

SCHOOL GARDENS – THE INTEREST IS GROWING

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Last fall, a group of El Dorado County Master Gardeners attended the Statewide Master Gardener Conference in San Jose where the keynote speaker was Delaine Eastin, former California State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Delaine spoke about the importance of school gardens, and it was obvious to those in the audience that she brought a passion to her subject that was anything but bureaucratic. She exhorted us to go back to our counties and work with our local schools to support and encourage them in their school gardening efforts. In an era when testing seems to dominate and college entrance seems to be the focus, how refreshing to hear that gardens are blossoming on many school campuses.

Imagine our excitement when a few months later, we heard there is now a School Garden Network of El Dorado County (SGNEDC). We were also glad to hear that Wendy West, University of California Cooperative Extension Liaison for the master gardeners, will coordinate this effort. So, what will this mean for educators and parents working on or hoping to start a school garden? More resources, particularly the availability of expert advice, will be brought together to encourage and assist schools in implementing and "growing" garden-based learning programs. The group will be surveying schools to see what kinds of gardens currently exist, how they are being utilized and how schools without garden programs might get started. Since there is already lots of great information out there, they will be providing a quarterly newsletter to share resources that are specific to our local area. They will also be providing workshops and continuing education for teachers, parents and community volunteers. The good news is that there is state grant money available to school sites to help fund school gardens. Expect to hear more about all of this in the months to come.

A few local schools have had gardens for years, probably the most well-known being Schnell School's Garden of Learning, founded and directed by Kelli Wessman, who is also a member of SGNEDC. This garden was recently featured on a PBS special; Kelli and the students and teachers at Schnell have much to teach us about the benefits of school gardens. Other schools have newer gardens, such as Camino School and Jackson Elementary in El Dorado Hills. El Dorado High School is also planning to develop a school garden this year. So, why have gardens at schools? You might be surprised to find out some of the reasons why they are a great idea.

In a world where kids (even in a rural area like ours) are increasingly detached from nature, gardens allow the youngsters to experience natural cycles. Watching seeds sprout, nourishing tiny seedlings and eliminating weeds that compete for nutrients and water all give kids a chance to see what it takes to produce healthy plants. They also get to learn about insects (both the good and the bad ones) firsthand, so they can begin to see how nature creates balance.

Today, when childhood obesity is creating health concerns and diabetes is skyrocketing in the young, it is more important than ever for schools to provide ways for children to learn first-hand about nutrition. There's nothing like pulling a plump

radish out of the ground or slicing a crisp carrot for today's snack to encourage kids to eat more "naturally." Schnell School has a big farmer's market in the spring, where the kids are quite proud to show off their harvest. It's hard to imagine that after all this hands-on work, kids' exposure to delicious, fresh-picked veggies would not expand their menu choices away from school. In fact, some school gardens have begun coordinating with their cafeterias to broaden the fresh food options for school lunches.

School gardens allow kids to experience science first-hand, which experts agree is a great way to learn. These gardens also provide wonderful opportunities to teach math, make multicultural studies come to life and expand writing opportunities. One of the reasons that Schnell School's Garden of Learning is so successful is that Kelli correlates all the garden activities with state and local learning standards. Utilizing high quality garden curriculum, linked with state standards, makes it easy for teachers to integrate the garden activities into all aspects of the classroom experience.

As recess and physical education time is reduced in schools, time in the garden offers a great chance for kids to breathe fresh air and get physical exercise, while learning in a positive and non-threatening environment. We know that children learn in many different ways, but there is a place for all learning styles in the garden.

School gardens also have other, less tangible benefits. Kids learn to cooperate by working together with a diverse collection of schoolmates and adults. The social and emotional rewards of being in the garden can carry over to the classroom and to home, where teachers and parents often find that children are more patient and have a greater sense of responsibility because of their time in the garden.

El Dorado County Master Gardeners will have a representative on the local School Garden Network committee and we will be gearing up to provide some assistance to new or established school gardens. Our new training class of master gardeners is also full of people with experience and interest in working with kids. Go to the El Dorado County Master Gardener website at <http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master%5FGardener> and click on "Youth Garden Consultants." There you will find information about our school garden resources and a survey about your school's gardening project or plans. You can also contact us at 530-621-5512 Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to noon when we're available to answer questions on this topic and other home gardening issues.