

Fresh from the school garden

Nature provides student in Kent with hands-on learning experience

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT FOUNDATION

Kids are more likely to eat vegetables they grow. Though this is not always the case with my own children in our home garden, at Holden Elementary in Kent students are proving this to be true. Over the last three seasons, children have feasted on sweet cherry tomatoes, crunched fresh broccoli, and asked for seconds of sautéed Swiss chard — all fresh from their garden.

To see students tending their plot, then harvesting healthy snacks from it, is very rewarding. This is one of the main reasons a group of parents, including myself, started the garden three years ago. We wanted to provide our kids and their classmates the opportunity to eat more vegetables and to know where their food comes from.

School gardening is not a new idea, but it is a good one. One hundred years ago, school gardens enjoyed immense popularity, with an estimated 75,000 school gardens across the country. The focus was multifaceted, as it is today: to learn natural sciences, acquire vocational skills, and engage in civic beautification.

As early as 400 years ago, Johann Amos Comenius, the father of modern education, declared that every school should have a garden, and children should be allowed to investigate the plants, soil, and animal life found there. He instructed us to let words be taught in combination with objects. Across our nation, people are discovering that school gardens are a great place to do this.

Increasingly, school gardens are gaining support through initiatives such as the USDA's Farm-to-School program that establishes relationships between local food and school children.

October is National Farm-to-School Month and Holden Elementary will invite a local farmer to come and share his story.

One of the most engaging things about school gardens is that they can be utilized by students and teachers in so many different ways. Gardens provide a setting for alternative ways of learning — students don't just look at a computer screen, but can see, touch, and take part in the life cycle of a plant or insect. Students plant the seeds and water them, see bees pollinating the flowers, then harvest and taste the fruit. They mea-

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Lynn Gregor



sure the square footage of a plot or the amount of rainfall, providing essential information for the maintenance of their garden.

At Holden Elementary, each grade level has chosen a theme for its garden plot. The third graders tend a historical-themed garden. Last year, a student incorporated her biographical study of George Washington Carver with her garden work. Third grade teacher Susan Louis observed that her student gained a deeper insight into Carver's work as a scientist only through her hands-on experience in the garden.

Second graders maintain a flower and butterfly garden, connecting with their science curriculum of studying life cycles. In the garden this fall, they were mesmerized by bees, heavy with pollen sacs on their legs and drinking nectar from flowers. They observed a life cycle as they collected next year's seeds from this year's plants. The relationship with nature that is established in a garden gives children a more intimate knowledge of the natural world. This gives them a better understanding of the life sciences but also teaches them to be good stewards of our environment now and in the years to come.

A supportive community has made the Holden garden a reality — with a receptive principal, passionate teachers, enthusiastic students, willing parent volunteers, and generous community groups such as Kent Environmental Council and the Kent Garden Club. Building school gardens is a worthy investment that offers our children a healthy future. So, let's dig in!

Lynn Gregor is the volunteer chairperson of the Holden Garden Committee and formerly worked as the Community Gardening Program Coordinator with OSU Extension in Cleveland. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier in cooperation with the Portage Park District.

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