



## Learning and Growing in Action

Pittsburg Unified School District – Pittsburg High School

### LAYING THE FOUNDATION

In January 2014, the UC Master Gardener Program of Contra Costa County (MGCC) initiated a new approach in their School Gardens Program. The UC Master Gardeners and the UC Nutrition educators partnered together to provide Nutrition education and MGCC-supported school gardens to schools that had 50% or more of its students eligible for free or subsidized school lunches. The goal was that MGCC would help the schools create sustainable gardens through a combination of horticultural education based on UC research-based practices, UC's integrated pest management guidelines and "hands-on" assistance in the actual creation of the edible garden with accompanying companion plants. In addition to consulting with the school garden team, one of its UC Master Gardeners (UCMGs) would be an active member of the school garden team as the point person.

### TAKING SHAPE

Shawna Anderson was the first UCMG to become a point person in March 2014. She volunteered to work with the Pittsburg High School (PH) garden team to create a brand-new school garden of edibles. As the point person, using her background in Horticulture and her Master Gardener training, Shawna guided the PH team through the steps to convert a field of weeds to a productive Nutrition garden.

Shawna led the planning and the implementation of the garden. She enlisted the participation of other UCMGs, who then set up irrigation and added a pathway to divide the garden into manageable plots for planting. This team effort by Shawna and fellow UCMGs Ann Noll, Emma Connery, Ken DeSilva, and Theresa Pecoraro was commitment personified, as they worked side by side with the dedicated PH team and community to remove weeds, prepare the soil, and plant seedlings and seeds.



Figure 1 Students digging out the weeds



Figure 2 The planting begins

Once the weeds were pulled, the irrigation was in, the paths were laid, and the soil was prepared, Shawna worked with the PH team to plan the garden and to plant the free seedlings from MGCC's *Our Garden* in Walnut Creek. After the garden was in place, PH team members Cookie Freeman and Michelle DeCoy took over the care and maintenance of the garden.

Having a garden at PH was a long-time goal of Ms. Freeman, a Special Education teacher at PH since 2003. Without her persistence to get approval for the school garden, and her hands-on help every step of the way, there would be no garden. She shares her passion for the Farm-to-School program by having her students out in the garden often.

Michelle DeCoy has been employed with Pittsburg Unified School District (PUSD) since February 1992. She is an avid gardener and believes so strongly in the school garden movement that she has been assisting the nine PUSD garden sites since their inception, including PH's garden.

Ms. DeCoy's outstanding work supporting PUSD school gardens received national attention, and she accompanied Pittsburg students from Willow Cove Elementary School when they were invited to the White House to participate in the annual garden harvest with First Lady Michelle Obama in October 2014. (Willow Cove also had two UCMG point persons, Ada Ritter and Bonnie Bradt, consulting and doing "hands-on" work at the garden since July 2015...but that is another story.)

### REAPING THE BENEFITS

The garden took shape and began successfully producing in record time – less than a year. By fall 2014, the PH garden was supplying produce to the students of PH in their cafeteria. After the fall harvest, Shawna and the PH team started their second year producing nutritious edibles at PH. PH has become the "bread basket" garden in the PUSD.

The students, by actively participating in the garden activities, learned about science, the environment, growing nutritious food, and important life skills. These lessons were reinforced by their teachers through integrated lessons learned during the gardening experience and in the classroom curricula.



Figure 3 The hard work pays off



## GROWING FOR THE FUTURE



Figure 4 Late summer harvest

The success of the PH garden, which UC Master Gardeners have been instrumental in creating, has led the PUSD to increase its commitment to the Farm-to-School program. The PUSD feels so strongly that school gardens play such an important role in education, it has decided to create a new District position – Garden Supervisor – within the school to support its formalized nutrition education program, “Growing Thoughtful Food Gardens.” PUSD believes “The position of garden supervisor is essential to provide the elements of sustainability and ongoing coordination of the wide aspects and activities that are tied to the garden.” The District offered the Garden Supervisor position to Michelle DeCoy, and she accepted.

The PUSD also stated that “this is amazing progress not only for PUSD, but for Farm-to-School as a whole. This position is in direct support of our LCAP goals. It is remarkable to have non-educational staff provide support to the students, contribute to the instructional discipline, and support the strong link between what students learn in the classroom and what they eat in the cafeteria. The educational benefits impact students on a multi-disciplinary level. Offering hands-on garden experience to the students is essential in teaching a wide array of disciplines, including natural and social sciences, math, language arts (garden journaling), visual arts (garden design, and décor), and more importantly the knowledge of nutritional benefits. With recent concern over relatively weak science and math skills among American children, the need for innovation in science and math teaching is apparent. There is mounting evidence that students who participate in school gardening score higher on standardized science achievement tests.”

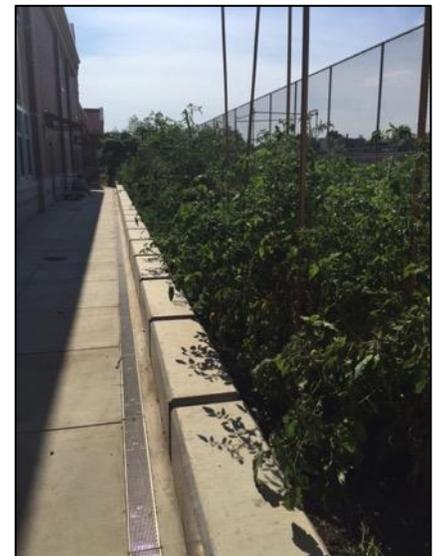


Figure 5 The tomato wall

Matthew Belasco, Director of Child Nutrition Services at Pittsburg USD, believes that “The UC Master Gardeners were an integral part of the process from the inception. I am a food service director so I didn’t know much about gardening, where to plant things, how much water, soil types, etc. MGCC has been so helpful in getting the gardens established and producing the maximum amount of food for the students to utilize. Without the MGCC program, we would have had to invest heavily in training, and the process would have taken much longer to get up and running. We are extremely thankful for the partnership we have cultivated and can’t wait to see the wonderful things that will come from Michelle working full time in the gardens.”



Figure 7 Eggplant and squash



Figure 8 Beautiful gourd



Figure 6 Peppers galore

Are you considering starting a school garden? We can help!  
Contact us to set up an appointment for us to visit your site  
and provide suggestions for your project.

Email [ccmg@ucanr.edu](mailto:ccmg@ucanr.edu) or call (925) 608-6683.

For walk-in assistance,  
visit our Help Desk at 2380 Bisso Lane in Concord,  
Monday – Thursday, 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.