The Edible Schoolyard: A Resource for the Entire Community

A schoolyard garden can teach many valuable lessons.

by Chelsea Chapman

The mission of The Edible Schoolyard project at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California, is to create and sustain an organic garden and landscape that is integrated into the school’s curriculum and lunch program.

The Edible Schoolyard project is a nonprofit organization located on the campus and integrated into the school. It involves students in all aspects of farming the garden, along with preparing, serving, and eating the food. The goal is to awaken their senses and encourage awareness and appreciation of the transformative values of nourishment, community, and stewardship of the land.

The project is now 10 years old. Since its inception, the garden has grown from a cover crop to a lush, thriving acre of berries and citrus, apples and pears, grains, fragrant garlic, greens, herbs, and root crops. The garden provides hundreds of pounds of seasonal organic produce that is used in Edible Schoolyard kitchen classes, produce giveaways, and community programs that support those in need.

The Edible Schoolyard kitchen is housed in a colorful bungalow that sits at the garden’s southwest border. Warm, bright, and cheerful, the kitchen is a backdrop for enthusiastic students who view the garden through north-facing windows that make the tacit connection between seasonality, plants, and food. During kitchen classes, students follow a diverse selection of recipes as they prepare a variety of delicious, seasonal dishes from daily garden harvests.

The project has grown from a staff of one to its current configuration of seven teaching and administrative staff members. In the early years, student participation in garden or kitchen classes was limited to once a month, or even once a semester. In 2006, all 830 of Martin Luther King’s students will spend between 18 and 48 hours each, depending on grade level, in kitchen and garden classes.

An Integrated Curriculum

Program staff assist King teachers in integrating Edible Schoolyard lessons into the curriculum. They also respond to requests for advice and support from others who wish to establish similar programs; recruit, schedule, and manage program volunteers; and coordinate tours and visits for nearly 1,000 guests each year.

Former students return as Berkeley High School volunteers or as AmeriCorps members to work in the garden and kitchen classrooms. After working and training at the Edible Schoolyard, a number of former staff members have established similar programs in other schools. Garden, kitchen, and lunch programs throughout the United States credit the Edible Schoolyard with their success.

The success of the garden and kitchen classes also provided a launching point for the district’s School Lunch Initiative. In 2004, the Edible Schoolyard project merged with the Chez Panisse Foundation—a local organization committed to transforming public education by using food traditions to teach, nurture, and empower young people—to establish a districtwide model school lunch program that includes educational gardens and kitchens.

Some Lessons Learned

Through our work at King Middle School we have learned that program success lies in the collaborative exploration of innovative educational opportunities that have the potential to benefit each of our students. In keeping with our mission to educate and inspire projects like
ours nationwide, King sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade teachers and Edible Schoolyard staff have compiled the following lessons learned since 1995.

In the garden:

- Build a place where classes can meet. We created a simple, shaded structure with hay bale seats in which to begin and end each class.
- Leave room to plant flowers. They add beauty to the garden, encourage beneficial insects, and come in handy for special occasions.
- Trust your students to build and design the garden walls, beds, and fences.
- Make the garden a whole-school garden. Instead of dividing the work into various beds for each class, work together to ensure the garden’s success as a whole.
- Do not put up a fence to “protect” the garden. Use signs to gently remind the public that King students grow and eat the food produced there.
- Engage students in practical gardening or observational experiences, not paper-and-pencil activities.
- Plant the garden to encourage foraging (e.g., raspberries, carrots, peas) and make tasting (or smelling) part of each lesson.

In the kitchen:

- Begin each class with a thorough introduction of the ingredients and methods that will be used.
- Encourage tasting as students work.
- Use low-tech, high-quality equipment (e.g., graters, mortars and pestles, food mills).
- Make sure each small group has a separate set of tools with which to work.
- Identify different jobs for students to do: washing, chopping, grinding, etc.
- Arrange for groups of two students at a time to take turns at the stovetop.
- Designate jobs during cleanup so that everything is finished on time.
- Set the table properly. Use real plates and utensils, and create a centerpiece.

Garden and kitchen classroom management:

- Begin and end each class with a special ritual—opening and closing circles, for example.
- Set boundaries so students know where they can go, and have plenty of adult supervision.
- Establish procedures. For example, set a defined time for cleanup and make sure students know that everything has its place (e.g., tool and boot racks, glove hangers, and silverware drawers).

Teachers and Staff:

- Make time for reflection. Learn from your mistakes and improve your work.
- Structure time for classroom teachers to meet with the garden and kitchen staff at grade level, department, or faculty meetings.
- Encourage ongoing, schoolwide staff development activities (e.g., retreats and workshops).
- Teach lessons in the classroom to support the experiential learning that occurs in the kitchen and garden.
- Learn with the students in the kitchen and garden. Allow for emergent opportunities.
- Use 90-minute (or longer) blocks of time to ensure more intensive experience.
- Be flexible. This work involves the collaboration of many people and entities!

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