 11 a.m., as students quickly filled the cafeteria for lunch.

The finished potatoes were set up by the condiment table, with two students helping serve them to classmates.

Carrie Seekamp, 8, added a scoop of potatoes to her tray along with chicken nuggets and pickle chips.

"These are really good potatoes," she said.

At another table, Colby Turner, 10, had served himself pineapple chunks, a taco salad, and the roasted potatoes. Across from him, Wendy Vargas, 8, was also finishing a taco salad, pineapples and potatoes.

Both gave the potatoes thumbs up.

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