

Features

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School Gardens: A Growing Class

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Unlike many of us in the horticulture world, a child's first experience with growing plant life takes place in school. For some of us of a certain age, that experience was likely a bean plant growing in a milk carton on the classroom windowsill. For others, sadly, that first foray into growing didn't occur until adulthood—if it's occurred at all.

Burpee Home Gardens' "I Can Grow" program has aided more than 1,000 schools and organizations with free online gardening resources, materials and hands-on assistance.

Thanks to a number of current trends and health initiatives, more extensive plant-growing opportunities have begun at the school level, especially in recent years. The interest in vegetable gardening, locally sourced foods, childhood obesity, school nutrition, urban "food deserts" and encouraging outdoor activities for children have all contributed to the growing number of gardens being installed on the grounds of our nation's schools. While the exact number of school gardens is unknown, the National Gardening Association (NGA) reports that it has approximately 4,400 school garden programs registered in the organization's database. What is known, according to NGA's president and CEO Mike Metallo, is that NGA has delivered 9,596 sponsored grants and awards worth \$3.96 million to school garden programs since 1982, benefitting more than 1.6 million children. NGA also provides a curriculum for educators, which they can quickly implement and sustain at the school level.

In addition to NGA's commitments on a national level, there are numerous other school gardening programs on a local level that NGA helps with funding and resources. What's common to all of them is a mission to provide children with experiences outside the classroom that engage them in the learning process. And in the garden, these experiences are ripe for the picking.

Growing the Curriculum

The Paul Ecke Central (PEC) School in Encinitas, California, has one such schoolyard gardening program. The original campus garden was initiated by Paul Ecke, Jr. in the 1990s. Four years ago, Paul Ecke III and his sister decided to re-energize PEC's garden program with a three-year pledge of funding from the Ecke

Family Foundation (another three-year pledge has just begun). During this time, the school's administration has implemented two garden curricula into the school—the science-based LifeLab curriculum from University of California—Santa Cruz and the social studies-based Edible Schoolyard Project from Berkeley, California. The school's garden coordinator and science coordinator work closely and regularly with the teaching staff to incorporate the garden and these curricula into required classroom lessons. The school now has all 500 students go through this growing outdoor classroom (complete with outdoor kitchen) each week. And according to PEC principal Adriana Chavarin, their students' California standardized science scores have “gone through the roof.” She gives much of the credit to this hands-on learning approach.

School gardens provide a venue for more than just required classroom learning. “It’s really not about that, it’s about the process of learning,” NGA’s Mike Metallo says. Along with science, math and social studies, “they’re learning about every type of subject imaginable, in terms of cooperation, leadership skills, problem solving. It’s also a leveling field for kids with disabilities who can then be as strong as the kids who don’t have disabilities.”

Homework

New ways to learn curricula—great. Test score improvements—wonderful. Learning social and leadership skills—fantastic. But what about something that directly impacts your garden-related business?

“Even at home they’ve started to change,” says Adriana. She hears anecdote after anecdote from parents about how their children are encouraging families to plant vegetables and flowers at home and to begin composting their scraps.

Roberta Paolo, founder of Granny’s Garden School in Loveland, Ohio, has some numbers to back this up. Roberta founded Granny’s Garden School in the early 2000s because she saw the power gardens had in the lives of her grandchildren. Granny’s Garden School now oversees 100 vegetable gardens, orchards and flower gardens on the 24-acre campus, and works closely with the more than 50 teachers in the town’s school. A survey they recently conducted of their 4th-grade pupils found that about 60% or more now have their own gardens at home. The Family Garden Project, a spinoff of Granny’s Garden School, exists to help translate what a child learns at school into success in the family’s home garden.

“We are growing our next crop of customers,” Roberta says. From these survey results, Roberta says, “now they’re helping to make decisions on what to buy at the garden center, because they have some interest in it.”

Securing a Champion

While the mission of school gardens is admirable, gardens that were initiated like gangbusters can fail in subsequent years. Children grow older and lose interest in later grades. Teachers’ plates fill with other state-mandated classes. Parents become uninvolved after their kids graduate. Funding is inconsistent or can dry up altogether. Finding an individual or a group to be a champion of the garden is vital.

Hank Stelzl is the “champion” of the PEC School. As garden coordinator, he not only teaches a science- and edibles-based curriculum to the schoolchildren, but also works alongside teachers, writes grant proposals, secures additional funding, works with the community, and collaborates with the PTA—in addition to helping

to maintain the garden. “When they added Hank, it totally changed the dynamic [of the PEC garden],” says Paul Ecke III. “There was consistency and there was follow through and things got done. You need a champion, someone who is going to be there over the next few years, not just this year.”



