



GETTING SCHOOLED IN THE GARDEN

A PORTRAIT OF SCHOOL GARDENS THAT ARE GETTING IT RIGHT

BY AARON LEE ■ PHOTOS BY KIM RAFF



Few things evoke warm fuzzy feelings like marrying the word “school” to “garden.” And not surprisingly, since throughout the last decade school gardens have enjoyed an alluring image as the meeting grounds of caped kale-chip crusaders who lash out at childhood obesity one raised bed at a time.

It paints quite the healthy picture when you think of kids planting spinach and then harvesting that spinach and then eating that spinach. Lo! The holistic harmony of it all!

Another picture it paints – the untold story, especially for school administrators and groundskeepers - is one of kids planting a bunch of veggies in April only to have them go un-weeded and un-watered throughout the summer sojourn and wind up on the compost pile of good intentions.

The most successful school garden is one with a plan, a buy in from the parents/neighborhood - not just the students - and someone to finesse the folks who work in front offices. You’ll also need to keep an eye out for wallets that don’t creak when they open, because you’re going to need some cash for seeds and such, from time to time.

Last spring, Edible Wasatch put out a call asking for people to

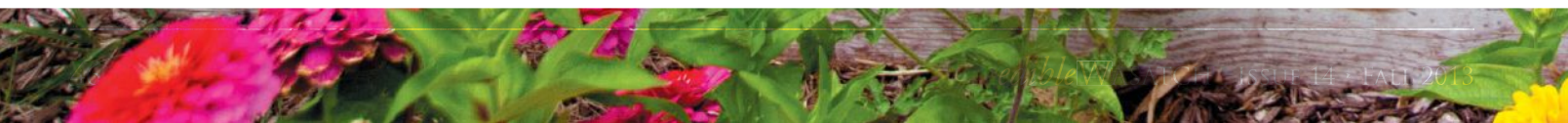
nominate school gardens that are getting it right. And what boomeranged back were seven plots in various states of enthusiasm and maturity. We were especially interested to know if a garden was an inclusive place for the school as well as the neighborhood, and what happened to the veggies each was producing.

One garden we visited was no larger than a pick-up truck, while another was the size of two tennis courts laid end to end. Some were hidden away on the school property, while others were proudly dug into the fabric of the school’s landscape. Some were haphazardly planted, while others appeared thoughtful and kempt.

It’s simply a fact of nature that most of the vegetable growing that’s going on in Utah is happening while kids are vacationing their brains out. So while school gardens can be outdoor classrooms of the finest ilk, they need attention when school is out or the food they produce will spoil. And with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting this August that 1 in 8 pre-school children are obese, it would be a shame to let any of those fresh veggies go to waste.

WEST LAKE JR. HIGH

Ninety percent of West Lake’s students (7th and 8th graders) are eating free or reduced lunch. “We’re considered one of the poorest neighborhoods in the district,” said Ike Spencer, the school’s





7th grade West Lake Junior High student Luis Curiel gives his mother Claudia Curiel flowers harvested from West Lake's garden in West Valley City

principal. This was part of the reason Spencer pushed to have the garden installed. With almost everyone in the same food-insecurity boat, he felt students should have more opportunity to learn where food comes from.

It took a Saturday afternoon two years ago to rip up the sod and get the raised beds screwed together. And it took a school-wide fundraiser and a call to Comcast to fund it. But, in a way, that was the easy part. Keeping the garden vibrant and the students engaged is altogether another challenge.

Early mornings at West Lake's garden bustle with kids and parents from the neighborhood. They water, harvest veggies and replant. This, it seems, has solved a problem faced by other school gardens: finding consistency from volunteers to tend the garden in the summer.

The students chose the veggies to grow: squash, tomatoes, chiles, garlic and onions, among the ranks. Then there is corn from southern Mexico that is 12 feet tall, growing on stalks that are baseball-bat thick.

"They believe you have to talk to [the plants] for them to grow," Andrea Martinez, a part-time teacher and family center coordinator for Latinos in Action, said of the parents and students. It's clearly not hurting; the garden is already at capacity and Martinez said an

expansion is needed.

It's easy to feel and hear the cultural influence of the families whose children attend this school, and the hands that cultivate this garden's dirt. But this garden also blooms with stories of kids regularly delivering vegetables to a nearby trailer park where families are struggling, and West Lake's construction class who drug their feet on building the garden's tool shed but got it done, and the group of Native American students who held a ceremony and blessed the garden. All of this is happening in a chain-linked-in space half the size of a basketball court.

"Instead of beating kids down, you build them up" Spencer said. "And they will exceed what you think they can do."

MIDWAY ELEMENTARY

Lush with pastures, and a rushing river, the Heber Valley seems like the kind of place where no one would need the birds-and-the-bees talk about where a tomato comes from. But tucked behind Midway Elementary, on a little-noticed patch of school property, are two raised beds the size of a pair of twin mattresses.

"In today's crazy technology society we're kind of getting torn away from [the land]," said Tara Stafford, a teacher at Growing





Lights Montessori who helped found the garden. “A lot of these children have [agriculture] in their blood.”

By keeping the garden space small, it is easily manageable for one person. But, it’s densely planted with variety, so the garden’s story isn’t monotone. There were 26 different veggies and herbs packed their beds this August. The garden is geared at helping explain plant life processes to 2nd graders at Midway, who do their part by starting garden transplants in their classroom.

