

Features

7/30/2014

Growing On The Go

Annie White



Where does our food come from? How is it grown and who's growing it? These are questions that even a lot of adults struggle to provide the answers to. Food literacy is a challenge in North America. Creative garden centers have the power to change this: promoting the importance of growing your own food.

Increasing food literacy is particularly important for children. It's an issue that Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Unit and the North Coast Food Web have been actively working to change starting with the elementary students of Clatsop County.

Jennifer Rasmussen, a board member of the North Coast Food Web, knew the best way to promote food literacy was to grow your own food. Land in Clatsop County was limited and full sun locations are even harder to find. In addition, gardens had been tried at the schools in the past and failed. The challenge: there was no one to maintain them over the summer.

How do you plant a garden without land? They were stumped. Until Jennifer walked by some abandoned shopping carts. The carts sparked an idea; why not make the gardens mobile? And so Jennifer brought some carts back to the university, made custom-fit landscape fabric liners, filled them with soil and watched the plants grow.

Once Jennifer discovered plants could be grown successfully, it was time to bring the gardens out to the market. Their target market was the four local elementary schools where OSU was currently offering a monthly nutrition lesson. With the introduction of the mobile gardens, Miki'ala Souza, another board member of the North Coast Food Web and current project manager of the Mobile Food Garden, saw the connections between food and land begin to flourish.

"It's a lot of education about how to grow and food literacy overall," Miki'ala says. "The education focuses on questions like, 'Have you all seen a radish? What is a radish? Do they grow above ground or below ground? What else grows below ground? Have you tasted a radish?' And I see the children all making these connections."

The education is adapted to the level of the children evolving from food awareness to experiments with planting (what happens when there's less light?). In the first year, the children selected the majority of plants that were in the gardens. Now in the third year, the team deliberately chooses plants that are faster growing and that the children will hopefully benefit in the harvesting. Peas, kale and lettuce remain some of the favorites, although they have also grown edible flowers and even carrots.

"I give them options; if there are six classes within the grade school, I have each class plant a different vegetable," says Miki'ala. "But within that, I give them a choice of variety. For example, if it was kale, I would give them a choice of red Russian kale or the dinosaur kale. I talk a bit about what it's going to look like and then they can come up and choose."

Today, the Mobile Garden Project is in six schools in Astoria, Oregon, including a high school (where they grow their plants year round) and a preschool. The shopping carts are donated from a variety of sources, with New Seasons Market and Jo-Ann Fabric & Craft Store being two of the primary donors.

In the summer, the mobile gardens are either adopted by the school families or brought to the Farmer's Market for the kids' activity booth. This drop-in program is geared for children from ages 2 to 14, and is focused on fostering the connection between the food and the land. During this impromptu children's garden, Jennifer discusses everything about growing and food from planting seeds to why sunlight is important. Three years later, Jennifer is still very enthusiastic about the project, emphasizing not only how important it is, but also how easy it is to run. "I just I feel like as soon as you get your hands on some shopping carts or something that's mobile, the project should be able to run itself because it's so easy for teachers ... they don't have to worry about it at all," Jennifer says.

For Miki'ala, the most powerful piece of the project was watching the children harvest their produce. "It's such a big deal for them. Asking them why they chose that piece? Why are you drawn to it? Is that the piece that you think you've planted?" Miki'ala says. "They love it; they are not afraid of tasting it, where they may have never eaten that vegetable outside the classroom."

Mobile gardens can easily be incorporated into a garden center, taking up minimal space and time. In addition, the carts are an excellent way to demonstrate that having an edible garden is possible for everyone. Encourage your customer to be creative about the space that they need for their own local garden.

DIY Mobile Garden Carts

Mobile gardens are a great way to connect with your customers and foster food literacy from the garden center out. The flexibility of planting your garden in a shopping cart is ideal, especially if you don't have the space in-store for a dedicated children's garden. Be creative with your mobile garden: trying out a variety of edible crops. Don't forget to have fun harvesting! Enjoy the magic of watching a child bite food that they grew themselves

Here's how to make your mobile garden:

1. Choose a Cart (or 3). For additional appeal, paint the carts or have a painting party to start out your mobile garden club and have the children paint them.
2. Measure all sides of the cart with the child seat up.
3. Add 5 in. to each side of the cart.
4. Measure and cut the landscape fabric panels according to your new measurement.
5. Sew the panels together.
6. Turn your liner inside out and fit into the shopping cart.
7. Fold the top seam over the ridge of the shopping cart and sew into place.
8. Add potting soil.

Your shopping cart is now ready for planting. Encourage the children to choose their plants and enjoy watching them grow. **GP**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.