Finding the Funds

Paul and the Ecke Family Foundation are involved with PEC for two reasons: to support the industry by developing an appreciation of horticulture at an early age and to develop new customers. “If you get kids involved and excited, their parents are going to follow,” Paul says. “It’s an investment in the future.”

Children at the Paul Ecke Central School learn more than how to grow flowers and veggies—they grow as leaders, team members and active community members.

The Ecke Family Foundation just renewed another three-year pledge of \$10,000 per year to support the school’s garden program. While much of that goes to support the garden coordinator position and training, a portion is designated to find other sources of sponsorship and community support.

For PEC’s Hank Stelzl, finding acceptance in the greater debate on education is the biggest challenge, and with that he considers the possibility of funding from state and federal sources. “I don’t think it’s necessarily acceptance with the parents [we have to worry about], as much as it is with officials and politicians,” says Hank. “I feel so very grateful and I wish that more people, corporations and foundations can find the money to support programs like this.”

Granny’s Garden School is looking for ways to make connections with the green industry, “from the hosemakers on down and across the board,” Roberta says, to begin some dialogue around this issue of funding. It’s not necessarily donations of plants and gloves and the like from garden centers and manufacturers that will get school gardening onto a sustainable path. “I don’t even know what the answer is,” Roberta says. “It’s something that’s not there now and needs to be created. But really, now is the opportunity to sit down with people in the industry and talk about it.”

Getting Involved

The green industry has been stepping up with funding and materials for the school and youth garden movement. For example, Burpee Home Gardens established the “I Can Grow” program in 2010, which, in collaboration with NGA, created the Guide for Educators, a free online resource for schools and community garden organizers. The program has helped more than 1,000 schools and organizations with this online resource, as well as seed and plant donations and, in a few cases, on-site assistance from Burpee experts. Burpee Home Gardens expanded the “I Can Grow” program to include the “I Can Grow” Youth Garden Award and has since awarded a total of \$20,000 to eight grand-prize winners since 2011, and all applicants were supported with donations and materials to get their programs started.

Retailers, too, have been getting involved with their local school garden initiatives. Wallace’s Garden Center

in Bettendorf, Iowa, has been involved with their school for more than five years now. Wallace's Kate Terrell says they became involved because her mother works at the school, and when a "garden champion" teacher needed assistance, they stepped up to the plate. Through grants written by this teacher, the school has money to spend on the gardening projects, which have included a butterfly garden and a prairie garden. "It's a win-win," says Kate, "because when they get grant money, they have money to spend and aren't asking for donations necessarily." Each year the school's 5th-grade class walks to Wallace's to purchase plants for the butterfly garden, which Wallace's offers at or near cost to help their money go a bit farther. Wallace's has also provided them with critical gardening information to help the school—and the children—be successful in their gardening ventures.

And how does this involvement benefit Wallace's? Other than the goodwill it creates with the community, "A lot of times [the children] will get attached to what they're planting at school and they'll want it for their home," Kate says. "And it exposes them to gardening and being comfortable in the garden center."

"Businesses have to run as a business," notes Roberta. "And their goal, of course, is to get people in their store." She notes that Granny's Garden School works to that end with a number of garden retailers on plant sales and promotions.

NGA is currently working on a program that would allow garden centers to contribute locally to schools through a program managed at a national level. "Garden centers can identify their school but NGA would do the hard lifting in terms of making sure they have the curriculum and that they have a sustainable program in mind," says Mike, "but then channeling the actual gift to go through the garden center." In essence, NGA would play matchmaker. "A garden center can identify a school on their own and say to them, 'We want to do this.' But more often than not, programs need a little more hand holding than that. More often than not, even though a school has good intentions, they don't have the infrastructure in place, don't have the time, don't have a champion, so we would step in and try to make sure the school is ready to go." (Any garden center interested in discussing this program further is welcome to contact NGA's Mike Metallo at (802) 863-5251.)

Just as it's important to ensure our customers are successful in their home gardens, so too is it important that school gardens succeed for the children. Because their success in gardening gives them great excitement, as Hank has noticed. "I never thought kids would be this excited about something," he says. "I'm hoping, not that I'm creating future gardeners, but that children are going to want to learn more, not only about gardening, but about anything in life." **GP**