



Do Schools Need Gardens?

Over 90 percent of Rhode Island's population lives in urban areas, and most children in urban schools have no idea where food actually comes from. Many children have never planted anything, let alone watched something grow from seed to fruition. How have the principles of nature—upon which all life is based—become so foreign? We have grown increasingly disconnected from nature. So the answer to the title's rhetorical question is a resounding, "Yes!" School gardens can ground children's awareness in the circle of life and the cycle of the seasons; gardens can nurture children's confidence in and connections to the natural world; and gardens can promote hands-on, lifelong learning, fostering essential awareness that ties into nutrition, biology, chemistry, physics, ecology and much more.

A Garden at Every School

Imagine a program to promote gardening at every school in our state. With this vision in mind, the Children's Garden Network was founded seven years ago. Increasingly, gardens have become an exciting platform for learning in many schools, and many teachers have discovered how gardens provide a living context for learning in ways that "chalk talks" and books can never replicate.

According to Stu Nunnery, one of the founders of the Children's Garden

Network, "Having children grow plants and even produce food with their own hands teaches far more than gardening and imparts knowledge about life. If math and science are critical to our children's future, it will be gardens that provide tone and texture to their studies. We should regard schoolyards as growing landscapes and use gardening to enhance the learning experience of all children, from pre-school to high school." Urban school landscapes—typically barren—can be transformed with raised beds, container gardens and the addition of a few trees—some of them even fruit bearing. Classrooms can be enhanced with hanging plants, sprouting trays and terrariums.

Purposeful Learning, Practical Living

While our culture has migrated away from farming, private sector jobs relating to the environment will present ever-increasing opportunities. It's no secret we face many environmental challenges—water shortages, radioactive contamination, overuse of toxic pesticides, the vanishing of honey bees—yet adversity leads to opportunity and farming can help reclaim and regrow Rhode Island's economy. This is already beginning to happen, with growth in the organic farming and consumable product sectors being some of the highlights in an otherwise sluggish economy.

The Keys to Creating a Successful Program

When it comes to establishing a school garden, the most important ingredient is building a dedicated team of five to 10 people who understand that gardening is a year-round community commitment and that there is room on the team for experts and novices. With limited funding, resourcefulness is also critical. Fourth graders studying a plant unit at Fallon Memorial School used their own two hands to plant pine saplings in milk cartons saved from lunch. The saplings were donated by a local paperboard and packaging company that offered to help teach about recycling and replanting for replacing harvested trees. Business executives gave a classroom media presentation and facilitated the planting project outdoors under the shade of a full-grown maple tree, using only 40 minutes of class time. The subject of gardening poses a tremendous opportunity for teaching resourcefulness.

Year-Round Activity

Knowing how a vegetable garden requires space in a well-protected sunny location with healthy soil, a school can identify this space in the late summer. During the fall, students can collect seeds from farm fresh vegetables like beans, cucumbers or pumpkin, which they can dry and then store and catalog in envelopes. They can also stake out a safe area for a bulb garden and plant garlic, onion and chive bulbs.

During the winter, students can do indoor activities, such as conducting composting experiments to make healthy soil, growing edible sprouts in plastic salad containers and planting herbs like sage, rosemary and thyme in milk cartons, while keeping science journals. They can also read books and articles about organic gardening methods and begin to plan their outdoor garden.

In the spring, seeds collected during the fall can be planted directly into the garden soil or in large recycled containers. Potato plants can be started from pieces of potato that have started growing "eyes". Throughout the summer, the garden will need to be tended, weeded, debugged, watered and harvested as the plants go from flower to fruit. After



experiencing the four seasons and a complete plant life cycle, students will be eager to experiment with new plant varieties and alternative methods.

Real education reform and environmental sustainability is starting to sprout with school gardens across Rhode Island, and these roots will firmly take hold when the Department of Education catches on to this trend and promotes the integration of a garden into every school. Imagine the possibilities.

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School Garden Resources

Many local and national organizations provide training, books, videos and project ideas for school gardens, which show how to integrate the hands-on process with academic goals. Here are some ideas of where to start:

The Children's Garden Network website provides organizational guidance and shares a list of ninety schools across Rhode Island that have implemented garden programs. Visit ChildrensGardenNetwork.org.

University of Rhode Island's Outreach Center offers program assistance, as well as free seeds in February and early March to qualifying schools and non-profit organizations. Visit Uri.edu/cels/ceoc/documents/seedOrderForm.pdf.

California-based Life Lab has been creating resources that connect "The Growing Classroom" with the new common core math and language arts standards and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) being rolled out in schools across the country. Curriculum and training information is available at LifeLab.org.

The School Garden Share-site also offers a broad range of online resources, including recommendations for organizing a garden leadership team. For info, visit Gardenabcs.com.



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