

## School Gardening

By Laura Bryon DiDonato, Alameda County Master Gardener

The East Bay has grown exponentially and one has to look no farther than the public schools to measure its impacts. In the mid-nineties, while housing developments, business parks and shopping malls were springing up everywhere within a frenzied dot-com atmosphere, a voice -as clear as a bell- was calling for “a garden in every school.” Despite the technologic momentum growing in and out of the classroom, and in the face of rising rates of childhood obesity, California’s State Superintendent of Schools was asking us not to forget our roots. Since then, teaching and learning have been blossoming within outdoor garden

classrooms, and the children are becoming healthier as a result.

To date, nearly two hundred public schools in Alameda County have been enhanced by garden programs that provide a variety of educational opportunities for students in the K-12 grade levels. Students are encouraged to explore the multidimensional aspects of life’s processes and discover the origins of fresh food while their nutritional awareness rises. Studies commissioned by the California Department of Education cite a direct correlation between school garden programs and positive impacts on children’s health and academic achievement.



If you look closely enough you will find a rich diversity amongst school garden programs within your area. School gardens may have a specialized focus or simply operate as living laboratories. Often schools implement a garden curriculum that aligns with state-mandated subject requirements, while others act as models to the greater community by promoting natural resource conservation in landscaping designs. Some school gardens have been developed specifically as demonstrative outreach tools, teaching students the importance of nutritional awareness, ecological relationships, water conservation, and/or habitat preservation. Whatever the design, garden-based learning is experiential; students gain the values of environmental stewardship and bring home the message of healthier food choices to their families.

School gardens have also become renowned for nurturing the volunteer spirit. Building a school garden from the ground up can be a wonderfully collaborative process, as

teachers, students and volunteers work together to develop a program that meets their specific needs. Frequently, however, there is some hesitation due to a lack of funding and/or garden know-how, but fortunately there are volunteers and funding available to make a school's dream become reality. Alameda County has a task force of trained Master Gardeners who can help schools develop a plan for a sustainable garden program. An assortment of grants are also available from many public agencies and utility companies, and over the next two years California Assembly Bill 1535 will provide \$15million in grant money to promote, develop, and sustain instructional school gardens.

For more information on how to start a school garden program or how to enhance an existing program, go to:

<http://www.csgn.org/>

or **call one of Alameda County's Master Gardener Hotlines at (925)-964-9420 or (510)-639-1275.**