“I really wanted them to take ownership of it,” Stafford said.

MT. OLYMPUS GARDEN

Not actually at the school, this garden plays host to community gardeners and as well as students from nearby Howard Driggs Elementary. The land will one day be the lucky landing zone for a new water tower. Students make suggestions about what gets planted and make at least one trip to the garden each school year, although Christina VierraMcGill, the Principal at Driggs’, says they are trying to offer more trips. “It’s a much deeper and richer learning experience,” she said of using the garden as a classroom.

As with many other school gardens the richness of that experience relies on community members like Paul Fetzer, a master gardener, who coordinates volunteers, while fighting to keep the zucchini at bay.

REDEEMER LUTHERAN SCHOOL

At Redeemer Lutheran School in Salt Lake City the garden’s raised beds were built by parents and students with money that the school won two years ago from a fitness contest called “Step Express”. This fall, the plan is to give each class two raised beds to tend, and hopefully incorporate some produce into the cafeteria and into a cooking elective, Principal Melody Barenbrugge said.

This garden has a commitment from students and their families to work the plots a week at a time during the summer, but it suffers from a couple of common maladies: one: some of the teachers that spearheaded the idea have since moved on to teach elsewhere; and two: there isn’t the go-to institutional knowledge about gardening that might make the soil sing. On the plus side the family tending the garden each week gets the veggies and Barenbrugge says “Maybe the children will eat them if they grow them.”

SKAGGS CATHOLIC CENTER GARDEN

No fence around this garden (Now, that’s faith!), and when we visited it was loaded with kids picking vegetables while parents milled around. This 200 x 50-foot garden definitely benefits from the built-in community of the church that the school’s attached to.

“It’s done well, but with many, many hands, says” Sister Celine Dounies, who helped found the garden.

The Skaggs garden, in its fifth year, is “sustainable.” Yes, sustainable ... the word that buzzes louder these days than a hive of backyard bees. Aside from the fact the garden is complimented by a working greenhouse, the veggies drum up money for the garden through a once-a-year farmers’ market sale. There’s also a school-wide pumpkin raffle and a May plant sale.

“I always feel like this garden is “The Giving Tree” without the sad ending,” said Monica Bathurst, a teacher and one of the garden’s founders.

But ginning-up money isn’t the overarching concern. Getting the veggies out to those in need seems to be the goal, along with being able to use the garden as a classroom and put veggies in the school’s cafeteria during the fall.

Student gardeners from top to bottom: Driggs Elementary, Midway Elementary, Maria Montessori, Redeemer Lutheran.

After-all finding folks to eat fresh produce is not as hard as getting people to pick it and deliver it those who need it the most. Skaggs manages to make the most of what they grow.

CACHE VALLEY ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

Last year Cache Valley Alternative offered its first elective. And it wasn't an orchestra class. Instead, the course centered on reclaiming a never-been-used greenhouse located on the school's property, in addition to digging in a school garden.

"Whatever they want to grow, they can grow and take it home," said Jennifer Sapp, the school's greenhouse and garden coordinator. "It's a way to give the students empowerment."

Growing what they want – i.e. being in the class - comes with the responsibility of maintaining good grades. Last year, there were 15 students in the class. And another 15 from a nearby juvenile facility who worked the garden in the afternoons.

All the produce grown that doesn't go to the students – the majority of whom are low-income – is given to a nearby food pantry, or is incorporated into a nutrition class taught by Utah State University students.

"When you look at the students, you can feel the response to it," Sapp said of the greenhouse and garden.

Reading their words brings home the impact, too: "I mean, we are always low on food, so it feels so amazing, to be able to help out w/ the fam," one student wrote of taking food home.

If they can get the water running in the greenhouse, the students would like to try growing a few exotic plants. There is not a lot of money to go around right now, but the sweat equity of students and 10 volunteers steered the program through its first year. Along with the juvenile justice kids that maintained the property during the summer.

"We might be in trouble, or whatever, but this has really affected my life in a good way," one student wrote in an essay last spring. "And I'm happy to eat better. Especially, when I grow that food."

MARIA MONTESSORI SCHOOL

For Amity Rockwell's students, it's all about the pumpkins. "I'm not sure what it is about the pumpkins," Rockwell said. "Perhaps it's because the plants get so large and that's very impressive." Her class is one of 19 at Maria Montessori that gets assigned a garden bed for growing whatever they want. "The teachers don't dictate what gets planted," she said.

The gardens are there to produce snacks and lead to lessons on botany. Some elementary classes are experimenting with gardens dedicated to each part of the plant we eat: one for stems, one roots and one leaves.

Some classes returned to school this fall and got lessons on what happens to a garden when it goes untended during the summer.

There is money set aside for building a greenhouse but the school needs to raise more. This would allow students to start their own transplants.

"The greatest thing about [the garden] is the students' enthusiasm for it," Rockwell said. "They absolutely love it." ©

EDITORS NOTE: Making school gardens work may be an uphill battle, but along with dedicated administrators, parents and students, we at Edible Wasatch believe that they're worth investing in. Join us on October 5th at Granery Row as we celebrate the efforts of the gardeners in this story and kick off Eat Local Week. Visit edibleWasatch.com for more details and to learn how you can get involved.



Student gardeners from top to bottom: Skaggs Catholic Center (top three photos,) Westlake Junior High.